CHAPTER 32

Invisible Identities

Notes on Class and Race

DAVID ENGEN
Minnesota State University, Mankato

I am a white, working-class man. Actually, given my fancy degrees and current position as a college professor, it would be more accurate to say I am a white man from a working-class background. I am grateful I can say this not because I am proud to be white or proud to be from a blue-collar background (although, to be truthful, the latter does engender in me a certain degree of pride). I am pleased to say this because my formal study of communication in general and intercultural communication in particular has given me the tools to name myself in a manner that helps me understand my life, my communication patterns and struggles, and, yes, my culture.

Talking About Social Class

Americans tend not to talk about social class. bell hooks (2000) gets it about right when suggesting that "nowadays it is fashionable to talk about race or gender; the uncool subject is class. It's the subject that makes us all tense, nervous, uncertain about where we stand" (p. vii). Yet at least intuitively, most of us know there exist different social classes within American society. We see it in the way people dress, and we hear it in the lessons taught to us as children. We catch glimpses of it in conversations about the value of higher education, and we notice it when counting the number of forks at the dinner table. Helping us direct our vision toward the complex subject of class, Kohn (1972) explains that social classes are "aggregates of individuals who occupy broadly similar positions in the scale of prestige" (p. 111). He goes on to explain that "members of different social classes, by virtue of enjoying (or suffering) different conditions of life, come to see the world differently—to develop different conceptions of social reality, different aspirations and hopes and fears, different conceptions of the desirable" (p. 110).

Zweig (2000) estimates approximately 62% of the labor force can be considered working-class, defining the working class as "those who do the direct work of production and who typically have little control over their jobs and no supervisory authority over others" (p. 34). Members of the working class tend not to have college degrees and tend to hold jobs such as factory worker, truck driver, plumber, secretary, food server, and so on. In my case, my father was a truck driver and my mother did not work outside the home. Neither of my parents attended college. My father left school after the eighth grade to provide for his family and my mother, claiming to have accumulated too many hours of after-school detention, left in the 12th grade.

Because members of different social classes come to see the world differently, we can make cautious generalizations about the attitudes and values present within a given social class. In the following box , Smith (1995) outlines several of the core values associated with working-class culture. As always, we must be careful when talking in generalizations. That said, Smith's observations are consistent with much

Some General Values of Working-Class Culture

These are some observations of general cultural values and tendencies, and are not meant to be cultural stereotypes but recognitions.

1. COMMUNICATION: TO THE POINT

Direct (even blunt), sometimes impassioned, accepts arguing
Functional (not reflective)
Story telling—passing on values, history
Speak the truth (yet keep it in the family)
Humor—laugh to survive—getting down to it

2. FAMILY: BLOOD TIES

Support each other
Stay close to home
Parental rule—often patriarchy
Persistence and ingenuity: making do—getting by sacrifice

3. COMMUNITY: NEIGHBORHOOD

Mutual respect and cooperation
Democratic & egalitarian—
Treat others fairly, especially the "little guy"
Often denial and anger
Difficulty is seeing multiple perspectives

4. WORK ETHIC: WORK AS FABRIC OF LIFE

Providing for family
Hard work and follow through
Respect for tools & maintenance
Having a good job
Functional & practical—getting things done
Time is money—work sets schedule

5. EDUCATION: GET ONE

Value basic education—
as a means of achieving "a good life"
as a means of achieving "freedom of choice"
But not too much education—"don't forget where you came from."

of the research on working-class culture. Following Smith's observations will be an exploration of four communication spaces in which class and whiteness have a profound impact on social interaction.

Going Home: Education and the Working-Class Family

One evening while I was home from graduate school, my mother looked me in the eye and said, "You know, the problem with you is you're getting too smart to make small talk." She had a point. I wasn't getting *too smart* for anything, but education was beginning to change me in some fundamental way. To be sure, it was providing me a new language with which to express myself and expanding my perspective on the world. These were good things. But my education was doing something else, something neither I nor my mother could articulate, but something we both sensed: It was altering my working-class worldview, changing my conception of what was desirable and acceptable in life and in conversation.

