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Experiences of Racism, Prejudice, and Bias in the Classroom

Akirah J. Bradley

In this study I explore the climate for students of color in the classroom setting at a university located in Northern New England. This research shines light on the experiences of six students of color. I conducted phenomenological interviews to reveal specific acts of racism, prejudice, and bias in the classroom. Throughout this study the themes developed are based on the students' perceptions of climate. Additionally, this study implores institutions to validate the voices of students of color with one powerful institutional response.

Many actually believe this monster, racism, that has had at least a few hundred years to take root, grow, invade our space and develop subtle variations . . . this mind-funk that distorts thought and action, can be merely wished away. I've run into folks who really think that we can beat this devil, kick this habit, be healed of this disease in a snap. In a sincere blink of a well-intentioned eye, presto—poof—racism disappears. (Yamato, 2004, p. 92)

Introduction

Many Historically/Predominantly White Institutions (HPWI) in the United States are making rigorous efforts to increase racial diversity within the student body (Davis, Dias-Bowie, Greenberg, Klukken, Pollio, & Thomas, et al., 2004). In 2006, the American Council on Education reported that between 1993-2003 the enrollment of students of color in higher education in the United States increased by 50.7%. As campus populations become increasingly diverse, institutions of higher education must respond actively to these changes.

In recent years, some institutions of higher education have adapted their policies, mission, and vision statements to emphasize and prioritize multiculturalism.

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However, these values are not consistently enacted across all individuals and departments (Maruyama, & Moreno, 2000; Watson, Terrell, & Wright, 2002). While some universities work toward increasing the structural diversity of their student body, they often make minimal efforts to increase the racial diversity of administration and faculty (Berlak & Moyenda, 2001; Bresciani, 2003; De Sherbinin, 2004). The expression and incidence of prejudice on college campuses continues to be a concern. In particular, students of color at HPWIs report experiencing racism in the classroom (Davis et al., 2004). This study focuses on these experiences.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of racially biased incidents experienced in the classroom at a Northern New England University (NNEU). Through this study, I sought to identify these particular biases and to make recommendations for the retention and support of students of color on their educational journeys. I explore these research questions:

1. What is the nature of the classroom climate for students of color at NNEU?
2. What types of racially biased related incidents occur in the classroom setting?
3. What actions can be taken to diminish the number of racially biased incidents in the classroom?

Significance of the Study

Many scholars acknowledge that institutions of higher education across the nation are experiencing a growth in the number of students of color enrolled (Davis et al., 2004; De Sherbinin, 2004; Howard, 2006; Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). This rapid increase in structural diversity challenges institutions of higher education to create and maintain a benevolent and respectful learning environment for students of color. Many HPWI administrators and faculty members on campus are not cognizant of the struggle that students of color face in the classroom (Watson et al., 2002). In addition to recognizing the burden that students of color carry, institutions must respond diligently to faculty who send racist and/or biased messages to students. Hurtado (1992) stated "that instances of overt racial conflict can no longer be viewed as aberrations or isolated incidents, but rather are indicators of a more general problem of unresolved racial issues in college environments and in society at large" (p. 540).

As an African American female and new professional in the field of higher education, I reflect back on my undergraduate experiences while attending a HPWI remembering the bias and injustice I endured. Through reflection I chose this topic to help give a voice to commonly misunderstood or neglected students of

color at HPWIs. After a review of the literature and personal communication from students at NNEU, I find that this topic is important, necessary, and affects all stakeholders in higher education—students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and administration.

Initial research and conversations unearthed disturbing stories provided by students of color across the nation. During this review of existing literature and personal communication, I identified racially biased incidents that students of color attending a HPWI encounter in the classroom. This study grew from the literature and conversations which indicate that predominantly White campuses are unwelcoming and hostile, creating a "chilly climate" for students of color (Fleming, 1984; Hurtado, 1992; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Smith & Wolf-Wendel, 2005; Stage & Manning, 1992; Watson et al., 2002).

