DECOLONIZING EDUCATION: UNDERSTANDING HOW CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS ON RACIAL OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE AFFECT STUDENTS’ SENSE OF AGENCY

A Project

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by

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Division of Social Work
Abstract

of

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The purpose of this study was to explore the effects a social work and diverse populations course, on students’ sense of agency. The research study utilized a mixed-methods exploratory design to generate quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers administered a survey consisting of 21 questions regarding classroom discussions on racial oppression, privilege, and students’ sense of agency. The survey also consisted of three open-ended qualitative questions designed to capture the voices of the students regarding their sense of agency and desire to participate in activism to challenge racial oppression. From a sample of 45 graduate students enrolled in a diversity course, the researchers evaluated classroom demographics, classroom environment, theoretical explanations of racial oppression and privilege, and feelings related to students’ sense of agency. Results found a mild correlation between classroom discussions on racial
oppression and privilege and students sense of agency. Additionally, findings show that in-class discussions on such topics leave students with better understandings of their social locations and the desire to advance racial equity—both individually and institutionally. Upon the completion of this study, it was determined that results could not be extrapolated from such a small and specific sample; however, they may be able to assist in determining the direction future research on this topic may take, and the ways in which it can be conducted most successfully.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead, Ph.D., LCSW

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Date
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Racism in the United States is a problem of cataclysmic proportions and consequences; it is individual and structural, and moves with us through history in shifting and insidious forms. Birthed from colonization, slavery, legal segregation, U.S. imperialism, and white supremacy, racism continues to underline—and in many cases, fuel—major social institutions. As it operates within societal structures and institutions, racism privileges white people both economically and socially, while perpetuating marginalization, discrimination, and various forms of violence against people of color. Within the seemingly innocuous institution of education, racism has functioned to justify the grotesque histories of eugenics (Selden, 2005), sterilization of women (Ralstin-Lewis, 2005), and exclusionary practices towards people of color in this country in the name of knowledge and education (Anderson, 2007).

Now, within the context of our “colorblind” society, discussions of racism have the potential to be examined in classrooms as things of the past, relics of times less humane and educated (Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Discussions of racism are often reduced to individualized actions by white people, limiting the discussion from expanding to a larger critique of institutional power and oppression. Further, this myopic interpretation lends itself to placing the burden of challenging racism on people of color, leaving white people with a sense of anger at their racist counter-parts and guilt at their unearned privileges (Blackwell, 2010; Booker, 2007).
As graduate students we often saw this occurring with our classmates of all ethnicities, as they left classroom discussions of race and privilege frustrated, confused, and unsure of the necessary actions to take to adequately challenge such a pervasive problem. Classroom discussions were either too individualistic and unchallenging of structural inequality, or overly sensitive to centering students of color, asking them questions about their ethnicity/experiences, unintentionally forcing them into the role of cultural representatives (Blackwell, 2010).

As outside discussions continued to call our attention to the “missing link” in diversity courses, we wondered if this was a general feeling amongst students, or the individual feelings of two militant and passionate women. From this, it was decided that we would survey our classmates in a genuine attempt to understand the effects that diversity courses have on students—specifically their sense of agency. In doing this it is hoped that our humble findings might in some way contribute to a future pedagogy of diversity that is as legitimately educational, healing, and as transformative as possible—leaving students with a holistic understanding of their social locations, and ways to challenge the societal structures in which we reside.

**Background of the Problem**

The educational system in America operates within the confines of its historical time period. Within this social institution lingers the remnants and consequences of prior and deeply rooted histories of racism and colonization in this country that have left lasting legacies of self-hatred, economic and social insecurity, and oppression and resistance. As college classrooms across the country become increasingly diversified, this
historically unjust and inequitable institution has had to confront these legacies, and its role in perpetuating them. Indeed, college campuses have been the location of infinite lectures, workshops, and classroom discussions regarding the histories of racial oppression in the US, and have had to adapt, whether willingly, or not to an ever-increasing student body population that represents, historically and currently, structurally oppressed people.

The shift in student demographics, coupled with the rise of ethnic studies in the 1970s and 1980s, necessitated the emergence and prevalence of college courses that focus their curriculum on topics such as “multiculturalism,” “diversity,” and “cultural competence” (Nylund, 2006). Ironically, as college campuses continue to reflect the ethnic diversity of the United States, and diversity education gains legitimacy as well as availability, structural racism and racial prejudice remain largely unchallenged, as many diversity courses leave students with myopic and individualistic understandings of racism. As the classroom setting is a microcosm of hegemonic societal relations and norms, diversity curriculum may subscribe to the various mainstream discourses of society, leaving structural racism and historical colonialism under-discussed and unchallenged, while othering students of color (Daniel, 2011; Gates, 1991; Bohmer & Briggs, 1991). Further, critical literature notes the relations of power that contextualize classroom discussions and understandings of race, noting their inseparability from the institutionally powerful discourses that aided in their creation (Pyke, 2010).

While academia has remained a space to theoretically critique and challenge power relations, and historically has been the starting point of many social justice
movements for racial equality, diversity courses and their curriculum are simultaneously being critiqued by scholars for many of their unintended effects (Garcia & Melendez, 1997; Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012; Nylund, 2006). In what seems like giant progressive leaps away from educational segregation and codified racism, students of color now have the opportunity, to first be allowed at colleges, and also to share their experiences with oppression, resistance, and daily living/survival within a white-supremacist country. However, within academic attempts to prioritize and center the voices of students who have historically been marginalized, classroom discussions can become uncomfortable for students of color when they are perceived as cultural representatives, expected to embody the infinitely diverse experiences of their perceived cultural group (Blackwell, 2010; Garcia & Melendez, 1997). While centering students of color in diversity discussions is well intended, it has the tendency to perpetuate exotification and othering, as students of color share their experiences to the benefit of their white classmates (Blackwell, 2010). In what mimics histories of colonialism, diversity classroom settings may have the tendency to become spaces of exploration and learning for white students and spaces of discomfort for students of color.

Conversely, many students of color experience empowerment, personal growth, and cathartic exchanges within diversity courses (Baldwin, 1979; Gates, 1991; McDermott & Samson, 2005). Based on the literature, when multiculturalism is taught critically there is more potential for students—all students—to experience empowerment, rather than feelings of guilt, embarrassment, or shame (Chapman, 2007; Miller et al., 2001; Rozas, 2007). Rather than solely discussing racism in individualistic
oppressor/oppressed language, students are encouraged to pull from personal experiences and contextualize them, critique them, and rename them in their own voice. Through professor and student commitment to social justice, diversity courses have the potential to be spaces of resistance, reconceptualization, and counter-hegemony. Indeed, their transformative potential has been realized by many students and professors, however, it has been noted that this can only be realized when the classroom setting is safe for all students. Carrying on the Freirean legacy in which systems of oppression are posed as problems to be solved, rather than static and totalizing forces, the classroom setting can then become a space for strategizing, deconstruction, and the creation of new meanings for students. While the potential for discomfort is still present, students are given the opportunity to ground discussions in their lived experiences and cite the ways in which they have been effected by and challenged institutional oppression (Romney et al., 1991).

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Due to the lasting legacy and changing characteristics of racism in our country, courses involving racial diversity have the potential to leave students with feelings of discomfort, guilt, and/or powerlessness (Todd, Poteat, & Spanierman, 2011; Stelle, 2002 as cited in Giroux, 2003). The capacity for students to become disempowered increases when students of color are singled out as cultural representatives to educate white students on their personal experiences with discrimination and racism (Blackwell, 2010; Booker, 2007; Chapman, 2007). Similarly, guilt and powerlessness can arise in white students when racism is discussed solely from an individualistic lens, as opposed to discussing the structural, cultural, and societal ways that race permeates our nation.
Broadening the scope of diversity course curriculum from a position that is merely individualistic to a focus on the institutionally oppressive structures of society opens up a pathway for students to conceptualize ways in which they can challenge racism.

The research problem is that there is a lack of knowledge about the ways in which courses with diversity curriculum encourage students to or discourage students from consciously challenging acts of racial oppression in their everyday lives. As a result, an exploratory study is the most appropriate research design to allow the researchers to examine students’ sense of agency after completing diversity course curriculum.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore the immediate effects of a graduate level diversity course curriculum on first year social work students’ sense of agency. Surveys were administered to gauge students’ learning experiences as they relate to classroom discussions on racial oppression and privilege, assess students’ self-determination, and evaluate student viewpoints on challenging individual and institutional acts of racism. The primary objective of this study was to expand the understanding of the effects of graduate level diversity courses on students’ sense of agency. It is the hope of the researchers that this study will help to highlight feasible ways to establish a radical academic curriculum for future classes teaching about racial oppression and privilege. Our vision for a radical curriculum includes rich discussions of the political, social, and economic effects of institutional racism on people of color as well as white people, as
opposed to a watered down version of multicultural narratives that focus solely on teaching tolerance (Nylund, 2010; Platt, 2002; Pyke, 2010).

Furthermore, we expect that the implementation of an increasingly radical pedagogy in diversity courses could potentially lessen the feelings of unintended hopelessness that can arise from learning about the powerful forces of racism. We aim to demonstrate that by critically exploring the existence of racial power dynamics in academic spaces we, as a society, can strengthen human agency and spark individual and collective acts of resistance to advance racial equality.

Theoretical Framework

Non-traditional, arguably counter hegemonic, theories have long been engaged in critiques of social systems and structures. Inspired by the ability of theories to challenge existing systems of oppression, this study has drawn from and couched itself within the post-modern contributions of Feminist Theory (Chafetz, 1997) and Social Constructionism (Greene, 2008). These theories have been the driving force behind this study, as they are liberated, in many ways, from traditionalist theories that may perpetuate discourses and institutions of domination. As this study is attempting to contribute to a more radical and “decolonized” pedagogy, it has utilized theories that align themselves with pedagogical liberation, rather than domination and exploitation.

The Social Constructionist perspective, part of the larger postmodern movement, represents a convergence of many influential theories. Focusing specifically on appreciating the uniqueness of all experiences, it emphasizes the significance of people’s interpretations of their own unique realities. Fundamental to this perspective is the
assumption that people do not exist solely within an environment (Greene, 2008). People are not passive recipients of their surrounding world, but rather they are capable of acting upon it, influencing it while being influenced by it. Continually engaged in processes of deconstruction and reconstruction, ideally a recreation of new identities and meanings can occur as individuals make sense of their environment using their own language.