Much has been written about the adjustment many working-class individuals face as they pursue higher education. Arguably the most well-known observations pertaining to the working-class student's often traumatic transition to collegiate life are found in Richard Rodriguez's (1982) book *Hunger of Memory*. Rodriguez frames the discussion of his own academic success (and the costs that accompanied it) by suggesting that:

> Not for the working-class child alone is adjustment to the classroom difficult ... But the working-class child is usually least prepared for the change. And, unlike many middle-class children, he goes home and sees in his parents a way of life not only different but starkly opposed to that of the classroom. (He enters the house and hears his parents talking in ways his teachers discourage). (p. 47)

A former student of mine from a white working-class home said it like this:

> It's [home] almost like, I don't want to say tug of war, but something like that. I'm on one side with all this education and everything and they're on the other side saying "What are we not good enough for you?" Something like that ... I guess if you think of it as a tug of war there is constant stress. There is always pulling to one direction or another. I'm always being pulled somewhere and they feel like, I mean I can't speak for them, but they feel like stressed because I think I'm better than them or something ... I think a lot of this does have to do with education and not just with personalities. I think that you have to be really careful. You have to know just what to say and when to say it. It's really delicate.

I knew exactly what she meant. As Smith points out, education is valued in working-class culture, but what tends to be valued is a more functional form of education. What tends to be valued is an education that serves as a means to an end, an education that helps individuals get a good job and pursue the good life. There is nothing necessarily wrong with this view of education, but it is cultural and it often stands at odds with approaches to education that emphasize finding new dimensions of one's self, expanding creativity, and so on. Therefore, those of us from working-class backgrounds who elect to pursue higher education are likely to encounter a number of communicative struggles at home. Some of us, like Rodriguez, will struggle with finding ways to respect our parents when much of our education leads us to believe they use inappropriate language, make false arguments, and so on. Many of us will encounter resistance from our parents should we decide to pursue less practical majors. Of course, many working-class students will find their family remarkably supportive of nearly all their educational endeavors; there are no universals here.

In my case, my parents tried to convince me not to attend college but instead pursue a 2-year degree in accounting. There was a time when I thought this represented a lack of sophistication and understanding on the part of my parents. After all, clearly I was "college material." I now see that my parents and I were part of a cultural community that emphasized functional education and local connections. To this day my parents could care less that I occupy the relatively prestigious position of college professor. They are proud and respectful, but they would be no less so if I had a secure job in a factory. What they wanted for me was security and predictability in my life, things they worked very hard to gain for themselves. They also wanted a son with whom they could make small talk.

Lareau (2003) conducted ethnographic research in families from a range of social classes and concluded that poor and working-class families often (although not always) parent their children in a manner similar to the way I was parented and substantively different than do professional middle-class parents. Working-class and poor parents typically subscribe to a *natural growth* approach to parenting, whereas professional middle-class parents tend to take a *concerted cultivation* approach. At the core of these different approaches stands a different definition of self, with poor and working-class parents seeing self as something that emerges more naturally and professional middle-class parents seeing self as something to be cultivated and transformed through communication and structured activities—from music lessons to adult-supervised sporting activities.

On the one hand, I am grateful my parents did not work especially hard to try and *cultivate* me into a version of some ideal they might have held. They did not try to get me into the best schools so I could someday attend a prestigious university, nor did they start me playing a musical instrument at age 3 to further develop my sensibilities. They pretty much let me become me—so long as I was in the house before dark. Although I appreciate their way of parenting, it's also true this came at a cost. For example, I disliked reading while growing up and literally refused to read for school or pleasure; my parents, adopting a highly natural growth approach, explained this as, "Well, Dave really doesn't like reading." It is possible, even probable, that my joy of reading could have been cultivated with more attention from my parents. For instance, I grew up quite a boxing fan, and I might well have read a book about Muhammad Ali, but one never appeared. I don't blame my parents for this, as they really weren't readers themselves. But, as Lareau (2003) points out in her research, there are strengths and limitations

to both the natural growth and concerted cultivation approaches to parenting.

Learning the Ropes: Class in the Classroom

Communicative struggles centering around class and education are not limited to the family. Many students from working-class backgrounds find themselves marginalized within the classroom. Discussing the role social class plays in the climate of the college classroom, bell hooks (1994) explains:

> Bourgeois values [i.e., upper class values] in the classroom create a barrier, blocking the possibility of confrontation and conflict, warding off dissent. Students are often silenced by means of their acceptance of class values that teach them to maintain order at all costs. When the obsession with maintaining order is coupled with the fear of "losing face," of not being thought well by one's professor and peers, all possibility of constructive dialogue is undermined. Even though students enter the "democratic" classroom believing they have the right to "free speech," ... most students are not comfortable exercising this right—especially if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas, feelings that go against the grain, that are unpopular. This censoring process is one way bourgeois values overdetermine social behavior in the classroom and undermine the democratic exchange of ideas. (pp. 178–179)

