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White silence is experienced by members of the White culture who, during discussions of racial issues, experience negative emotions including guilt and anger. When these feelings are not addressed, Whites begin to resist certain content areas. This resistance takes on the form of White silence. Using interviews, the researcher explored the concept of White silence through the lived experiences of three African American students at a mid-size public institution.

I want you to say it because then at least I know who I'm dealing with. It's when you don't say it, that's when I get suspicious of you . . . I don't know when they're looking at me what they're thinking . . . I want to be connected to this person. I want to know who you are. (Tom, an African American college student)

White silence is experienced by members of the White culture who, during discussions of racial tension, experience emotions ranging from shame and guilt to anger and despair. When these feelings are not addressed, White students begin to resist talking about certain topics such as race and privilege. This resistance is called White silence (Tatum, 1992).

In her book, *Names We Call Home: Autobiography on Racial Identity*, Frankenberg (1996) described her experience with White silence as a time "when I was terrified to speak in gatherings that were primarily of color, since I feared that anything I did say would be marked by my whiteness, my racial privilege (which in my mind meant the same)" (p. 14). During this period in her life, Frankenberg described her experience of being White as shameful, painful, and full of bodily discomfort. In addition, it was a time of "twisting and turning to get away from, to resist, what was. What is" (p. 14). Heidegger, a prominent philosopher, also supports Frankenberg's claim. His work illustrates that when someone keeps the contents of their "inner sphere" silent, the unknown "will remain problematic unless one has previously clarified how it is and what it is" (1927/1962, p. 87).

I feel called to examine and make sense of White silence because as a White woman I have used my own silence as a mask for my inner thoughts. In addition to observing my own silence, I have become aware of the silence of White colleagues. In these settings our collective silence has created "white [sic] racial bonding" which then emphasizes racial boundaries or we-they boundaries (Sleeter, 1996, p. 261). What part do I play in creating the boundaries and how does this affect those not involved in the bonding? As a student affairs professional I am concerned with my ability to act as a true ally and role model for students when I am silenced by my own prejudices. Also, I cannot challenge my White peers to shed their shield of silence until I have removed my own. I hope to better understand White silence, both my own and others', by exploring how it is perceived by African American students. Through conversations with the participants of this study I hope not to prove a theory, but instead gain insight into the realm of White silence (Gadamer, 1989).

Literature Review

Researchers have noted that there is a variety of reasons for the "lost voice" or "voicelessness" experienced by White students (Ellsworth, 1989). Tatum (1992) stated that White silence can occur because race is viewed as a taboo topic or students view themselves as void of personal prejudices. Weinstein and Obear (1992) claimed fear as the biggest cause of White silence. Whites are afraid of losing control, being labeled as racist, being viewed as incompetent, and losing the instructor's approval.

During her many years of teaching multicultural issues courses, Ladson-Billings (1996) has witnessed similar silences in the classroom. She stated:

Silence is not necessarily an indication of ignorance or agreement . . . [it] can be an indication of feelings of oppression (real or perceived) . . . silence can be used as a weapon. Rather than feeling unable to use one's voice in a forceful way to provoke dialogue, silence can be used as a means of resistance that shuts down dialogic processes in the classroom. (p. 85)

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According to Kochman (1981), White students may justify silence by claiming they have no opinion of the material discussed. African American students view this silence as a reaction to the threat of White comfort involved when a majority of students in a class are African American. When opposing views are presented, Whites refuse to forego the benefits of their silence to engage in the struggle, and subsequently continue to conceal their true thoughts. In these situations, African American students appear sympathetic toward the White students. However, if the class is at least fifty percent White, African American students are less likely to be sympathetic. Whites will be perceived as insincere or deceitful in expressing their opinions. Whites may also be accused of consciously suppressing their feelings and beliefs, also known as fronting.

Methodology

This study uses qualitative inquiry and phenomenology to explore the nature of White silence as it affects African American students at a predominantly White, comprehensive state university in the Northeast. The nature of phenomenology is to use the lived experiences of others to comprehend an element of the human experience in the context of the total human experience (van Manen, 1990).

Participants in this study are three African American students: Lisa, Tabitha, and Tom (the students have selected different names to protect their identities). In order to solicit volunteers, I sent letters to the members of a Multicultural Student Association. This initial letter described the focus of the study, time commitment expected of participants, and a statement assuring confidentiality.