Feminist Theory notes the ways in which power imbalances and sexist structures play a direct role in the lives of women specifically, but all people in general (Chafetz, 1997). While often misinterpreted as only a political movement for the rights of women, Feminist Theory is also an egalitarian framework of analysis that interprets individual situations while contextualizing them by social location within an historical time period (Morrison Van Voorhis, 2008).

Given the unintended perpetuation of legacies of racism within commonplace classroom discourses, post-modernist and post-structuralist theories open up a theoretical landscape in which to explore, deconstruct, critique, and challenge students’ “taken for granted” experiences. Both theories foster an acknowledgement of pervasive systems of oppression, while maintaining students’ subjectivity and ability to act upon and influence their surrounding worlds. Rather than theories that present power along more linear terms, reinforcing positions of oppression and positioning the individual as an affected object, Social Constructionist and Feminist Theory recognize the fluidity of power, and the ability of each individual to make meaning of their lived experiences, relating (or in opposition) to hegemonic social institutions.
Definition of Terms

**Classroom Discussions:** A conversation or exchange of ideas about a specific topic that takes place in an academic setting.

**Decolonizing:** recognizing and deconstructing the influence of colonial relationships and interactions, while challenging their insidious legacies of domination, within educational settings (Clignet, 1971; Teasley & Tyson, 2007).

**Diversity Course:** An academic course, which contains content that deals with social power and examines history, politics, racial groups, and economics so as to better understand the marginalization, invisibility, and devaluation of some individuals based on their group membership.

**Internalized Racial Oppression:** Internalized racial oppression is a subtle process that can cause members of subjugated groups to associate negative images and attitudes to their sense of self (Szymanski & Arpana, 2009).

**Students of Color:** Any student who self-identifies as a person of color.

**White Privilege:** As the institutionally dominant group, white people are afforded unearned advantages and dominance. This institutional advantage is not bestowed as a result of something they did or did not do; on the contrary, it is given simply through classification as a white person (Johnson, 2006).

Assumptions

This research is based on two assumptions. The first being that lasting legacies of racism and colonialism prevail throughout every institution of our society, including higher education. These lasting legacies result in a myriad of phenomena, specifically
internalized racial oppression and privilege—two distinct areas that are the focus of this study. Secondly, classroom discussions operate within the confines of hegemonic discourses, limited by academic language conceptualized within the powerful institution of education.

**Justification**

Throughout the course of our research we have intended to contribute, not only to the profession of social work and its accompanying curriculum, but to also align our work with the principles of social justice. Given the significant gaps in the literature concerning the outcomes of diversity courses on students’ sense of agency, it is the hope of the researchers that this study may contribute to academic understanding of diversity course outcomes on students. Indeed, the profession of social work strives to promote social justice and what better way to accomplish a more just society than fostering in students a sense of self-determination and possibility, rather than the unintended consequences of guilt and shame.

While the literature reflects a solid body of knowledge regarding: diversity pedagogy, experiences of students of color, and issues of white privilege and racial oppression, it was short of any studies that sought out the impact of these classes on students. Instead, the majority of the literature attempted to understand students’ individual experiences *within* the classroom, rather than seeking to understand the effects their classrooms experiences have on them (Blackwell, 2010; Booker, 2007; Chapman, 2007). In gaining knowledge of the latter, we attempted to give voice to students and understand the impact of extremely difficult classroom discussions. Ultimately, it is
hoped that our body of research may aide in the creation of a more radical diversity
course curriculum for social work students, creating classrooms of safety, accountability,
and learning, and future social workers with the knowledge and determination to
challenge racial oppression in any of its forms.

Limitations

This thesis does not include a large and diverse enough sample population to
extrapolate the data. The data retrieved was confined to graduate level diversity course,
Social Work 202 at California State University, Sacramento. The researchers narrowed
the focus of the survey to pull out students’ sense, or lack thereof, of agency while taking
this specific diversity course, although there are a myriad of other emotions that students
may experience while taking this course.

Statement of Collaboration

This thesis was written through the combined efforts of both researchers, Leah
Barros and Erica Fonseca. Leah was the lead writer for chapter four, while Erica was the
primary writer on chapter five, although both researchers assisted in review and analysis
of the data. Both researchers worked equally on chapters one through three, and
collaboratively edited the thesis in its entirety. All subsequent revisions were done
collaboratively.
Chapter 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Racism in Current Academic Discourse

Racism is a phenomenon that is situated within a dynamic historical context and expressed and experienced in infinite ways (Giroux, 2003; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Drawing on the influence of feminist studies, post-colonial studies, Marxism, sociology, post-modernism and many other academic disciplines, racism has been conceptualized and re-conceptualized in nearly every way imaginable. What remains consistent, however, is the direction that most academic discourses discussing the various taxonomies of racism take (Zamudio & Rios, 2006). From traditional understandings of racism that reduce racism to individualized acts of prejudice, or overtly racist institutions that exist solely within past historical time periods, the conceptualization of racism has shifted both in academic discourse and societal consciousness, as it morphs with discursive shifts and reinvents itself with history (Bonilla-Silva, 2003 as cited in Zamudio & Rios, 2006).

Racism has transformed since the abolition of legally codified racism, segregation, and disenfranchisement, and while no less real, exists deeply embedded within the social institutions and culture of American society. This new racism, or “colorblind racism,” has been well studied by scholars of varying schools of thought; moreover, attempts have been made to link past events and understandings of racism to present, or post-Civil Rights era racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In their 2006 study
documenting the persistence of racism within the everyday lives of hundreds of university students, author Zamudio & Rios (2006) exemplify the link between historical manifestations of racism and its modern occurrences. Through the analyses of 87 completed journals, totaling 1,263 entries, they found striking examples of both implicit and explicit racism playing out daily in the students’ lived experiences and thoughts. Further, they illuminated the ways in which racism operates on an individual as well as structural level, maintaining a pervasive presence in all powerful social institutions and influential discourses. Linking modern racism, to its inescapable past, highlights not only the relevance of past instances of racism, but the explicit silence that accompanies the phenomenon today, obscuring its structural and tangible consequences, and its mediating role between individuals and institutions.

Indeed, the majority of literature recognizes racism as both an abstract and structural, social and individual phenomenon reified by both dominate institutions of power and individual actions/reactions (Spanierman & Heppner, 2004; Giroux, 2003; Carter & Virdee, 2008). Historically and presently racism continues to be a complex and dynamic socially constructed phenomenon that can be conceptualized in infinite ways. Widely held assumptions about racism vary significantly given the historical time period in which it is being discussed. The causes, manifestations, outcomes, and even the existence of racism have be theorized, lived and experienced, by both its perpetrators and its victims in a myriad of ways. While nearly all of the literature on racism acknowledges both its social, economic, historical, psychological, and personal aspects, the academic
discourse focused on this social phenomenon differs considerably in its starting location of analysis to study both the causes and manifestations of racism.

What remains consistent throughout the vast body of literature regarding racism is the general unwillingness to detach the individual subject—who is created and affected by the conditions of racist society, while simultaneously creating those conditions—from the structural forces of racism. Centering the subject within this conceptual understanding of racism has included an analysis that understands the phenomenon of racism as being the manifestation of reactive subjects, not permeable and passive objects (Carter & Virdee, 2008). Racism is the outcome of individual actors comprising a social body that is both determinant of, and determined by behaviors and actions. To be sure, much of the literature seeks to destabilize racism as a \textit{linear} and omnipotent force that is purely affective on the individual rather than simultaneously being created by it (Baldwin, 1979; Carter and Virdee, 2008; Gates, 1991; Lucal, 1996). Within this conceptual understanding, specific attention is given to the interplay between social structures and social subjects in creating and maintaining racism in its varied forms. Other literature, however, has been accused of being overly deterministic in its absolute, inculcating understanding of racism, therefore downplaying the role of the individual in creating and maintaining racist discourses, structures, and individual relationships (Lucal, 1996; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Indeed scholars such as Baldwin (1979), and McDermott and Samson (2005), specifically challenge racism as an all encompassing force that could be potentially misinterpreted as completely influential in the lives of people of color, and all people in general, rather than far less significant in the face of active subjects creating
lived situations. This of course seeks to illuminate the individual or communal agency that remains within racially oppressed communities, while challenging the overly fatalistic body of literature that emphasizes racism, and the subsequent formation of racial identities, as resulting exclusively from the decisions of institutionally powerful subjects, reducing all others to passive objects seemingly unable or unwilling to take an active role in the creation and reification of their collective identities (Gates, 1991).

White Privilege

Equally as contributive to academic understandings of racism is the well-studied notion of white privilege, often used interchangeably with: racism, racial oppression, institutional power, etc. (Lucal, 1996; McDermott and Samson, 2005). Indeed, most academic scholars would agree that racism is upheld by a reified notion of white supremacy; white supremacy being racism’s ideological foundation, white privilege being the tangible outcome (Lucal, 1996; Zamudio & Rios, 2006). Acting as an extension of white domination, white privilege is reliant on the construction and transmission of ideologies that seek to substantiate the superiority of whites and inferiority of nonwhites (Pyke, 2010). Furthermore, white privilege and power must function below the radar, because it does not exist innately in the form of superior biological traits or racial makeup of white people; conversely, it exists as a result of historical circumstances and widespread institutionalized racism (Eichstedt, 2001).

The insidious nature of white privilege enables the privileged group to deny its existence making it invisible to the people it benefits most. Moreover, the institutionally dominant group’s lack of awareness of privilege is an act of privilege itself. As the
controlling group in society, white people are able to have an identity outside of whiteness. As a result, unlike many people of color who constantly think about race, white people often view themselves as race-less (McDermott & Samson, 2005), which, in turn, establishes whiteness as the norm to which all others are compared (Eichstedt, 2001). Disassociation from a defined sense of whiteness makes it difficult for white people to see the benefits they receive from white privilege. As the institutionally dominant group, white people are afforded unearned advantage and dominance over people of color. This advantage is not bestowed upon white people as a result of something they did or did not do; on the contrary, it is given to them simply because they are white (Johnson, 2006).