The term "chilly climate" comes from the research of Hall and Sandler and refers to the classroom climate for women (Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin, 2003). Crombie et al. (2003) defined "chilly climate" as "the aggregated impact of a host of micro inequities and forms of systemic discrimination that disadvantage women in academic environments" (p. 52). Smith and Wolf-Wendel (2005) stated, "the current literature suggests that some campus environments are more 'chilly' than welcoming, more 'alienating' than involving, more hostile than encouraging" (p. 12). After review of the literature, I define the term "chilly climate" for students of color in the classroom as a milieu that does not actively support cultural or racial identities other than White, and one that tolerates acts of subtle or overt individual, group, or systemic racism. By conducting a study on students of color in a chilly climate, the goal is to capture perspective on a shared experience using qualitative method that acts as an outlet to voice students' narrative of their reality.

Methodology

Qualitative researchers endeavor to "capture and discover meaning" (Neuman, 2000, p. 123). There are many types of qualitative methodologies; this study is an example of phenomenological research methods. Phenomenology seeks to understand the experiences of individuals and connect an understanding of shared experiences among groups.

Selection of Participants

Six undergraduate students of color at NNEU participated in this study. At NNEU in 2007 approximately 11,870 students were enrolled. Of this number, roughly 800 identified as students of color. The student sample was chosen through quota sampling. The criteria were as follows: a student of color, under-

graduate junior or senior status, and experience with being a racial target in the classroom. The delimitations to this method and the study are that experiences of the participants do not represent all students of color. However, their experiences may be shared by other students of color at other HWPIs.

Data Collection

I chose to interview only those students who held junior or senior status because of their experience and knowledge of the frequency and nature of college classroom-based racially biased incidents. Their upper-class status meant that they completed approximately three academic years at NNEU. To complete the study, I sought a sample size of six participants using the quota method to ensure a diverse (i.e., gender, race/ethnicity, and major) sample group (see Table 1 for details). I conducted phenomenological interviews, which enabled students to express feelings, experiences, and perceptions of how they perceived the classroom climate.

Data Analysis

In this study, I used Strauss's three-step method for qualitative data coding including open, axial, and selective coding (Neuman, 2000). The data was divided into the general demographics of gender, race/ethnicity, university status, and major (see Table 1). I utilized analytical memos of each audio recorded interview to draw out the insightful responses from respondents. By validating and acknowledging students' experiences through their responses, I hope that the findings will be used to develop a blueprint for institutional change to create a safer classroom environment for students of color.

Table 1: General Demographics of Participants

	Alias Name	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Status	Major
Student 1	Jerry	Male	Multiracial	Senior	Anthropology
Student 2	Muhammad	Male	South Asian	Senior	Political Science & History
Student 3	Bridgett	Female	African American	Junior	Business Administration
Student 4	Rosaura	Female	Latina	Junior	Psychology
Student 5	Alyse	Female	African American	Senior	Political Science
Student 6	Melissa	Female	Dominican	Junior	Spanish & Political Science

Findings

I categorized the collected data based on the analytical memos which listed popular or unique themes that emerged. These themes provided essential information needed to conduct this study in a methodical fashion. The interpretation of ana-

lytical memos revealed the following three prevalent themes:

1. Failure to intervene
2. Shifting of the expert and the spotlight
3. Structure to support diverse learning

Themes emerged after hearing authentic voices and personal stories of participants regarding their experiences in the classroom at NNEU. The findings indicate an expectation for all higher education professionals to take action and own the responsibility of transforming the academy to a more welcoming place for all students. An elaboration and analysis of these findings follows.