Many students from working-class backgrounds strongly sense that their typical methods of expression and language use are not valued in the world of higher education. Verbal styles that at home allow the student to insert him or herself into conversation might have just the opposite effect at school. Being especially direct and to the point, for example, is not always valued in a collegiate environment. Entering college classrooms, working-class students often feel as if they have entered a new culture, and, in a very real sense, they have. Too often the culture shock associated with this transition leads to silence and frustration. I remain convinced that one reason students complain about there being an overwhelming degree of "political correctness" in the classroom has to do with the classroom demanding forms of interaction alien to students from working-class and other backgrounds. Yet our conversations about the classroom seldom explore the role social class plays in one's ability or willingness to participate in what is considered appropriate classroom language and dialogue.

Appropriate classroom language and dialogue demands, among other things, speaking proper English—whatever that might mean. I vividly recall coming to college saying things like "I seen that," "I ain't worried about that," and "That don't mean nothing to me." I am glad my professors and friends helped me acquire a language that allowed me to succeed in mainstream American society. Yet I find it interesting and troubling that if you are a white working-class individual and speak as I did (and certainly not all members of the working class do), you are likely to be viewed as unsophisticated and uncultured, or dumb. Is this an example of middle-class bias in language or is this simply an example of an educational institution attempting to teach students *proper* English? I am not sure.

I am more sure about the discomfort many working-class students feel about the philosophical conversations present in many classrooms. As Smith (1995) explains, "Working class communication is bound to function—to Getting Things Done" (p. 39). Very often this is not the goal of classroom discussion. No doubt the feelings of Laurel Johnson-Black, a woman who went from a working-class life into college teaching, are known to many working-class students. Describing her university job, Johnson-Black remarks, "I sometimes sit in meetings and classrooms and wonder who else would like to cut the shit and say what they feel" (cited in Smith, 1995, p. 39). This is not to say all classroom discussion should be designed to perform easily identifiable functions. Most educators, myself included, would suggest there is a substantive place for abstract conversation that serves to broaden perspectives rather than perform any particular task. That said, there is reason to believe many working-class students will, at least initially, have difficulty finding meaning in this sort of talk.

Honky: On Being White in a Diverse Setting

Although I consider my race and class to be inseparable, my whiteness is the most visible feature of my

identity. This was made especially clear in the summer of 1997 when I worked on the west side of Chicago in a media literacy program for kids. Nearly all of the kids with whom I worked were Latino. One day a particularly direct youth named Sammy Martinez came up to me after class and asked, "Why are you so white?" Honestly, I don't think I had ever thought about my whiteness, despite the fact that I am about as white as they come; my red hair, glasses, and pale skin leave me looking more like Opie than a college professor interested in communication and culture. In his book, *Honky,* Conley (2000) gets at this issue when remarking, "Ask any African-American to list the adjectives that describe them and they will likely put *black* or *African-American* at the top of the list. Ask someone of European descent the same question and *white* will be far down the list, if it's there at all" (p. xiii). In part because of Sammy's question and in larger part because of a variety of life experiences, I am now well aware that, like my social class, my race plays a large role in my interactions with others.

I am pleased that much of my adult life has been lived in especially diverse settings. I taught for several years at a university ranked as one of America's most diverse, and I did volunteer work in Detroit, a city that is approximately 80% African American. My work with youth in a juvenile detention facility and with the media literacy program in Chicago gave me the opportunity to interact with individuals from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. On several occasions I have found myself the minority, something fairly rare for white folks in American culture. In these situations, the fact that I am white creates for me a number of concerns and communication struggles. In no way am I suggesting these struggles should be equated with the blatant racism many individuals of color experience on a daily basis. I am, however, suggesting that these challenges warrant discussion and exploration.

For me anyway, to be white represents a fundamental problem related to presentation of self. When interacting in a diverse environment, I expect to be stereotyped as the white man who understands little about race, gender, and so on. I fear that I will be viewed as arrogant or insensitive. I sense at times that my perspective on an issue will be viewed as hopelessly contaminated by my double majority status as white and male. In an odd way I see these moments as an opportunity to better understand what some individuals feel like in most of the social settings in which they interact. Being the minority is exhausting, however, something many people know far better than I.