Eichstedt (2001) reports that racial justice movements such as Civil Rights, Chicano Pride, and Black Power helped to contribute to the categorization of whiteness as a distinct race whose recipients do, indeed, receive unjustified privilege. This helped to bring an end to the misconception that whiteness transcended race and linked the salient feature of whiteness to domination and unearned entitlements. Due to feelings of guilt, linking whiteness to power can be a stumbling block for many white people when they become aware of white privilege and racial oppression. In a longitudinal study of the psychosocial costs of racism to white people, Todd, Poteat, and Spanierman (2011) administered surveys across five points in time to college students who identified as white. The authors surveyed 538 students in the first Time Point, 483 students in the second Time Point, 197 students in the third Time Point, 286 students in the fourth Time Point, and 270 students in the fifth Time Point. The purpose of this study was to examine
the ways white privilege negatively impacts white students during their college experience. The authors found that students who completed diversity courses and participated in cultural awareness activities reported higher levels of white guilt. This shows a positive correlation between taking part in activities that promote awareness of racial power imbalances and reports of white guilt. The presence of white guilt becomes problematic because, according to Swim and Miller (1999), those who measure high levels of white guilt tend to have negative thoughts and feelings toward other whites (as cited in Spanierman & Heppner, 2004).

Naturally, along with highlighting the psychosocial costs of white privilege encountered by whites, the resulting benefits should also be noted (e.g., higher income levels, greater access to healthcare, decreased chance of involvement in the criminal justice system, and greater access to quality education) (Johnson, 2006). It is also important to acknowledge that the many benefits related to whiteness are not evenly distributed. In other words, people cannot be categorized as an absolute oppressor or absolutely oppressed. White people who are dominant in terms of race may be marginalized based on other social locations such as gender, class, and/or sexual orientation (Eichstedt, 2001). In her account of growing up white and living in poverty, DiAngelo (2006) demonstrates how white privilege operates collectively for whites. It is her assertion that although it is difficult for whites to experience oppression in one area, on some level they still recognize that being white in this society is somehow of greater benefit than being a person of color.
Furthermore, DiAngelo (2006) notes explicitly the interrelations of white privilege and racism and argues that the two concepts, theoretically, could be used interchangeably. Particularly varied within this niche of the larger body of literature on racism, is the centering of “whiteness” within analyses of racism (Platt, 2002; DiAngelo, 2006; Nylund, 2006). Indeed, through the intentionality of race scholars, whiteness has been addressed in nearly every article on racism, attempting to highlight the power relations and privileged positions inherent within racism and its perpetuation that may otherwise be obfuscated if racism is to be understood exclusively as the burden of people of color. Authors McDermott and Samson (2005), representative of a wide body of literature, note explicitly racism cannot be understood without understanding whiteness.

Conversely, few scholars, albeit no less troubling, have misguided ly noted the ways in which racism burdens white people with feelings guilt and shame (Stelle, 2002 as cited in Giroux, 2003). Indeed, it is thought that racism actually benefits people of color through polices such as affirmative action (McWhorter, 2003 as cited in Giroux 2003). This misguided notion, however, remains a highly contested, and significantly challenged, contribution to the body of literature on racism and its effects.

The majority of the literature recognizes the dehumanizing effects of racism on all subjects within a society, broadening the academic discourse to include the study of the encompassing and detrimental effects of racism, with specific attention to the contributions and effects of white people (the structurally responsible party for legitimatizing and maintaining racist institutions (Miller, Hyde, & Ruth, 2004; Spanierman & Heppner, 2004). Drawing from a varied body of empirical research on the
psychosocial effects of racism, the multiple research studies have sought to gain insight into internalized racism (questioning both its effects as well as challenging its existence) held by both people of color and white people, in order to understand both is societal and personal consequences and the interplay between the two (Todd, Poteat, & Spanierman, 2011). Spanierman and Heppner’s (2004) exploratory study on the costs of racism to white people sought to challenge the notion of racism as solely affecting people of color, by studying 727 white participants illuminating the privileging as well as damaging consequences of racism for white people. Similar to the theoretical interpretations of various authors (McDermott & Sampson, 2005; Lucal, 1996) Spanierman and Heppner (2004) exemplified the common responses of empathy, guilt, and fear, that white people typically experience when racism is framed solely within the confines of “the oppressor vs. the oppressed” dichotomy. Indeed, the majority of scholars note the detrimental effects of racism on people of all ethnicities, citing white privilege and internalized racial oppression as two common manifestations of this.

**Internalized Racial Oppression**

Internalized racial oppression is a subtle process that can cause members of subjugated groups to associate negative images and attitudes to their sense of self (Szymanski & Arpana, 2009). The process of internalizing oppression—for instance, regarding mainstream racist beliefs, values, and stereotypes as factual—occurs without conscious awareness and leads those who experience internalized racial oppression to believe in the false inferiority of not only themselves, but their racial group as a whole (Pyke & Dang, 2003; Szymanski & Arpana, 2009). Internalized racial oppression is not
something that affects all members of racially subjugated groups and cannot be understood as a one-dimensional phenomenon. Moreover, it takes on many forms and can affect a person in varying degrees, which makes internalized racial oppression difficult to distinguish and measure (Pyke, 2010; Szymanski & Arpana, 2009).

It is important to note that internalized racial oppression does not occur as a result of cultural or biological deficits of the subjugated group; it is not a sign of weakness, inferiority, or ignorance. On the contrary, internalized racial oppression is a result of the pervasive forces of racism—institutional and overt. According to Pyke (2010), past studies on internalized racial oppression have used a psychological paradigm that focuses on practical methods for persons of color to mitigate the impact of internalized racial oppression through techniques that enhance self-esteem and raising consciousness within their communities. This approach places the responsibility of solving the problems associated with internalized racial oppression on the oppressed as if it is a personal or group deficit. Attempting to address internalized racial oppression using the victim blaming approach does not get to the root of the problem, which, ultimately, allows social structures and cultural norms that produce internalized racial oppression to persist (Pyke, 2010).

In understanding how internalized racial oppression operates, it should be recognized that this type of oppression functions on group and individual levels. For example, internalized racial oppression on a group level can be seen in the formation of collective social practices, which are most often a manifestation of having a deeply embedded colonized mentality. Characterized by having a sense of inferiority and an
aspiration of the subjugated to be more like their colonizers, a colonized mentality results in negative self-images around racialized features like skin tone, hair texture, or body type, to name a few. An example of this can be observed in communities of color where higher status may be granted to those with lighter skin tones causing intraracial imbalances in access to resources. Consequently, disparities in occupational status, social desirability, opportunities for marriage, educational attainment, and income emerge (Pyke, 2010).

Manifestations of internalized racial oppression on an individual level come in the form of distancing and intraethnic othering. Distancing takes place when a member of a racially subordinate group disassociates him or herself from coethnics through avoidance of interaction with and/or expressions of contempt for coethnics (Pyke & Dang, 2003). By doing this, the individual seeking distance from coethnics is attempting to gain acceptance from whites by displaying commonalities with the white majority. Similar to distancing, intraethnic othering is carried out in an attempt to combat the shame that can result from membership in an oppressed group. However, when intraethnic othering occurs, group members seeking to align with the dominant group openly deride and isolate those who exhibit strong characteristics tied to their ethnicity (Pyke, 2010). In a qualitative study conducted by Pyke & Dang (2003), 184 Korean and Vietnamese men and women ranging in age from 18 to 34 were interviewed to understand how race and stereotypes of mainstream society impacted their relationships with coethnics. The authors found that distancing and intraethnic othering were commonly used among participants as a way to adapt to racial oppression and avoid the stigma associated with
being Asian. Additionally, a noted consequence of distancing and intraethnic othering was the presence of resentment and division within the ethnic group as a result of one faction of the group assigning stereotypes of the dominant society to those who were more ethnically traditional.

When individuals from a marginalized racial group identify with their oppressors in this way, it becomes easier for the dominant group to subjugate and control the marginalized group leading to what Pyke (2010) refers to as the “double bind situation” (p. 557). The double bind situation is a byproduct of indoctrination and mental colonization whereby the oppressed believe that becoming more like the dominant group and assigning negative stereotypes to coethnics will allow them to be accepted by the dominant group. On the contrary, acceptance of the norms, values, and standards of the ruling class reinforces a more powerful dominant group; thus, making oppressed people a part of the system that oppresses them—not merely as the oppressed, but as actors in the process of oppression (Pyke, 2010).

Additionally, a portion of the literature attempts to call attention to the uniqueness of present day racism, citing its direct relationship to neoliberalism, and the continual reification of racism through the notion of individualism legitimatized and substantiated through state and economic policies (Carter & Virdee, 2008; Giroux, 2003; McDermott & Samson, 2005). This “new racism” as Giroux (2003, p.194) labels it, is couched within individualistic rhetoric perpetuated by the marketplace ideologies of neoliberalism, significantly reducing the sociological phenomenon of racism to that of an individualized issue. In stripping racism of its dynamic historical and societal components and replacing
them with the discourse of private experiences and personal considerations, a critical examination of racism becomes nearly impossible. Through this reductionist interpretation, racism is constructed as an occurrence of the past, a phenomenon that is no longer relevant to better understanding the relationships and social locations of modern society. Further, this racial discourse denies the very relations of power that create and maintain it (Giroux, 2003).

**The Influence of Post-colonial Studies in Education**

Over the past few decades the “ascendancy of the colonial paradigm” has been witnessed in academic literature, however, it remains largely unaccompanied by empirical research regarding the influence of colonialism on our understandings of racialized interactions in any social setting (Gates, 1991, p. 457). Specifically, the explicit influence of colonialism in classroom relations remains under-explored, with only brief mentions to the pivotal role it plays in shaping these relationships (Clignet, 1971). Although not exclusive to post-colonial theory, many scholars who may not self-define or define their work as “post-colonial” recognize the influence of the educational system in perpetuating existing models of colonialism and domination (Teasley & Tyson, 2007; Zamudio & Rios, 2006; Chapman, 2007; Bohmer & Briggs, 1991).

Indeed, it is likely that many academics and educators may inadvertently employ the language of post-colonial studies; however, explicit mention of colonialism remains infrequent (Forstorp, 2008). The discourse on colonialism is likely to be inadvertently embodied in Marxist (and Fanonian) notions, of self-actualization and liberation arising from subjects actively resisting the dominant social or discursive conditions (Gates, 1991;
Nylund, 2006; Platt, 2002). Additionally, much of the literature notes the overgeneralizations made within current academic understandings of the identities of the “other,” albeit little mention is made to the colonial relations (discursive and material) that indeed create and perpetuate the depersonalization of individuals, relegating them to an “anonymous collectivity” (Memmi n.d. as cited in Gates, 1991, p. 549). In a 2011 empirical study on the experience of students of color within graduate level social work courses, Daniel (2011) interviewed 15 graduate students of color to gain insight into their learning experience within social work classrooms. Explicitly noted within the findings of her study, is the ease in which research on “the other” can often become reduced to stereotypical and oversimplified representations; a clear example of employing post-colonial discourse, albeit not intentionally.