Theme 1: Failure to Intervene

Five out of six participants expressed concerns in relation to professors ignoring subtle racist and prejudicial remarks expressed by White students in the classroom. Those five participants described incidents where they felt that the appropriate action would have been to address the issue, but instead it was ignored. Alyse shared her experience:

> This semester in my writing class we had to write poems about somewhere we would rather be, but here. So this boy wrote a poem about how he would rather be in California because it is warmer there and it is so cold here. Then he said something like the only thing you have to worry about in California is one Mexican fighting another Mexican over who gets to mow your lawn. And then he said you just can't get rid of Jesus! All she [the professor] did was look at him and didn't say anything and I was dumbfounded. Like, I can't believe he just said that! It is ridiculous. She [the professor] just looked at him and quickly tried to change the subject by calling on somebody else to read their poem.

This student mentioned the passive approach that the professor used to deal with issues of racism and bias in the classroom. One must remember that racism presents itself in various forms, including acts of passive racism. This particular form of racism is seen more often on today's campuses (De Sherbinin, 2004; Hurtado, 1992) and especially at NNEU. Another participant, Rosaura, explained:

> A student of the majority [a White student] voiced how if you do not like a part of your identity you should just change it…at one point I said what about your race and ethnicity you can't change that and the whole class sort of ignored what I said. Everyone just turned to the teacher who suddenly took their attention and segued into something else…Faculty tend to be a little more subtle about it. They tend to be the ones who will look away when

the situation is happening rather than address [it]… After that I dreaded going to class.

Through the voices of these students, one can see that the act of ignoring even subtle racism is detrimental to society and the learning environment of our students. Students expressed anger because in some classes, they felt that they were all alone in addressing racial tension, prejudice, and racist stereotypes. Students acknowledged the hardship of being in a class where the professor never attempted to interrupt the cycle of racism perpetuated by their classmates. Jerry stated why he believes a faculty member should interrupt when racist remarks are made in the classroom:

It would be a good thing if professors address it. Because professors are people in sort of like a power position. If you have someone in a power position who will address something that went wrong or a bias incident it is less likely to happen again because the person with the most knowledge, the person with the most power, the person that you are supposed to revere and respect is telling you that it is wrong.

Students mentioned specific professors and classes that were known to avoid subjects such as race. Avoidance is a dangerous road to travel when the academy desperately needs to become inclusive and supportive of all. Fear motivates the practice of ignoring the discussion of racism and confrontation of bias related classroom incidents (hooks, 1994; Tatum, 1997). hooks (1994) explained:

The unwillingness to approach teaching from a standpoint that includes awareness of race, sex, and class is often rooted in the fear that the classroom will be uncontrollable, that emotions and passions will not be contained. To some extent, we all know that whenever we address in the classroom subjects that students are passionate about there is always a possibility of confrontation, forceful expression of ideas, or even conflict. (p. 39)

Even with these missed opportunities for confrontation, students shared stories of joy and excitement the few times a professor appropriately intervened and educated students on racist or biased remarks made in the classroom. Melissa exclaimed, "I am really fortunate to have the professors that I have…the couple of times that something has been said the professor completely shut down the conversation." By "shut down," the student means the professor addressed the situation by educating the student who said the racist comment.

In the interviews, when sharing an experience similar to Melissa's, many students smiled, clapped, or used some other body language to express that they felt supported. It is a healing lesson; we all must come to realize that in each of us lies

the power and the right to interrupt the constant flow of racism (Howard, 2006).

Theme 2: Shifting of the Expert and the Spotlight

Students told stories about being a witness to biased remarks in the classroom where the professors failed to intervene in Theme 1. However, Theme 2 emerges from students' descriptions of incidents in the classroom when they felt racially targeted by professors themselves. When students noticed this dynamic, based on their race as perceived by the professor, they expressed emotions of frustration, anxiety, and aggravation. Muhammad aptly summarized:

> I am a Middle Eastern Studies minor and I am Muslim and my appearance looks Middle Eastern but I am actually South Asian… People freely speak their minds and I do not know if they have any idea that what they are saying is completely offensive and racist. In class, this girl smeared the whole religion [Islam] as a terrorist sympathizing religion. My professor called on me to answer that and I was just very frustrated at that point.