The participants' experiences are explored by means of in-depth, open-ended interviews which were audiotaped. This method of data collection permitted me to learn first-hand the world experienced by the participants (Borg & Gall, 1989).

Intentionally, all interactions with the participants began as interviews, but it was my hope that the interviews would undergo a metamorphosis and become conversations. Interview suggests a rigid interaction between a researcher reading from a guide and a participant answering only what is asked. In *The Nature of Interviewing* Weber (1986) described the special level an interview should reach.

The interview has its best moments when the interviewer and the participant are both caught up in the phenomenon being discussed, when both are trying and wanting to understand. At these times, both people forget the tape-recorder, forget that "this is an interview," and simply talk and listen in a genuine dialogue that is focussed [sic] on the phenomenon in question. They are talking to each other rather than past each other. The interviews, then, are very much a shared experience affecting both. (p. 69)

As we explored the lived experience of White silence we also explored "the lived experience of interviewing" (Weber, 1986).

I met individually with each participant for three conversations lasting 60-90 minutes. The conversations took place between January and April of 1997. The focus of the first conversation was establishing trust between the interviewee and myself. Topics such as "Tell me your story" and "What is important to you?" were addressed (Arminio & McEwen, p. 65, 1996). The second conversation built upon the first conversation. Thoughts and feelings expressed by the participant were clarified and expanded. The concept of White silence was also shared. The participants were asked their understanding of the phenomenon and how it has been experienced in their lives. Between the second and third meeting, I summarized the themes of the initial conversations and shared them with the participants. During the third meeting, these themes were reviewed. Participants were then asked to clarify the themes I had interpreted from the conversations.

As Barritt, Beckman, Bleeker, and Mulderij (1984) stated, the themes that emerge in research are "inevitably the result of a comparison with [my] own views" (p. 1). While this statement is true, I believe the themes were actually co-interpreted and co-analyzed by the participants and myself. At certain stages, participants even helped to co-author other participants' experiences, as Weber's (1986) following comments illustrate.

A dialogue between two people may evolve into a conversation between three or more people. I often find myself, for example, questioning one participant in the light of what another person has said, … Through me, the ideas of participants are exchanged, challenged, tested. (p. 69)

Discussion

Emerging from my conversations with Lisa, Tabitha, and Tom is the fact that White silence exists in their lives. It exists in classrooms, in residence halls, at work, and on the street. Participants unanimously experience the silence and they have many supporting examples. An Intercultural Communication class falls silent when the topic turns to African American communication styles. A facilitator asks an audience to define "multicultural" and "diversity" and sees an absence of White hands raised in response. A White woman turns to her African American classmate and says, "I am so happy to be in this class so I can hear your story." In addition, several salient themes surfaced as I read and reread the transcripts from our conversations. They include unquiet silence, the desire to know, and evidence that silence silences.

Unquiet Silence

White silence, as experienced by the participants, extends beyond the moments when Whites choose to remain quiet. Lisa, Tabitha, and Tom each describe situations where Whites contributed to the conversations but were masking or keeping their true feelings silent. Wolf (1995) described these people as WMWPs, "well-meaning white [sic] people." When discussing racism, WMWPs approach the subject in a safe and rigid manner. Tom offers this description of the effect a WMWP has on dialogue.

We skirt the issues. We talk about what we've seen, what we've heard, the kinds of stigmas we understand exist. We know that Black people are seen as this, White people as this . . . . But what do we as individuals believe? We don't get into that . . . . that's a little personal.

Tabitha recounts a classroom incident where a White student was participating but keeping his true thoughts silent. What he did voice seemed inauthentic to Tabitha. "Yeah, I know that he was lying . . . . I pretty much figure maybe [to] himself . . . . I just don't believe it . . . . That's one of the times where I had to hold my tongue because I couldn't say 'I think you're lying.'"

Desire to Know

Tabitha, Lisa, and Tom all express a desire to know. They want to know if someone is an enemy or a friend. In moments of White silence when nothing is being said, there is no opportunity for people to converse or to move towards a shared experience. There is nothing for the African American students to work with or connect to their own experience. Tom speaks about this desire to connect and desire to know.