The empirical research on the strengths and challenges of educating students on racism, or multiculturalism, in the classroom suggests a radical re-categorization and promotion of social change through dialogic learning processes (Rozas, 2007). Rozas’ (2007) qualitative two-phased research investigation detailing the results of an intergroup dialogue of 79 participants within classroom settings, found that intergroup dialogues provide space to acknowledge and reevaluate positions of privilege and social injustice. Unintentionally drawing on the post-colonial influence of new meanings being formed from resistance to the dominant discourse, studies may often embody various elements of the post-colonial paradigm. Indeed, drawing on the influential Fanonian legacy, post-colonial education attempts to empower the colonized through counter-discourses, while remaining hyper vigilant of the violent nature of colonialism, so as not to down play its
lasting legacy. However, playing up the nature of colonial domination suggests a fatalistic viewpoint and can potentially rob the student of his or her own sense of agency and subjectivity. The mindfulness of this “double bind” is central to the paradigm of post-colonial education (Gates, 1991).

**Pedagogical Trends in Diversity Courses**

The current body of literature regarding pedagogical trends within diversity courses suggests the nearly unanimous theme of diversity courses acting as an academic space to confront privilege and oppression while inspiring social action and counter narratives both in and outside the classroom setting (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Chapman, 2007; Castagno, 2008; Miller, Hyde, & Ruth, 2004; Romney, Tatum, & Jones, 1991). Instructors and academics alike anticipate diversity courses will inspire critical and conscious students, potentially translating into tangible social consequences. Although this theme remains consistent throughout the literature it manifests within varied schools of thought.

Afrocentric authors Teasley and Tyson (2007) explicitly contend that multicultural education (or diversity courses as we are choosing to label them) is fundamentally necessary to establishing a free and just world, albeit they are especially concerned with these courses fostering agency in African-American students. While authors Bohmer & Briggs (1991) cite the proposal of mandatory courses on race/diversity as “a step in the right direction” and critical race theorist Chapman (2007) agrees in the potentiality of these courses to instigate positive societal change. Similarly Romney et al. (1991) draw connections between students’ experiences within diversity courses and their
commitment to social justice. Certainly, much of the radical scholarship taught within diversity courses encourages resistance narratives, potentially inspiring students’ commitment to liberation movements (Pyke, 2010).

While much of the literature on diversity courses reflects the desire to encourage a sense of agency within students both during and after taking a critical course, more emphasis is situated on the importance of providing a safe and exploratory place for students to engage in counter-hegemonic analyses of power relations (Castagno, 2008; Pyke, 2010). Drawing significantly from the question-posing pedagogical strategies of the Frierian legacy, authors Romney et al. (1991) combine a feminist approach that emphasizes the importance of creating space for all students to engage in difficult classroom discussions to help minimize the ease in which students become angry, emotional, or aggressive. Specifically, they attempt to keep their classroom discussions grounded in the lived experiences of their students’ everyday lives. This process-oriented, or largely feminist approach is also discussed by Nylund (2006) who notes the benefits of locating an investigation of privilege and oppression within the lived experiences of the participants engaged in the classroom dialogue. In a sense, it is widely encouraged by diversity instructors and critical scholars in general, to speak your “own special cultural truth” when exploring and discussing oppression (Karenga, 2003 as cited in Teasley & Tyson, 2007, p. 394). Without engaging in a problem-posing educational model, presenting oppression as a problem to be addressed and changed, educators may unintentionally reinforce a fatalistic perception of reality, in which oppression is unchangeable (Freire, 1970).
The counter-hegemonic aspects of critical self-reflection, while uncovering and naming oppression within one’s own reality, are essential to diversity courses. Critical Race Theory, being a well-known and effective tool employed by educators to illustrate student strengths through interrogating social systems, while prioritizing the voices of the participants in the dialogue (Chapman, 2007). Bohmer and Briggs (1991), note the ways in which renaming one’s experiences or identities may destabilize power relations, since the inequity of hegemonic power is such that those with institutional power usually have the ability to name and define individuals (on an institutional level) and their subsequent realities. Pyke (2010) also agrees in the cultural hegemony afforded to the dominant group of a society, and challenges counter-narratives as entirely liberating, noting their origins in the narratives of those with enough institutional power to shape academic discourses. Conversely, Castagno (2008) challenges her readers to understand radical pedagogical methods as direct challenges to cultural hegemony and the maintenance of systems of domination. Indeed, discussing relations of oppression, power, and privilege that seek to legitimize or reinforce their often unseen, albeit real, interrelations, can be one step of many in the direction of unmaking oppression and fostering social justice.

Other scholars note, however, the ways in which diversity education, in some instances, has shifted from a focus on the political, social, and economic effects of racism to a diluted form of multicultural storytelling with an emphasis on history, cultural contributions, and teaching tolerance (Platt, 2002). Centering the discussion on simply appreciating different cultures and backgrounds minimizes the impact of racism and can lead to feelings of hopelessness. Consequently, classes on multiculturalism should be
discussed within the framework of radical politics where the relationship between race, class, and gender are deconstructed (Platt, 2002). Breaking down inequalities within the context of the institutionally oppressive structures of society provides a framework for larger social change, thus, creating a positive framework for empowerment and change.

**Agency**

Conversely, students’ sense of agency may become subdued as a result of discussions of internalized racial oppression and privilege within diversity courses. Because of this, professors of diversity courses are attempting to build curriculum that highlights human agency and the possibility that individual acts of resistance can make a difference (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Rozas & Miller, 2009). Agency is an internal feeling that people have regarding the level of control we possess over our individual actions and how those actions impact the outside world. It is ideal for people to have a strong sense of agency; however, external phenomena such as racism can play a part in the ways one views their capacity to exercise human agency (Karlsen & Nazroo, 2002; Moretto, Walsh & Haggard, 2011).

In a qualitative study of 21 African American and Latino students in the 11th grade, Epstein, Mayorga, and Nelson (2011) investigated the impact of culturally responsive teaching on students’ understanding of collective agency and the capacity to effect change. The authors defined culturally responsive teaching as a pedagogical strategy that centers the histories of people of color as a crucial component of the curriculum. As a result, professors who teach with responsive cultural awareness, do so in a way that people of color not only share a space in history, but are also depicted as
individuals with agency. Results of the study show that while students who participated in classes with culturally responsive teaching recognized that people of color are victims of racism, they also viewed people of color as resilient individuals who have been successful in effecting change through increased freedom and equality. Studying the ways in which people of color utilize individual and collective agency in the face of adversity gave the students a belief that individuals can make a positive difference.

**Classroom Environment**

The intention of diversity courses should be to create a safe space for students to critically deconstruct hegemonic notions of diversity in all its varied forms (Miller et al., 2001; Nylund, 2010; Rozas, 2007). However, within diversity courses the class environment is often not reflective of this desire (Aveling, 2002). Indeed, many authors note the large potential of diversity courses to be a place of discomfort, and in many cases, an emotionally unsafe environment for students (Nylund, 2010; Garcia, 1997; Daniel, 2011). To help combat the discomfort that is largely inherent to the discussions of diversity courses, Nylund (2010) notes the importance of contextualizing feelings of guilt within larger societal institutions rather than privatizing, and inadvertently stigmatizing, these feelings and experiences. To do this, the instructor’s willingness to create a safe and exploratory classroom becomes imperative. Miller et al. (2001) explain the ways in which the instructor’s intention for the class and their desired outcome directly influence the classroom dynamic. When professors fail to promote trusting and comfortable dialogues within their classroom, students may leave the classroom experiencing greater feelings of unease, powerlessness, or guilt (Booker, 2007; Blackwell, 2010). Booker (2007), reports
that subject matter and instructional style of the professor contribute greatly to the negative classroom experiences of students of color, specifically. Chapman (2007) notes the debate surrounding the ways in which—who and how—students of color can be taught more effectively. Related to this, Miller et al. (2001) discuss the potential skepticism some students of color may hold in regarding white professors’ ability to teach about racism. This is likely a direct response to the white privilege that white professors benefit from both in and outside of the classroom, potentially causing a student of color to question why they would be willing to confront this privilege and possibly relinquish it when it benefits them on such a grand scale. To be sure, white people in general—professionally and economically privileged white people, specifically—have much to lose in an honest dialogue that addresses positions of privilege and institutional racism potentially fostering radical social change, and a redistribution of power both in and outside of the classroom (Castagno, 2008).

Classroom Experiences of Students of Color

While the gaps in literature suggest a need for further research on the experiences of students of color within diversity courses, articles have noted the emergence of troublesome and painful feelings in these courses that can lead to distress and secondary trauma for students of color (Garcia & Melendez, 1997; Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012; Nylund, 2006). Anticipation of these difficult and painful feelings often result in students of color purposely avoiding participation in classroom discussions involving race relations as a way to diminish the threat of potentially hostile race dynamics (Blackwell, 2010). Consequently, when teaching about the imbalance of racial power, professors
should consider using pedagogical strategies that take this potential negative outcome into account.

In a critical analysis on students of color and antiracist education, Blackwell (2010) uses first hand experience as a black woman graduate student in a predominately white university to demonstrate the ways in which white professors of college-level diversity courses objectify students of color through the use of students’ personal experiences as learning tools for white students. Using black feminist standpoint theory, the author contends that using personal stories of oppression to educate white students on the effects of racism undermines the vulnerability and pain that can result from revisiting such events. Furthermore, positioning students of color as cultural experts may have the unintended consequence of requiring students to exchange the opportunity to make sense of their personal experiences using a contextual framework, in favor of providing a first-hand learning experience about race for white students (Blackwell, 2010). To mitigate the effects of this unintended consequence, Blackwell suggests implementing all-inclusive pedagogical strategies by shifting classroom discussions from a focus on helping white students recognize racial oppression and privilege, to raising the consciousness of all students by including antiracist education from the standpoint of students of color as well.