These situations of expecting students of color in predominantly White classrooms to represent their entire race are commonly visited within the literature. "Often if there is one lone person of color in the classroom [that person] is objectified by others and forced to assume the role of 'native informant'" (hooks, 1994, p. 43).

Three out of five students reported that they were pegged by classmates and even professors as the "native informant" of their ethnic group. Bridgett shared a comment made in class by a peer:

> "Black people all live on welfare and they live in ghettoes." Then it is like I have to raise my hand and say that I am speaking on behalf of [Bridgett] and not my entire race. I do not feel that White people have to ever say when they are not talking for their entire race. But, when it comes to minorities you have to let people know.

Students had several stories to tell about the idea of being the "native informant" in the classroom. These students seem to find themselves in similar situations as other students of color attending a HPWI. Davis et al. (2004) completed a study where one of the five themes presented was, "Sometimes I'm Not Even Here/ Sometimes I Have to Represent All Black Students" (p. 427). This was noted as "invisibility and supervisibility" in Davis et al.'s (2004) study.

Invisibility and supervisibility are accurate identifiers for what students voice throughout this theme. The spotlight was placed on students wholly as a result

of their race which, in turn, made them super visible in a predominantly White class. The participant, Alyse, focused on a time where she was uncomfortable because she was called on by the professor to answer a question because her race was the topic of discussion. Alyse said, "Then he said something like, is there an African American culture? So, I looked up and he [the professor] said, well, let me ask the two African American students in this classroom." In this situation, the student's race was the topic at hand.

Conversely, when issues of race were not the topic many students suddenly became invisible. Students also acknowledged when the energy in the room would shift in their direction. Students and faculty alike had the expectation of hearing the perspective of the only student of color in the class when the topic of ethnicity or culture is raised. The next excerpt is a narrative of a participant who experienced the spotlight shift on them because the professor was no longer the expert on the topic of conversation. Melissa explained:

> Professors will discreetly refer certain questions to you because they want to hear your perspective on it… The Spanish professor always decides to ask my perspective on things, like she wants the correct answer or something. She [the professor] always tends to look at me as if I am supposed to know it.

Narratives shared by participants illustrate the transference of being the expert and having the spotlight move from professor to student. Most classrooms are structured with the professor as the sole expert within the class. Nonetheless, if a professor has not had any formal or personal developmental training to become fully cognizant of various cultures and issues of race, many are reluctant to speak about the topic. Students in the study often stated that, to some extent, a large percent of faculty members were not knowledgeable regarding issues of race. Muhammad exclaimed, "Professors need to become educated on these issues and not expect students of color to speak for the whole race!"

Students reported that professors unconsciously or consciously assumed that students of color were experts of what was perceived to be their culture. This is not a correct or fair assumption. Being from a particular racial group does not make one an expert. Classrooms are becoming increasingly racially diverse and students may have more knowledge pertaining to particular subjects (Clark, 2004), but professors should not have an expectation for individual students to educate the class. Professors receive a salary to educate and the student who is expected to educate the class on their culture does not. Professors must become more cognizant of putting the spotlight on certain students and should begin the process of increasing their own cultural competence by "acquiring a knowledge base about ethnic and cultural diversity in education" (Gay, 2000, p. 70).
In addition to personal knowledge about racial and cultural differences, profes-

sors must also understand how to facilitate and interact within these discussions (Dilg, 1999). A classroom can be designed in a way that allows for an open exchange in dialogue when and if students are comfortable speaking in such an environment. If a professor wishes to hear perspectives from students, these perspectives should be encouraged at all times, not just when race or ethnicity becomes the center of attention. Marin (2000) spoke about a specific classroom format where, "faculty and student participants agreed that faculty members have biases as well as limited knowledge and therefore are considered only one of many classroom participants—and not even the central one" (p. 63).

Faculty may respect diversity and admit their limitations in multicultural competence but also fear a potential loss of authority as the head of the class (hooks, 1994). The idea of shifting the expert and spotlight may be accompanied by hesitation and apprehension about not knowing what to say or how to say it. Faculty, similar to students, may have trepidations about offending someone, or worse yet, being called a racist. So how do we create classrooms that support diverse learning among faculty and students?

