

***Deconstructing “Playing the Race Card” in Psychology Courses:
An Invitation to Dialogue and Exploration***

Lisa Whitten

SUNY/College at Old Westbury

(This essay originally appeared as the monthly “E-xcellence in Teaching” e-column in the *PsychTeacher Electronic Discussion List* for May 2004.)

The concept “playing the race card” has been bantered about in the media during the last 10 years, most often in criminal justice or political contexts. Although several definitions of playing the race card have been offered (e.g., Mendelberg, 2001), for our purposes, playing the race card can be defined as introducing race for one’s own benefit in a context or setting in which it is irrelevant.

Playing the race card is typically seen as a negative, personally motivated tactic; or a situation where an individual could have accomplished her or his goal(s) or supported an argument without introducing race. Williams (2001) pointed out that, historically, both African Americans and Whites have played the race card, with African Americans “deploying the disadvantage of race” (p. 4) and Whites, in turn, dismissing attempts to discuss past and present racial injustice. Therefore, she asserted, one race card of racial grievance is essentially trumped by another, which discredits the need to pay attention to the past. Discussing race in psychology classes can feel like this type of competitive card game. Clearly, this is not the environment I strive to foster in my classes.

Recently, it has become more acceptable to discuss culture or ethnicity in psychology classes, but for many, race is still taboo. Some students are certain that race and psychology do not mix; they believe that race simply is not an important variable in human behavior, development, and interpersonal relations. Students who adhere to this view apparently believe that psychology faculty who discuss race harbor an ulterior motive, are racist, or “have a chip on their shoulder.” For them, race is the purview of sociology and anthropology.

Yetman (1985) noted that race is a social construct:

A society therefore defines a social category as a race when it isolates certain physical characteristics, perceives them to be innate and inherited, and magnifies their importance as differentiating factors. These physical characteristics are usually believed to be related to other immutable mental, emotional, or moral characteristics. (p. 8)

Although I acknowledge that race is socially—and not scientifically—constructed, I believe it should be a central topic in psychology curricula precisely because race and racism are still powerful social and psychological phenomena. Moreover, psychologists have participated, in both negative and positive ways, in the social construction of race (Guthrie, 1998; Hall, 1905,). In addition, many of my students are interested in learning about how psychologists have addressed race and racism. They also want to understand the role of race and racism in their lives and in societies around the world. Because playing the race card is also a socially

constructed concept, I believe it can and must be deconstructed. We should analyze, critique, and evaluate current use of the term and its application to psychology curricula and pedagogy. I want my students to view racial issues as stimulating, important, and relevant.

Why Should We Discuss Race?

Students in my classes often interpret my interest in and focus on race as playing the race card. Although students and professors can introduce race for the wrong reasons, I argue that we should include race in our courses because (a) race is imminently relevant, though often neglected; (b) psychologists can contribute to understanding race relations and eradicating racism; and (c) when professors teach and write about psychology as if it is “raceless,” they misrepresent the field.

Race should be addressed because policies and practices related to race impact the psychological functioning and social environment of millions of people around the world. Because many of these individuals are our students, race should be kept “on the radar screen” in psychology courses and textbooks. A new, reconstructed race card can prove beneficial to students, and therefore, to the future of the field and society at large. Moreover, it can be an invitation to dialogue and exploration.

Institutional and individual racism, along with other forms of oppression, are unresolved issues (Hansman, Spencer, Grant, & Jackson, 1999; Parham & Whitten, 2003). These conditions influence practice, research, education, and policy making (Hall, 1997). Psychologists must continue their efforts to uncover the roots of these problems and design effective strategies to eradicate them. Exposing students to the role that psychologists play in understanding race and racism will position them to critique past and current contributions of psychologists, and to be informed clinicians, researchers, educators, and change agents in the future.

The introductory course is an appropriate place to bring racial issues from the margins to the center of the curriculum (Whitten, 1993a). Many students will not learn about race and racism in their other courses. Even at colleges and universities that now have diversity requirements, students often are able to avoid taking a course that focuses on race by studying gender, culture, or aging. It is cliché to point out that our country is increasingly diverse, but it is a relevant fact. Grant (2003) asserted that preparation to function in a more global and diverse society includes engaging students in meaningful dialogue about race. Further, he stated that “faculty members can no longer confine racial discourse to ‘selected courses’ or confine racial dialogue to those classes that are factually diverse” (p. 5). It is crucial that we prepare our students to excel in the current social environment.

Navigating Racial(ized) Waters

In many of my courses, the honeymoon ends when I begin presenting material on race, racism, and/or privilege. Tensions rise, sides are chosen, and battles begin. Students comment on evaluations or in classes that “psychology isn’t about race” or “you’re talking too much about race.” In my Psychology of Violence class, a student complained, “This class is

supposed to be about violence, not race. If I had wanted to take a course on race, I would have taken another course.” Despite clear statements on my syllabi that race will be a central area of focus, some students are still taken aback by the frequency with which I address the topic, and they see it as a hindrance to their learning. They believe I am playing the race card and that I infuse race because it has been an issue in my life, even though it is irrelevant to the topic at hand. Instead, I hope to reconstruct playing the race card so students see the discussion of race as a way to inform and expand their insights into the study of mind and behavior.

At times, I thought students were reacting to reading African Americans’ perspectives on racism. However, even when I presented the classic “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack of White Privilege” (McIntosh, 1988), which was written by a White woman, several White students had a violent reaction. I recall one instance when a 50-something White man yelled at the top of his lungs, “I don’t care who wrote the article! White privilege does not exist!” It is interesting that I have not experienced similar reactions to topics related to gender. Some students see race as my personal preoccupation. In another interesting interchange, an older White male student asked me, “Why do you always think about race?” He spoke in a tone that expressed some sadness, as if he felt I was exhibiting a significant emotional problem. He continued, “My wife is Dominican. She looks just like you, and she doesn’t think about race.” This situation provided an opportunity for us to discuss the experiences of both Blacks and Whites, and the continued differential impact of public policy on people of various races.