Along with implementing all-inclusive pedagogical strategies, it is equally important for the classroom environment in diversity courses to be equitable. When professors fail to promote trusting and comfortable environments in their classrooms, students of color may be forced to defend the legitimacy of their positions in response to the defensiveness expressed by some white students (Booker, 2007; Blackwell, 2010). In
a qualitative study, Booker (2007), reports that instructional styles of the professor and classroom environment contribute greatly to experiences of African American students. The author interviewed 54 African American undergraduate students in a predominately white university to explore overall classroom experiences and the level of belongingness students felt in the classroom. Results of the study found that African American students are particularly susceptible to feelings of insignificance, isolation, stress, and mistrust when professors do not encourage a sense of trust between classmates. Students reported feelings of trust and comfort when they felt a sense of community and interconnectedness with their fellow classmates (Booker, 2007). Fostering an open environment where everyone’s opinions and input are valued and discussed critically, affords students of color an environment that is conducive to learning about and sharing experiences of racial oppression and privilege in a way that is safe and affective (Blackwell, 2010).

Living with the threat of encountering racism requires people of color to use various coping strategies ranging from living in a state of denial regarding the pervasiveness of racism in our society to suppressing any thoughts, feelings, or emotions connected to past experiences with racism. As a result, when people of color are put in a position where they must talk about past experiences of racism, it can cause them to experience strong negative emotions and risk of secondary trauma (Lowe et al., 2012). Lowe et al. examined the effects of exposure to overtly racist acts and racial microaggressions on people of color. In this qualitative study, the authors interviewed 19 self-identified people of color and discussed the damaging consequences associated with recounting experiences of past racial trauma. Findings from this study show that
discussing racial transgressions can lead to feelings including, but not limited to, shame, confusion, isolation, powerlessness, and mistrust. Research participants also reported feelings of self-blame when confidants minimized incidents of racial targeting or questioned their perception of what occurred. As a way to eliminate the occurrence of secondary trauma, the authors suggest that when listening to narratives regarding encounters with racism, one should provide support by listening actively, providing empathy, and validating the experience of the person who experienced the act of racism. These findings have direct implications for professors of diversity courses who often utilize experiences of students to help teach about racial oppression and privilege. Professors should be aware of the potential negative outcomes of encouraging students of color to tell their stories and, as a result, create classroom environments that foster relationship building and belongingness to help to alleviate the tensions involved in sharing sensitive narratives (Chapman, 2007).

**Classroom Experiences of White Students**

For many white students, coming into consciousness about white privilege can also evoke a range of emotional responses. In a qualitative study of the experiences of 63 undergraduate students enrolled in a service-learning course, Espino & Lee (2011) explored the effectiveness of having a service-learning component in courses teaching about race and privilege. The course was divided into two components consisting of classroom instruction and service-learning. On the one hand, classroom curriculum was designed to educate students on challenging social inequities and developing a critical consciousness in the areas of oppression and social justice. On the other, the goal of the
service-learning component was to establish a greater understanding of the implications of structural racism by working closely with middle and high school students of color from an under-resourced area. While many students were uncomfortable with the course teachings of racial identity and inequality, researchers found that by participating in the service-learning component, students were able to recognize their own biases and behaviors by building relationships with people they otherwise would not have had contact with. Several students also expressed that prior to completing the service-learning portion of the course, they had taken their racial and class privileges for granted. Furthermore, a majority of the students who had previous knowledge of social injustice noted that working closely with people from different social locations gave them a new understanding of the difficulties people of color face.

As previously discussed, white students may experience a range of emotions when attempting to confront white privilege. Feelings of defensiveness, guilt, and anger are not uncommon and in many cases stem from the point of view that racism is simply something that happens on an individual level. Viewing racism in terms of individual racist acts may cause white students to feel as though they are singled out as racists equivalent to those of the pre-Civil Rights era (Romney, Tatum, & Jones, 1992). In an exploration of classroom discussions on race and deconstructing white supremacy, Lucal (1996) suggests that professors can counter the notion that racism exists solely on an individual level by presenting curriculum that emphasizes the structural nature of racism. Lucal (1996) asserts that by encouraging students to direct their anger and resistance at oppressive systems within the United States, focus begins to shift from individual blame,
to recognition of the embedded structural norms that one is taught to accept through compliance with group expectations.

In a similar review of effective methods for teaching courses related to oppression, Romney et al. (1992) stress the importance of building relationships and creating safe spaces for discussing race. Using feminist theory, the authors analyze strategies and techniques that have proven useful for them when teaching courses concerning race. Through personal experience and collaboration, the authors found that when teaching racial oppression and privilege it is helpful to use a constructive process rather than a destructive process. According to the authors, a constructive process consists of first building a substantial understanding of oppression and privilege, recognizing one’s own prejudices and actions, fostering a commitment to growth and development, and establishing a mutual respect by acknowledging apprehensions and anxieties. Conversely, indicators of the destructive process include classroom environments that permit students to attack each other and fail to address occurrences of marginalization and invalidation. While the authors contend that a certain level of discomfort is necessary for change, they demonstrate that using a constructive process versus destructive process when developing course material and creating a classroom environment aids in alleviating some of the negative emotions tied to teaching white students about racial oppression and privilege.

**Confronting Privilege**

Contrary to the power relations that may be temporarily interrupted through an acknowledgement of the privileged aspects of one’s own identity, many authors express
the importance of unmasking one’s own privilege in order to exemplify it, while noting its specific role within classroom dynamics (Miller et al., 2001; Croteau, Talbot, Lance & Evans, 2002; Bohmer & Briggs, 1991). Because the most obvious privilege someone can hold is their skin color, many studies highlight the importance of confronting race within classrooms, both institutionally and individually, as a fundamental starting place.

Specifically, whiteness is commonly centered within discussion of racial privilege and oppression to de-essentialize it by highlighting both its creation and maintenance within hegemonic power structures (Eichstedt, 2001).

In a 2004-2005 ethnographic study, Castagno (2008) attempted to highlight the inadvertent essentializing of whiteness in academic settings by studying the classrooms and teaching methods of twenty-four teachers for an entire academic year. Throughout the course of her observations, it was found that teacher silence surrounding discussions of race was prevalent among nearly all of the twenty-four teachers, unintentionally reinforcing the status quo (i.e., whiteness as the prototype for all people and their experience within society). Ultimately Castagno (2008), attributes teachers’ silence, or race-neutral language employed when addressing questions/topics concerning race, as contributive to racial inequality by reinforcing whiteness and marginalizing the experiences of people of color. By rendering whiteness invisible, the privilege and oppression that remain attached to this social identity also become invisible.

Confronting the dynamic nature of privilege as a means to better understand structural oppression remains foundational to classroom discussions within diversity courses. In doing this, it is hoped that students gain perspective on both the institutional
and individual aspects of oppression (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991). Further, by engaging in these dialogues, while simultaneously locating and acknowledging oneself within uniquely ascribed positions of privilege and oppression, students are encouraged to investigate their own multidimensional identities, and move beyond a “one dimensional field of inequality” (Pyke, 2010, p. 566). The fluidity of identity is emphasized by various authors, (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Eichstedt, 2001) however, Croteau et al. (2002), substantiate academic contentions on the continual interplay between an individual’s varying identities. In their qualitative study involving 18 participants, they explicitly studied the interplay between varying identities of privileged and oppressed locations within one individual, finding that they were always working in combination. The multidimensional nature of identities highlights the interconnectedness of racism; therefore, it becomes the responsibility of all people to confront it.

**Antiracist Activism**

Knowledge of the pervasiveness of racial oppression and privilege can lead to feelings of pessimism and despair. Romney et al. (1992) stress that professors of diversity courses should teach techniques that empower students to become activists against the forces of racism. It is their assertion that taking action can serve as a solution to feelings of fatalism. An effective form of activism for students of diversity courses is antiracist activism. According to Johnson, Rush, and Feagin (2000), to be most effective at antiracist activism, activists should remain in a state of consciousness regarding race and race relations. Furthermore, it is their belief that one must exercise consistency in their fight to challenge racism on individual and structural levels. For white antiracist activists,
Johnson et al. note that feats of activism should go beyond simply existing as the well-meaning white ally. To be sure, being a white antiracist activist means that white allies must acknowledge and reject white privilege while simultaneously challenging individual acts of racism (2000).

While it can be maintained that people of color often engage in antiracist work regarding their own ethnic group, all encompassing antiracist work for people of color happens when they challenge racist acts and discrimination faced by all groups. Acknowledging one’s beliefs based on stereotypes and doing the emotional work of antiracism can be difficult for people of color and whites alike; however, these are essential components of becoming an antiracist activist (Johnson et al., 2000). To assist in fostering antiracism in students, professors of diversity courses can look to Rozas & Miller’s (2007) framework of using concepts they identify as “the web of racism” and “the web of resistance” for teaching about race relations. Using these concepts, Rozas & Miller help students understand the phenomenon of racism in two ways. First, the web of racism is used to teach students about the institution of racism. This highlights the existence of racism on a systemic level (e.g., social, political, economic), which aids students in understanding the role society as a whole plays in perpetuating racism. Second, the web of resistance is meant to foster antiracist attitudes by imparting internal (e.g., reflection and self-awareness) and external (e.g., action through coalition building) strategies for use in combating racism. In other words, antiracist activists must have a strong knowledge base of how institutionalized racism operates and a commitment to
self-reflection and collaboration with cross-racial coalitions to be effective as antiracist activists.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The researchers designed an exploratory research study utilizing a mixed-methods approach to generate quantitative and qualitative data. The purpose of this research study was to explore the effects of California State University, Sacramento’s graduate level Social Work 202 course curriculum on student’s sense of agency. Ultimately, the data collected was used to determine whether or not students are more likely to feel self-determined while being educated about the current and historical effects of structural racial oppression and privilege. The researchers administered a survey consisting of 21 close-ended questions and three open-ended questions to students in two sections of Social Work 202 regarding classroom discussions on racial oppression and privilege and students’ sense of agency. Due to gaps in literature regarding the topic, a mixed-methods exploratory research design was most appropriate to gather the information needed. This format was most beneficial because the close-ended questions allowed for comparisons between recipients’ answers to be easily drawn, while the open-ended questions provided participants the freedom to express themselves in a way that was more expansive and descriptive. The researchers anticipate that this study could potentially contribute to academic understanding of the effects of classroom discussions of structural racial oppression and privilege. Furthermore, it is hoped that the study’s findings can aid in the creation of a more comprehensive radical curriculum for future classes regarding such topics.
Sampling Procedures

A total of 45 students taking a graduate level Social Work diversity course (Social Work 202) at California State University, Sacramento participated in this study. The participants were first year graduate students in the two-year Master of Social Work program. The researchers used non-probability convenience sampling by gaining permission from two professors to survey students representative of a wide spectrum of racial identities in two sections of Social Work 202 classes. The method used to select participants for the sample was chosen due to the availability of the participants and nature of the curriculum taught in Social Work 202. The sample size of the study was 45. This size was determined by the number of students enrolled in the two sections of Social Work 202 classes the researchers were given permission to survey.