Theme 3: Structure to Support Diverse Learning

A final theme that surfaced in the interviews was a need for the classroom to be structured in a way that encourages diverse learning. Students involved in this study alluded to an incompatible atmosphere of a Euro-centric learning milieu. Students shared multiple perspectives and offered ideas on how to create a safe structured classroom environment. Muhammad conveyed:

> I think they [racially biased incidents] were experienced in the classroom more often than anywhere else. I think that is interesting because most people would not see it that way because a classroom is a place that has structure and discipline… In a classroom you have to sit and listen to what is being said. Whereas, in a social environment you can try to avoid it.

Muhammad and others displayed a desire to have classrooms with a structure that would encourage diverse learning.

Many colleges in the U.S. founded by European Americans were built on a foundation of and were governed with principles that reflect White culture. Feagan and Sikes (1995) have stated, "at the core of most predominantly white colleges is the Euro-American bias in courses, curricula, and research agendas" (p. 95). This style of classroom does little to support a structure developed to promote diverse learning. There is a need for a classroom to be a space where students can learn from one another and not be fearful about discussing issues of race and oppression as they arise. Rosaura spoke about a class she took that provided the

"perfect" structure for diverse learning:

> I took Intergroup Dialogue…that was the perfect class environment. Just because, we were talking about these issues, we were accepting our dynamics as a class that was mixed, a fairly good mix of different backgrounds… It was such a comfortable class environment. I remember having a discussion in which I was triggered, completely like flying off the wall and still trying to follow the rules that were given to me. It is so natural to be emotional about it. I felt really comfortable in the class because I knew I could be emotional and next Thursday everything would be fine.

Tatum (1992) has suggested confronting "race as a taboo topic" (p. 5) as the first step in developing a learning environment that supports multiculturalism. The Intergroup Dialogue classroom environment that Rosaura explained achieves this end.

Several respondents mentioned that race was a topic not easily explored in a classroom because a structure has not been built to encourage open dialogue. It must be tailored to fit the individual students in the classroom (Gilroy, 2004). However, there are ways to ensure that one creates an optimal learning environment for all students. A notable suggestion by Rosaura is that, "sometimes we just need ground rules."

Alyse shared an example of her ideal learning environment that supports diversity:

> The class may still be majority White, because that is how the world is. But, it should also have a nice representation across the ALANA [African, Latino/a, Asian, and Native American] spectrum…it gives those students of color a support system and you do not feel like you are alone. I feel that the White students would be able to see—that just because you are a minority we are not all the same, we all have different experiences and different stories to bring to the table.

She noted that, in her opinion, there is a need for more students of color in the classroom for true support; with a more diverse classroom will also come a safer environment where students are supported by one another.

Several scholars declare that the most favorable classrooms are those that establish trust, respect, support, and community. Most research has named this environment as a *safe space* (Marin, 2000). Participant Jerry wants to reduce the size of the average classroom to provide a type of community atmosphere which he believes will also help to create a safer space. Jerry said:

I would like classrooms to be smaller. If you have a smaller class and you know the people in the class it is less likely of a bias incident happening. Just because, everybody knows each other, and you know it is not going to be like, oh there's the Black kid in the corner. Let's see what he has to say about it.