I will always remember my first lecture as a full time professor in 1986—it was for an Introduction to Psychology class. When I reviewed theoretical approaches, I added the Afrocentric approach, even though it wasn’t mentioned in the textbook. At this point, I noticed a Black Jamaican man, who hadn’t previously reacted much to my statements, with huge smile on his face. Apparently, my statements about the benefit of an African-centered understanding of Black people were affirming for him. In the 18 intervening years, I have not seen the Afrocentric approach, or Black Psychology, mentioned, even briefly, in an introductory text. Sadly, many African American psychology seniors have told me that they never learned about the Afrocentric approach or Black Psychology, and had never heard of the *Journal of Black Psychology*.

Despite this, authors and publishers of introductory texts have made considerable progress in addressing diversity. Photographs frequently show people of color in powerful roles and positions of authority. Cultural diversity is addressed in boxed features and is more often infused throughout the text. In the history of psychology section, Kenneth Clarke, and sometimes Mamie Clarke and/or Francis Sumner are featured. Yet the content of most introductory psychology textbooks provides evidence for students that professors who emphasize race are playing the race card. The infrequent or nonexistent references to race and/or racism, and the almost total avoidance of research in which race is a variable all potentially suggest that psychologists do not study race, and do not see it as important. Consequently, students would probably be surprised to learn that a PsycINFO® search on April 11, 2004 revealed 1,498 peer-reviewed articles with “race” as an identifier, and 1,582 articles between 1994 and 2004 with “racial” as an identifier. However, during the same time period, there were 2,461 and 6,295 articles with “culture” and “cultural,” respectively, as

identifiers, providing evidence that researchers may be moving away from the study of race in favor of the study of culture.

Playing the New Race Card – An Invitation

As I have gained professional and life experience, I am even more convinced that one of my primary goals as a psychology professor is to stimulate interest and curiosity about the ways that psychologists have studied race, the social and psychological construction of race, and the role of race in all of my students' lives. A number of strategies can enhance the likelihood that learning will take place in a healthy environment.

1. Consider team teaching classes that emphasize race. If the teachers are of different races, it can shift the dynamic in the classroom and provide “mirrors” for more of the students. The professors can model clear, respectful dialogue about race.
2. Make concise statements at the beginning of the semester that some of the topics, notably race and racism, can be emotionally provocative and controversial, and that the content and process of the course could depart from what students are accustomed to.
3. Before talking at length about race, have students talk and/or write about their experiences with discrimination, privilege, and prejudice.
4. Solicit anonymous written feedback at mid-term, or more often, to get a sense of how the students are experiencing the class, then share and discuss the feedback with the class. Make it clear that you have taken their input seriously.
5. Encourage students to pay attention to both racial similarities and differences.
6. Seek out or arrange opportunities to meet with peers to manage feelings of frustration and isolation, using techniques such as those described by Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and DeFiore (2002).

Despite the numerous challenges inherent in teaching about race, I continue my commitment to helping students and professors become more comfortable addressing race as an issue central to the study of psychology. Together, we can construct a new race card. It is an invitation to discuss race and provides a supportive setting for exploration, dialogue, and increased insight into the complex nature of race, racism, and race relations. It affirms the experience of students for whom race *is* an important topic and helps those who are unaware of the role of race in their lives consider an alternate point of view. It can be used as a template for teaching about other forms of oppression. Finally, it provides a more accurate and nuanced understanding of the field of psychology.

References

- Gillespie, D., Ashbauagh, L., & DeFiore, J. (2002). White women teaching white women about white privilege, race cognizance, and social action: Toward a pedagogical pragmatics. *Race Ethnicity and Education, 5*, 237-253.
- Grant, O. (2003). Teaching and learning about racial issues in the modern classroom. *Radical Pedagogy, 5*, 1-8.
- Guthrie, R. (1998). *Even the rat was white* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hall, C. I. (1997). Cultural malpractice: The growing obsolescence of psychology with the changing U.S. population. *American Psychologist, 52*, 642-651.
- Hall, G. S. (1905). The Negro in Africa and America. *Journal of Genetic Psychology, 12*, 350-368.
- Hansman, C., Spencer, L., Grant, D., & Jackson, M. (1999). Beyond diversity: Dismantling barriers in education. *Journal of Instructional Education, 26*, 16-21.
- McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women's studies. *Work in Progress*, No. 189
Wellesley, MA: Stone Center Working Papers Series.
- Mendelberg, T. (2001). *The race card: Campaign strategy, implicit messages, and the norm of equality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Parham, T., & Whitten, L. (2003). The importance of continuing education for psychologists: A last stance. In D. B. Pope-Davis, H. L. K. Coleman, W. M. Liu, & R. L. Toporek (Eds.), *Handbook of Multicultural Competencies in Counseling and Psychology* (pp. 562-574). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Whitten, L. (1993a). Infusing Black psychology into the introductory psychology course. *Teaching of Psychology, 20*, 13-21.
- Whitten, L. (1993b). Managing emotional to controversial topics in the college classroom. *Transformations, 4*, 30-43.
- Williams, L. (2001). *Playing the race card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O. J. Simpson*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Yetman, N. R. (Ed.). (1985). *Majority and minority. The dynamics of race and ethnicity in American life* (4th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.