Data Collection Procedures

The researchers contacted four Social Work 202 professors via email during the Fall Semester in 2012 to obtain permission to survey students enrolled in five sections of the course. Of the four professors contacted, two responded with permission to survey. This gave the researchers access to survey three sections of Social Work 202. The researchers surveyed three sections of Social Work 202; however, due to an error in an early draft of the survey, data from Social Work 202 section one was thrown out. After correcting the error in the survey, the researchers were able to successfully collect data from Social Work 202 sections two and three.
During the data collection process the researchers described the purpose of the study and explained the voluntary nature of participation. The researchers answered all questions from students and then distributed consent forms and surveys to participants. Following data collection, the researchers evaluated the data using statistical analysis. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program was used to analyze the quantitative data from the surveys. In doing this, the researchers were able to cross-tabulate and manipulate the data in an effort to draw associations, correlations, and differences between responses.

Qualitative data was categorized, themed, and coded by the researchers for analysis. To begin, researchers engaged in a content analysis of the qualitative data that was collected. The data was divided as follows (with each category pertaining to students’ experiences in Social Work 202): demographics, class environment, theoretical explanations of racial oppression and privilege, and feelings related to students’ sense of agency. After the data was divided into subcategories, student responses were coded by grouping general themes and key words.

**Instruments**

Researchers administered a survey consisting of 21 questions. Sections included: demographics (age, gender, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, formal multicultural education experience, and participation in activism to advance racial equity); racial oppression; white privilege; students’ sense of agency; and activism. Additionally, at the end of the survey we included three open-ended questions inquiring about the general themes of the survey, albeit allowing students to answer without the
constraints of Likert Scale questioning. The intent was to incorporate the voices of the students unrestrained by pre-defined categories.

Both the questions within the survey as well as the open-ended portions of the questionnaire were designed to measure the perceived sense of agency students have after taking Social Work 202. Additionally, questions were structured in a way so researchers could investigate the ways in which students’ perceived sense of agency interacts with participants’ identity, their level of previous knowledge regarding structural racial oppression and privilege, and future implications regarding the attainment of knowledge on such topics.

Data Analysis

The survey instrument used for data collection included nominal and ordinal levels of measurement. The section pertaining to demographics consisted of nominal level questions such as age, gender, ethnicity, social class, and sexual orientation. However, subsequent quantitative sections on racial oppression and privilege, students’ sense of agency, and activism were comprised of ordinal level questions scored using a five-point Likert Scale. The qualitative portion of the survey included three open-ended questions that were coded and themed by researchers for further interpretation and analysis.

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to data collection, the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects at California State University, Sacramento, reviewed the proposed study research protocol. The review board found the study to be exempt of risk to the participants in the survey.
The Human Subjects approval number is: 12-13-032. In addition, the complete confidentiality of all data collected, as well as the absolute anonymity of all participants, was protected by the researchers. The right to privacy was maintained by storing all records without identifying information on password protected and encrypted computers owned by the researchers, and all of the surveys and consent forms within locked file cabinets. Confidential data was handled and accessed solely by the researchers and thesis advisor, Dr. Teiahsha Bankhead. All data will be destroyed once the master’s project is filed with the Office of Graduate Studies.
Chapter 4

RESULTS

Background

The participants of this study included first year Master’s level students enrolled in Social Work and Diverse Populations (Social Work 202), a diversity course offered at California State University, Sacramento. The researchers gained access to three of the five sections of the course offered in the Fall Semester of 2012. However, due to an error in an early draft of the survey, data collected from section one were not used. The researchers were able to obtain a small sample of 45 subjects since eligibility requirements to participate in the survey were limited to students enrolled in this specific class.

Demographics

The sample of this study is diverse in terms of age, ethnic background, social class, amount of formal multicultural education obtained, and level of experience with antiracist activism. The age of participants in the study sample range from 22 to 50 with a mean age of 28.7.
A large majority of the participants were female (68.9%), which was expected since the field of social work tends to attract a greater number of women than men. The remainder of participants identified as male (28.9%) and other (2.2%) (Figure 1).

While the ethnic background of the participants was diverse, the category with a large majority of participants was Caucasian (46.7%). The second largest category of
participants was Latino (20.0%). The third largest category was Multiracial (13.3%). African American (8.9%), Asian/Pacific Islander (6.7%), and Other (4.4%) participated in much smaller numbers than Caucasian and Latino, but were still represented. Due to the low number of African American, Asian, Latino, and Multiracial participants when compared to Caucasian participants, the researchers combined students of color into one group totaling 53.3%. The number of Caucasian participants remained the same at 46.7% (Figure 2).

Figure 3

Social Class of Participants

A large majority of participants came from low income/working class households (48.9%), middle class households were represented by 28.9%, and 17.9% of participants came from the lower middle class households. Upper middle class households were least represented in terms of social class (4.4%) (Figure 3).
Figure 4

Sexual Orientation of Participants

Of the 45 participants, 33 were Heterosexual (73.3%), seven were Other (15.6%), four were either Gay or Lesbian (8.9%), and one was Bisexual (2.2%) (Figure 4).

Figure 5

Amount of Formal Multicultural Education
A large percentage of participants reported having received formal multicultural instruction in the course of their education. Results are as follows, 60.0% reported having “quite a bit” of formal multicultural instruction, 33.3% reported only “some” formal multicultural instruction, 4.4% reported having an “extensive” amount, and 2.2% reported having “very little” (Figure 5).

Figure 6

*Level of Participation in Antiracist Activism*

In terms of level of activism to advance racial equity, a majority of respondents (60%) reported having “None” or “very little” participation in antiracist activism. The remaining reported “some” (31.1%) participation in antiracist activism. Only 8.9% of participants considered themselves to have participated “quite a bit” in antiracist activism (Figure 6).

**Overall Findings**

**Classroom Discussions**

This portion of the survey consisted of 11 Likert Scale questions and was designed to elicit responses related to classroom discussions on racial oppression and privilege. The responses available to choose from were: (1) Never (2) Rarely (3)
Somewhat (4) Often (5) Very Often. Results show that of the two classes surveyed, discussions of racial oppression and white privilege took place in between “Often” and “Very Often.” More specifically, student reports of discussions on racial oppression resulted in a mean score of 4.47 out of 5, while discussions on white privilege resulted in a mean score of 4.38 out of 5 (Table 1). These discussions on racial oppression and privilege included lectures on individual acts of racism, institutional racism, and ways to challenge racial oppression and white privilege. Data show that students were taught about individual acts of racism “Often,” with a mean score of 4.02, while discussions geared toward institutional racism took place in between “Somewhat” and “Often” with a mean score of 3.66. Instruction on ways to challenge racial oppression and white privilege scored in between “Somewhat” and “Often,” both with a mean score of 3.58 (Table 2).

Table 1

Frequency of Discussions on Racial Oppression and Privilege

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often did your professor facilitate discussions on racial oppression?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.47</td>
<td>.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often did your professor facilitate discussions on white privilege?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.684</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Content of Discussions on Racial Oppression and Privilege*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Were you taught about individual acts of racial discrimination?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>4.02</td>
<td>.690</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were you taught about institutional racism?</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>.834</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were examples of ways to challenge racial oppression discussed?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.839</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were examples of ways to challenge white privilege discussed?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>.812</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Included in the questions pertaining to classroom discussions, were questions related to student participation in discussions of racial oppression and privilege. Using the same Likert Scale response categories, students reported participating in discussions of racial oppression and privilege in between “Somewhat” and “Often,” with mean scores of 3.56 and 3.42, respectively (Table 3). In addition, data indicate that students who report high levels of participation in courses not pertaining to diversity also report high levels of participation in discussions of racial oppression and privilege. The strength of these relationships are strong positive correlation values of, \( r(45) = .73, \ p < .05 \) for participation in discussions of racial oppression and \( r(45) = .61, \ p = .05 \) for participation in discussions of white privilege.
Table 3

Student Participation in Discussions of Racial Oppression and Privilege

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How often did you participate in discussions of racial oppression?</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often did you participate in discussions of white privilege?</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Agency

Seven Likert Scale questions were included in the survey to examine participants’ sense of agency. The responses available to choose from were (1) Disagree (2) Somewhat Disagree (3) Somewhat Agree (4) Agree. On the whole, results reveal that students have a high level of agency in relation to racial oppression and white privilege. More specifically, data indicate that learning about racial oppression and white privilege did not greatly result in feelings of powerlessness. This is demonstrated by a mean score of 1.93 out of 4 for the statement, “what I learned about racial oppression made me feel powerless.” Similarly, a mean score of 1.91 was calculated from the statement, “what I learned about white privilege made me feel powerless” (Table 4). On the contrary, results show that learning about racial oppression and privilege helped students feel empowered to effect change as evidenced by a mean score of 3.33 out of 4 for the statement, “what I learned about racial oppression made me feel empowered to effect change.” Similarly,
the question, “what I learned about white privilege made me feel empowered to effect change,” indicated a mean score of 3.31 (Table 5).

Table 4

*Learning About Racial Oppression/Privilege and Powerlessness*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression made me feel powerless.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>.751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on white privilege made me feel powerless.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>.848</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5

*Learning About Racial Oppression/Privilege and Empowerment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression made me feel empowered to effect change.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.603</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on white privilege made me feel empowered to effect change.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.668</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results related to self-determination and antiracist activism indicate a strong sense of agency. Data revealed a mean score of 3.34 for the statement, “what I learned about racial oppression and white privilege has given me a stronger sense of self-determination.” Comparably, a score of 3.11 was calculated for the statement, “since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, I feel I can challenge these
institutional forces.” Responses for the statement, “since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces” resulted in a mean score of 3.42 (Table 6).