Professors must help to cultivate a respectful environment for students' safety. Bolgatz (2005) spoke about creating a trusting yet challenging class structure that supports critical reflection. In addition, deeply exploring content that does not simplify "issues by ignoring the intersections between multiple forms of oppression" is another way to create a safe space (Bolgatz, 2005, p. 97). Kelly (2005) built on the scholarly works of Corvin and Wiggins (1989) and Zuniga, Nagda, and Sevig (2002) when she stated, "A respectful environment helps students (1) trust their peers, (2) critically examine their own biases, prejudices, and stereotypes; and (3) foster open and honest dialogue" (p. 63). hooks (1994) noted:

Indeed, exposing certain truths and biases in the classroom often created chaos and confusion. The idea that the classroom should always be a "safe," harmonious place was challenged. In order to create a safe classroom one must understand and implement the following: Have the willingness to change the structure of the traditional classroom. (p. 30)

Institutions must restructure and transform the classroom from its traditional style. It is a difficult task and entails a significant amount of work, but oftentimes faculty are preoccupied with research and fail to take the time to create an innovative, flexible structure. A structure that supports and provides the best learning environment for all students is crucial (Stage & Manning, 1992). There is a need for professors to critically examine and reflect on what the most optimal learning environment would look like. This section reveals several ways that professors can begin restructuring a classroom environment to encourage diverse learning and help students of color feel supported in the classroom.

Implications for the Field

Traditionally, student affairs professionals have taken on the majority of the work for supporting students of color and raising awareness of the issues that plague the university community (Stage & Manning, 1992). The research discussed in this article addressed the most common forms of racially biased incidents that take place to create chilly climate classrooms. Literature and research is being produced, but often results in minimal changes in policy initiatives surrounding racial climate on college campuses (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998). It is vital for institutions to listen to the reality of students of color and continue to research the effects of administration, staff, and faculty who can eas-

ily escape into a daily routine that is suitable to primarily White students.
Classroom Transformation

From these testimonials, one can see that faculty play a vital role in the lives of students and the institution. As institutions grow in the representation of multiple racial and ethnic identities, faculty must take the time to learn about cultural difference and the various different styles of learning and understanding. When these cultures collide, there is potential for misunderstanding, misconceptions, and bias. Faculty members have an obligation to be cognizant of these dynamics that play out in the classroom. It is important, therefore, for classrooms to be transformed by culturally responsive instruction and curricula utilizing pedagogy of multicultural education and understanding (Boyer & Baptiste, 1996; Dilg, 1999, Gay, 2000; hooks, 1994).

If faculty members are going to transform their pedagogy and classroom structure, the author recommends support from the institution by providing training to shift the classroom to a multiculturally competent environment. Faculty may need assistance and training to learn how to track biased comments and combat racism and misconceptions in the classroom (hooks, 1994). By transforming the classroom experience, faculty can serve as a positive force to demolish chilly climates, improve the overall climate for students of color, and serve as change agents in the institution.

Institutional Transformation

Institutions of higher education acknowledge, understand, and take action against various forms of racism, prejudice, and bias on various levels. Some institutions have recently gained consciousness of the injustices and biases occurring on campus. The current approach that many institutions are taking is to rely on specific departments such as Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity, Multicultural Affairs, and Commissions on Diversity to deconstruct the history and vicious cycle of racism that permeates the institution. However, breaking down the cycle of bias, prejudice, and racism is the job of every administrator, faculty, and staff member on campus. This task often rests on the shoulders of small departments with limited staff and resources. It is important to have a welcoming space on campus, like ALANA and other multicultural centers, but it is equally important to transform the system by: instituting policies and procedures that work against hate and promote a friendly environment for students of color; implementing and requiring diversity training for staff, faculty, and administration; changing the curriculum to be more inclusive; and designing classroom lectures and presentations that support diverse learning.

Institutions cannot solely rely on student affairs administrators to support stu-

dents of color. There must be an institutional effort to change the climate not only on campus but also specifically in the classrooms where many student affairs professionals hesitate to intrude on the boundaries of academic space. Clark (2004) posited:

> Toward this end, the multicultural education classroom must become an oppositional space, in which educators and students can come together to fight for equality and social justice. That is, it must become a space in which prejudice and discrimination are the common enemies and educators and students join forces to figure out how to eradicate prejudice in themselves and in the context of discipline-specific study and professional practice. (p. 79)

When there is a chilly climate anywhere on campus it is everyone's problem. Together, student affairs professionals, administrators, faculty and staff can create change.

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