If I ask you "Do you hate Black people?" I want you to say "yes" or "no" if you believe yes or no. I want you to say it because then at least I know who I'm dealing with. It's when you don't say it, that's when I get suspicious of you. . . . I want to be connected to this person. I want to know who you are . . . . Let me know so that I can either: a) work with you to try to change your views or, b) avoid you for the rest of my life . . . . Because the more we know about each other the less reason we'll have to fear each other.

To further illustrate the point of the desire to know, Lisa uses an extreme example.

I always make a joke. Yeah, I respect the K.K.K. because you know they are racist. You know they don't like you. You know they might want to kill you. You know they might want to perish you from the face of the earth. Cool. I know not to deal with you. Versus someone who does racist things behind your back but pretends to be this all-glorious person. I have no respect for those types of people.

Although the Ku Klux Klan wears masks, the ideas and beliefs of the group are known to Lisa. When Tabitha speaks of knowing she also talks about the desire to connect. When asked if she would prefer a White student

reveal a racist thought than remain silent, she responds, "Yeah, because then I'd be able to ask them, 'Well, why?'" Tabitha was walking off-campus with friends one evening and two young women drove by in a car and yelled "Nigger!" Although angry at the incident, Tabitha still expresses a desire to know. "I'd rather they confront me and tell me they don't like me … if they did come to my face then I could say, 'Well you don't know anything about me.'"

Silence Silences

In the presence of White silence, Lisa, Tabitha, and Tom silence their own words. They become aware that they are contributing more than Whites in the classroom and convince themselves to become silent. Tom is very conscious of how much he speaks during classroom discussions on race.

I don't like talking about an issue that involves two people . . . I don't like talking about issues like that by myself . . . I'll sit there and ask people questions and they'll say a little but then they start battering me with questions. And I'm like, "I don't want to talk. You talk."

Lisa, too, feels silenced. Lisa has had White classmates who have passed her on campus without addressing her. They avoided making eye contact. Confused, Lisa asked a good friend, who is White, why this may be happening. Lisa's friend, too, has passed African American classmates without addressing them. Her friend's response was, "I only have a few friends of color . . . . So when I see a person of color I just ignore them because I assume I don't know them. So I don't even look their way." Lisa feels this "dehumanizes" people of color. They have been blocked out of a White person's vision.

Concluding Comments

At the end of one of our conversations, Tabitha asks to share one more story with me. She introduces this story by labeling it as a time when she refused to speak up and remained silent. Several years earlier, she had developed a close friendship with a White boy in her high school. They had often joked, "We can be cool" because he was Jewish and she was Black. One day, while riding the subway, "a group of Black guys . . . started picking on him. They hit him with their book bags and jumped on him." Tabitha wanted to tell them to stop, to leave him alone, but she could not. Their friendship ended after this incident and she still regrets her actions, or lack of action.

Tabitha shares this story in an attempt to make sense of White silence through her own silence. Are Whites aware of the impact of their silence? If so, do these feelings remain with Whites and are they transformed by the experience? Why do Whites choose to remain silent in certain situations? Lisa, Tabitha, and Tom continually ask themselves these questions. As they struggle to uncover or discover what lies behind the silence of Whites, they are forced to play the guessing game. What impact does this have on the learning process?

These students have not experienced a class without White silence. When asked to describe such a class, the students share readily; there is no silence in this conversation. "You could have a discussion and everybody joins in." "I would really learn a lot and it would be the best class." "I think it would have meaning." "It would be a real class, open, honest, and genuine."

My hope is that other White student affairs professionals will want to help create such an environment that is void of White silence. Sharing this article is my first step in helping to eradicate White silence. Though if I share these ideas only through the written word, I am perpetuating the White silence that exists. Words on paper can be safe. If Whites merely read these words and do not act, they too are contributing to the silence. To help create a classroom, a campus, a world without White silence, we must act or speak even when our shame, guilt, anger, or despair (Tatum, 1992) silences us.

Even during the process of writing this article, I have been faced with situations in which I have been guilty of White silence. With my heart pounding, I want to hold my words and thoughts close for fear of being found out or exposed as ignorant, or racist, or uncaring. What helps me move beyond this fright? I have an even greater concern that I am losing the opportunity to connect with students of color or to be an integral part of

their educational journey, which is at the heart of my decision to have a career in higher education. I am finally able to break my silence when I remember that I do not have to say something profound. I must, however, challenge myself and other White student affairs professionals to be engaged in the dialogue around racism and privilege.

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