Table 6

*Self-Determination and Antiracist Activism*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression and white privilege has given me a stronger sense of self-determination.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>.608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, I feel I can challenge these institutional forces.</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>.573</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces.</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>3.42</td>
<td>.657</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Effects of Classroom Discussions on Participants’ Agency**

Correlation tests indicate there is no significant relationship between how often professors facilitated classroom discussions on racial oppression and the likeliness of students to challenge racial oppression and privilege since learning about it in Social Work 202, $r(45) = .01, p > .05$. Similarly, there is no significant relationship between how often professors facilitated classroom discussions on white privilege and the likeliness of students to challenge racial oppression and privilege since learning about it in Social Work 202, $r(45) = -.06, p > .05$. In addition, findings suggest there is a weak to
moderate correlation between having a stronger sense of self-determination as a result of learning about racial oppression and privilege and the likelihood of students working to challenge racial oppression and privilege \( r(45) = .34, p < .05 \). Interestingly, there was a weak to moderate correlation between discussions of ways to challenge racial oppression and having a stronger sense of self-determination as a result of learning about racial oppression and privilege, \( r(45) = .32, p < .05 \). However, there was a weak correlation between discussions of ways to challenge white privilege and having a stronger sense of self-determination as a result of learning about racial oppression and privilege, \( r(45) = .21, p > .05 \) (Table 7).

**Ethnic Background and Agency**

Cross-tabulations show similar responses between students of color and Caucasian students in relation to the likelihood they will work toward challenging racial oppression and privilege. Results show 92% of students of color answered in the affirmative (Somewhat Agree or Agree), while only 8% answered in the negative (Somewhat Disagree). Similar results exist for Caucasian students who answered in the affirmative 90% and in the negative only 10% (Table 8).
### Table 7

**Classroom Discussions and Agency**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable 1</th>
<th>Variable 2</th>
<th>Correlation (r)</th>
<th>Significance (p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How often did your professor facilitate discussions on racial oppression?</td>
<td>Since learning about racial oppression and privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces.</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>&gt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How often did your professor facilitate discussions on white privilege?</td>
<td>Since learning about racial oppression and privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces.</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>&gt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression and white privilege has given me a stronger sense of self-determination.</td>
<td>Since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces.</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were examples of ways to challenge racial oppression discussed?</td>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression and white privilege has given me a stronger sense of self-determination.</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>&lt; .05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were examples of ways to challenge white privilege discussed?</td>
<td>What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression and white privilege has given me a stronger sense of self-determination.</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>&gt; .05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

Since learning about racial oppression and white privilege, it is likely that I will work to challenge these institutional forces.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cross-tabulations show mixed responses between students of color and Caucasian students in relation to feelings of powerlessness due to what they learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression. Results indicate that students of color are less likely to feel powerless as a result of learning about racial oppression than Caucasian students. Findings show that 87% of students of color disagreed with the statement, “what I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression made me feel powerless,” while only 62% of Caucasian students disagreed with that same statement. In addition, 13% of students of color agreed with this statement, while 38% of Caucasian students agreed with this statement (Table 9).

Table 9

What I learned in Social Work 202 on racial oppression made me feel powerless.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Cross-tabulations show Caucasian students are slightly more likely to experience feelings of powerlessness due to what they learned in Social Work 202 on white privilege. Findings show that 79% of students of color and 67% of Caucasian students disagreed with the statement, “what I learned in Social Work 202 on white privilege made me feel powerless.” Likewise, 21% of students of color and 33% of Caucasian students agreed with this statement (Table 10).

Table 10

*What I learned in Social Work 202 on white privilege made me feel powerless.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian Students</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Antiracist Activism**

Part two of the survey included three open-ended questions, which were formulated with the objective of incorporating the narrative voices of the participants. However, the researchers chose to focus on question three since questions one and two were summed up comprehensively through quantitative analysis. Question three reads, “in what ways do you see yourself challenging acts of racial oppression since learning about it in Social Work 202?” Responses were themed and coded into four categories: educating oneself and others, challenging institutional and individual acts of racism, engaging in acts of resistance, and participating in social advocacy.
Examples of responses given under the category “educating oneself and others” included talking to friends and family about what was learned in Social Work 202 regarding racial oppression and finding ways to continue to increase personal knowledge regarding racial oppression. For example, a 24-year-old female who identifies ethnically as “Other,” responded that she sees herself challenging racial oppression by educating others through the use of “social networking sites.” Additionally, a 32-year-old female who identifies as Multiracial reports that she plans to “have conversations with the people closest to me such as my family [and] challenge[ing] [f]riends.” Personal growth was also reported as a way to help challenge racial oppression, as cited by a 30-year-old African American male who plans to educate himself by “increasing knowledge of African American history.”

Challenging institutional and individual acts of racism was also created as a theme to categorize ways to challenge oppressive acts. A 31-year-old Caucasian male plans to do this by “challenging political policies that aren't equitable.” Another example, given by a 27-year-old Multiracial female, is to “… challenge[e] institutions and social norms in my practice as a social worker.” A 22-year-old Caucasian female reports that she plans to take the direct approach by “stand[ing] up for an individual if I see racial oppression.”

A few examples of ways participants plan to challenge racial oppression through acts of resistance could range anywhere from “rejecting racist conversations” to “refusing to laugh at racist jokes” as noted by a 27-year-old Asian/Pacific Islander female and 30-year-old Caucasian female, respectively. In addition, a 25-year-old Latino male reports
that he plans to take “proactive steps to expose acts of racial oppression if I observe them.”

Lastly, engaging in social advocacy is another way participants plan to confront racial oppression. This type of action can take place on the macro, mezzo, and micro levels. For example, a 29-year-old African American female intends to combat racism on a macro level by “speaking out and engaging in organized events against racial oppression.” An example of social advocacy on the mezzo level would be to “participat[e] in more social action for the community,” as cited by a 30-year-old female who identifies as “Other.” Similarly, a 43-year-old Caucasian male’s response to “work with undocumented immigrants to advance their rights and legal protections” is a micro level response to combating racial oppression through social advocacy.

Summary

This chapter summarized the findings from 45 surveys administered to Master of Social Work students enrolled in Social Work 202 during the Fall Semester of 2012 at California State University, Sacramento. The information was gathered from participants using quantitative and qualitative methods. The research was designed to explore the effects of classroom discussions on racial oppression and privilege on students’ sense of agency. The study collected demographic information, perceptions about classroom discussions related to racial oppression and privilege, details regarding students’ sense of agency, and ideas surrounding antiracist activism.
Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

Within this chapter the researchers will summarize and discuss the findings that were presented in chapter four. The researchers will engage in a discussion regarding the conclusions that can be drawn from this study, how the findings relate to current academic literature on the subject, and the implications for social work practice and policy. The chapter will also include a discussion on the limitations of the study, coupled with suggestions for future research and recommendations on how to effectively apply the findings to social work practice and policy in ways that best serve social work students.

Analysis

The researchers created this study with the intention of gaining insight into the effects of classroom discussions on students’ sense of agency. Indeed, we designed our research question and formulated our data collection instrument with the hope of gaining information from students on the unintended (whether good or bad) consequences of graduate-level discussions regarding institutional oppression and privilege on students’ sense of agency. Through the creation of the study, the researchers attempted to contribute to academic understandings of classroom experiences of students, while examining these experiences in relation to students’ sense of agency, and the relationship between the two. The phenomena of racial oppression, institutional racism, and white privilege are ones that garner a lot of discussion and research in academia. Also well explored are the ways in which these phenomenon impact individuals, and daily life
(Lucal, 1996; McDermott & Samson, 2005). Specifically, various researchers explore the role of these forces within classroom settings, and the ways in which they influence the diversity pedagogy, classroom discussions, and student relationships to one another (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Chapman, 2007; Castagno, 2008; Miller, Hyde, & Ruth, 2004).

In contrast to the various articles written on similar subject matters—specifically in-class experiences of students of color—(Nylund, 2010; Garcia, 1997; Daniel, 2011) our study’s findings indicated positive outcomes from in-class discussions on students’ sense of agency (75.5 percent). These outcomes included: feeling more inclined to engage in antiracist activism, challenging both interpersonal and institutional acts of racism, and feeling able to influence one’s own future, regardless of the omnipresence of institutional racism. It must be noted that the findings of this study could, in part, be a result of the fact that the participants surveyed were enrolled in courses taught by professors who use a radical pedagogy, which is more likely to instill a sense of empowerment in students. In the following discussion, the primary outcomes of the study will be compared to the findings documented within the review of the literature in Chapter 2.

Noted within the literature review, and congruent to the conclusions of the data, was the importance of confronting privilege and power (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Miller et al., 2001). This acts as one of the central themes of diversity courses and was exemplified through the classroom discussions held by the participants of the study. While our study found no correlation between the frequency of these discussions and students’ sense of agency, the majority of students noted their occurrence as “often” or
“very often.” While there was not an explicit link, it is likely when students are encouraged to investigate the institutional and individual nature of oppression an opportunity arises to expand the one-dimensional nature of oppression, thus, rendering racism as a force that can be tangibly challenged (Pyke, 2010). In an attempt to highlight the interconnectedness of racism, our study continually asked questions regarding both white privilege and institutional oppression so as to exemplify both the privileging and oppressive aspects of racism (Croteau et al., 2002).

While the literature review found that knowledge of the pervasive nature of racial oppression can potentially lead to feelings of defeat and pessimism, it noted that providing students with techniques that encourage them to engage in various forms of antiracist activism can help curb some of these feelings (Romney et al., 1992). In contrast, research findings reflected no significant correlation between how racial oppression and white privilege were discussed and students’ inclinations to engage in antiracist activism ($r= 45, p>.05$). Instead, students were generally willing to challenge racism through activism after discussing racial oppression and privilege—not necessarily the tools to combat them. However, this is likely to be the catalyst for further action, as knowledge can act as the foundation of action.

The second most notable finding/outcome extracted from the data was the direction many of the participants wanted to take regarding their personal challenges to racism. Regardless of how, or how often, racial oppression and white privilege were the planned topic of classroom discussions, the majority of participants expressed the desire to challenge racism (91 percent). Extracted from the open-ended questions at the end of
the survey, the students’ responses generated themes of what constitutes antiracist “activism.”

Similar to research documented within the literature review, students frequently expressed the importance of challenging one’s own stereotypical beliefs, and doing the “emotional work” necessary to challenge racism within them (Johnson et al., 2000). This was generally perceived as one of the primary ways to challenge racism. Additionally, students expressed the importance of embodying anti-racism within their future work as social workers, as well as within their daily lives. Gathered from the qualitative portion of the survey, challenging racism was generally exemplified by students on the individual level, and many of the responses acknowledged the need to challenge the institutional aspects of racism as well.

Finally, of the 45 participants surveyed, 93.2 percent experienced no negative affects to their sense of agency. On the contrary, many students felt self-determined upon learning about and discussing racial oppression and white privilege. Because current diversity pedagogy attempts to highlight agency and the human potential to effect progressive change in one’s life and community, racism is rendered a force that is no less pervasive, albeit individual resistance can make a difference (Bohmer & Briggs, 1991; Rozas & Miller, 2009).

Despite the scope and magnitude of racial oppression and privilege, the qualitative data reflected a strong sense of possibility and potential in both students of color and white students as a result of learning about these issues. The researchers attribute this, in part, to current trends in diversity pedagogy in which the interactive and
dynamic ways in which racism is expressed and experienced is presented as something that can and should be challenged (Miller et al., 2001; Nylund, 2010, Rozas, 2007). Potentially most surprising, was the finding that white students are slightly more likely to feel a sense of powerlessness upon discussing racial oppression and white privilege. The researchers attribute this to the well-documented feelings of guilt white students may experience and express upon learning about their institutional power and unearned privileges (Lucal, 1996; McDermott & Samson, 2005).

**Summary of Study**

There is a robust body of literature regarding the topic of classroom experiences of both students of color and white students (Garcia & Melendez, 1997; Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012; Nylund, 2006). There were no studies designated solely to exploring the potential link between knowledge of these phenomena and the real world effect this knowledge can have on an individual’s sense of empowerment and agency. Upon review of the conclusions garnered from related studies, the researchers sought to expand current academic discussions by seeking conclusions from their data findings regarding the potential link between knowledge of racial oppression and one’s sense of agency. The researchers found, following the conclusion of the study, that there is a weak to moderate correlation between knowledge of power and privilege and a strong sense of agency in students.

The results of the study found there is a weak to moderate correlation between classroom discussions of racial oppression and privilege and students sense of agency. It is likely that in-class discussions on such topics leave students with a better
understanding of their social locations and the desire to advance racial equity—both individually and institutionally. Although it is slightly more common for students of color to feel empowered by in-class discussions on racial oppression, the majority of both students of color (92 percent) and white students (90 percent) expressed sentiments of their ability to actively challenge racial oppression and privilege. This exemplifies the benefit of discussing racial oppression in the classroom setting, where students have the opportunity to not only learn about institutional racism, but work through their own experiences within the safety of a mediated classroom setting. This aligns itself with complementary research on the topic as the literature notes the various ways that discussing the personal and political aspects of privilege and power can positively affect all engaged within the classroom setting (Nylund, 2006; Lowe, Okubo, & Reilly, 2012).

The study found that discussions of racial oppression and privilege took place very often within classroom settings; however, there was no correlation between the frequency of these discussions relating to students’ sense of powerlessness, or lack of agency. Additionally, the data indicated that students generally felt self-determined, and classroom discussions of institutionally powerful forces within their lives had only minimal effect. Lastly, the desire to participate in antiracist activism subsequent to, or while, taking a graduate level diversity course, was notable within many of the students’ responses. Through open-ended responses, participants noted the various ways they plan to challenge racial oppression, varying in micro and macro tactics. The results of the study, garnered through cross tabulations, found only a 2 percent discrepancy between
white students and students of color regarding their desire to challenge racial oppression and white privilege—with students of color being 2 percent more likely to do this.

The most promising finding drawn from the study related to the overall feelings of agency and the desire to participate in antiracist activism indicated by nearly all of the student participants (91.1 percent). Interestingly, white students experienced feelings of “powerlessness,” as a result of in-class discussions, at higher rates than students of color. Given the institutional and individual privileges ascribed to whiteness in our society, students may feel disempowered upon learning about institutional oppression and privilege since it is not typically a familiar aspect in their day-to-day lives. However, feelings of disempowerment from both white students and students of color remained in the minority, and the general sentiments of the participants reflected a strong willingness and ability to challenge institutional oppression and privilege.

**Implications for Social Work**

Although the findings collected from the study are specific to California State University, Sacramento students who were enrolled in a graduate level social work diversity course, there are significant implications for social work pedagogy, practice, and policy. By conducting this study, the researchers attempted to explore the impact of difficult classroom discussions on students’ sense of agency. In the social work profession, it is imperative to interact both with clients and the community in ways that expand an individual’s agency and self-determination, rather than curb it, and learning how to do this begins in the classroom setting where future social workers are encouraged to explore their own experiences with oppression and privilege.
At the micro level, social workers will be better equipped to work with clients of various cultural and ethnic backgrounds if they have a historically relevant understanding of their own social location and the location of their clients, as they relate to systems of oppression and privilege. This could arguably better prepare social workers for the myriad social issues/stigmas their clients could face, as well as prepare social workers for potential backlash from clients, when their social location differs from that of their clients. This is directly in line with the core values promoted by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), in that learning about racial oppression and privilege can directly impact the competence of and commitment to populations served by social workers (Code of Ethics, 2008). Indeed, a restored commitment to furthering racial equity and challenging racial oppression on the individual and institutional level within social work practice has great transformative potential.

At the mezzo level, social workers can strive to create and/or reform programs to adequately promote the self-determination and agency of their clients. By understanding the institutional nature of racial oppression and privilege, social workers can tailor their programs in ways that legitimately promote individual agency, while simultaneously challenging racism both in and outside of the organization for which they work. This may look like working alongside prominent community members, so as not to unintentionally reinforce a position of inferiority targeting historically marginalized populations.

Finally, and potentially the most consequential, at the macro level social workers have an obligation to advocate for social policies that tangibly benefit marginalized communities, and legitimately seek to empower individuals, while ensuring their self-
determination. Advocacy at the macro level is central to the NASW Code of Ethics (Code of Ethics, 2008) and social workers have the opportunity to apply theories of liberation, and their understandings of oppression in a way that positively influences social policy and impacts individuals. Foundational to successful social policies is an historical understanding of what works, and what has created unintended consequence and reinforced marginality. In learning about racial oppression and white privilege, social workers have the unique opportunity to gain an historical perspective on the roots of these phenomena, so as to better challenge them.

**Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to obtain insight into the effects of in-class discussions of racial oppression and privilege on students’ sense of agency. The study was intentionally designed to tease out any subtle impacts of these discussions, so as to potentially aid in the creation of a more relevant and “decolonized” diversity pedagogy. Given the research did not reflect the need for any significant reforms to current diversity education (as the majority of respondents expressed feelings of self-determination and agency), the following section includes recommendations for future research, how this study could have collected richer data, and suggestions for future research.

Upon review of the data, and given the complex nature of the topic being surveyed, the researchers feel interviewing students, even using a smaller sample size, would have allowed for a more in-depth analysis of their responses. An interview process would have also allowed for follow-up questions, and the potential for the researchers to probe responses and receive clarification. Furthermore, since respondents were primarily
Caucasian, choosing students for the interview process would have given the researchers the opportunity to choose interviewees from various ethnic and social backgrounds.

Since the findings suggested the success of the graduate level diversity course, in not unintentionally harming students’ sense of agency, further research may be used to gain insight on what specific aspects of this diversity curriculum are contributing to students’ self-determination and agency. This has the potential to center students’ needs and desires within the formation of curriculum, creating curriculum that is genuinely impactful. This operates under the assumption that future research will have a larger sample size, thus allowing for greater diversity of academic disciplines as well as respondents.

Furthermore, since the researchers were only able to obtain permission to survey students from classes with professors who use techniques in line with a radical pedagogy, we did not have a control class to compare results with. In other words, findings could have been more influential if the researchers were able to compare results from these courses—taught by professors who have a radical pedagogy—to results from students enrolled in courses whose professors did not.

Lastly, although the findings reflect general sentiments of empowerment upon completion of this specific diversity course (Social Work 202), there were the outlier students who did in fact experience feelings of powerlessness and lack of control upon learning about the institutional nature of oppression and privilege. The researchers assume, that while these students were the minority, there are undoubtedly other students in varying diversity courses who have experienced these feelings at one point or another.
Because of this, future research should continue to examine these outlying voices so as to note when and why learning about institutional oppression translates into agency, or despair.

**Limitations**

Upon conclusion of the study the researchers determined that it was limited by its relatively small sample size (n=45), and surveying only graduate level students taking a diversity course, at California State University, Sacramento. If consent had been granted from the remaining two professors teaching the graduate level diversity course that semester, the researchers would have been able to generate a larger sample size, thus adding to the diversity of our participants. A larger sample size could also lend itself to greater variance in participant responses as well as participant demographics.

Further, from such a targeted sample it is challenging to extrapolate the data to university students in general. Upon review of the data, the researchers concluded that surveying both graduate and undergraduate students from various academic disciplines would have generated a much more comprehensive analysis of classroom discussions and their effects on students. Specifically, we concluded this because of the explicit challenge to racial oppression and white privilege couched within the discipline of social work. Because of this, it is likely that for many of the participants, the social work diversity course was not their first diversity course taken. It would have been beneficial to include the voices of students who are engaging in these discussions for the first time, and within a discipline that is not explicitly geared towards social justice.
Conclusion

Chapter 5 provided a summary and discussion of the key finding gathered from the research specified in Chapter 4. Additionally, there was a discussion of how the research findings were aligned or incongruent with the related academic literature discussed in Chapter 2. Following this, the limitations of the study were noted and discussed followed by implications for future social work practice at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Next, the researchers discussed potential recommendations for future research on this topic. Findings of this study can assist in determining the direction future research on this topic will take and the ways in which it can be conducted most successfully. Finally, the study reveals that generalizations cannot be made from the research, as the sample was too specific and small for extrapolation.
Appendix A
Human Subjects Review Approval Letter

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO
DIVISION OF SOCIAL WORK

To: Leah Barros & Erica Fonseca  Date: 11/21/2012
From: Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects

RE: YOUR RECENT HUMAN SUBJECTS APPLICATION

We are writing on behalf of the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects from the Division of Social Work. Your proposed study, “Decolonizing Education & Understanding How Classroom Discussions on Racial Oppression and Privilege Affect Students' Sense of Agency.”

X approved as X EXEMPT ___ MINIMAL RISK ___

Your human subjects approval number is: 12-13-032. Please use this number in all official correspondence and written materials relative to your study. Your approval expires one year from this date. Approval carries with it that you will inform the Committee promptly should an adverse reaction occur, and that you will make no modification in the protocol without prior approval of the Committee.

The committee wishes you the best in your research.

Professors: Maria Dinis, Jude Antonyappan, Teiahsha Bankhead, Serge Lee, Kisun Nam, Maura O’Keefe, Dale Russell, Francis Yuen

Cc: Bankhead
References


Colonization/Decolonization. 71-95