Of course it is important to point out that as a white male there have been and still are many issues I need not confront, and there are countless issues I simply do not understand. One's social position does impact the way the world is viewed. There is no getting around this. It would be just plain arrogant of me to in any way suggest I have figured out exactly how to learn about other cultural communities and worldviews. That said, I generally begin by listening, acknowledging my own biases as best I can, and admitting to myself and others that I have much to learn. I avoid forming counterclaims, and I avoid always placing the experience of others into my own worldview. I acknowledge the limitations of my perspective and remind myself that genuine dialogue with others will help me name my world in ways that expand my vision and my humanity. In short, I try to cross boundaries and learn from doing so. I hope others do the same.

"Just What Are You Saying Here?": Managing Contradictions

Perhaps the most foolish conversation I ever had with my parents took place shortly after I began to learn about issues relating to race and inequality within American culture. I suggested to my father that had he been an African American with an eighth-grade education there was little chance he would have gotten a good job driving a truck in 1951. This, I reasoned, would have changed everything in our family. I have not one doubt about the accuracy of my contention. Yet it was surely a stupid thing to bring up. As might be expected, my father was less than thrilled that the college education he was helping finance was teaching me to undermine the foundation on which his identity rested—hard work and the meritocratic ideal. That I had learned something about Jimmy Hoffa's mafia ties was bad enough, but this had simply gone too far.

Long after my ill-fated conversation with my father, it occurred to me that being white, at least

being a white college student, requires becoming comfortable with competing narratives about your position in the world. My father is a good man. He worked hard in his life, and I am proud of him for this. His work gave me the opportunity to pursue my dreams. Yet it is also true that my family benefited from being white. This cannot be denied (although it routinely is in my family and in others). As an individual who is attempting to live in and understand a multicultural world, I can no longer assume I am where I am today because of hard work alone. This revelation seems rather basic now, but when it first visited me it came as quite a shock.

I often hear my some of my white students, especially my white working-class students, talk about multicultural education in rather negative terms. They talk about having these ideas "rammed down their throats" and ask why we have to talk about these issues so much. Too often these comments are dismissed as born only out of ignorance, racism, or both. Of course, there are times when students react from a foundation of ignorance and anger. It is also true, however, that like members of other cultural communities, there are times when white folks are forced to manage significant contradictions in their lives. I'm reminded here of an observation from the sociologist Dalton Conley (2000) in the previously mentioned book, *Honky:*

> I will never know the true cause and effect in the trajectory of my life. And maybe it is better that way. I can believe what I want to believe. This is the privilege of the middle and upper classes in America—the right to make up the reasons things turn out the way they do, to construct our own narratives rather than having the media and society do so for us. (p. 110)

In many ways, learning about issues such as those taught in a course on intercultural communication chips away at the privilege Conley speaks of. Members of more privileged groups are forced to deal with the cognitive dissonance accompanying their education. A bridge must be built between ideas once held and new knowledge. Building this bridge is no easy task, but it is a necessary and urgent one. It is a task demanding both cognitive and moral energy.

Conclusion: Class, Race, and Culture

The intent of this chapter was to provide an invitation of sorts, an invitation to see social class as a significant form of cultural diversity and an invitation to explore some of the communicative struggles inherent in being white and working class. These are difficult topics to address. Class differences are so routinely ignored in American universities that any acknowledgment of them becomes something of a political act. Perhaps the only topic more difficult to write about than class is the communicative struggles associated with whiteness. Here one risks being viewed as an individual unaware of the privileges American culture bestows on white skin. I close this chapter hopeful it serves as a vehicle into the complexities of class and whiteness and hopeful it is taken in the spirit intended: a modest attempt to expand the ongoing conversation that is the study of intercultural communication.

Conclusion Two: Time Moves Along ...

Just the other day, a college student from Ohio emailed to ask if she could interview me about this chapter because it was an assigned reading in her intercultural communication class. Nearly 7 years have passed since I wrote the words found here, and I was pleased anybody was still interested in them—even if the interest was likely inspired by a class assignment.

The student asked why it was I believed social class was more difficult to discuss than other forms of diversity. Before answering, I asked her a question: "Do you think it is?" "No," she said, "I guess I really don't." Maybe things are changing. Maybe younger people, who do indeed seem more comfortable discussing issues of diversity, are more willing and able to discuss social class. I realize, of course, the student represents only one opinion, but perhaps books like *Our Voices* are leading to more productive conversations about social class. I hope so.

Since writing this chapter two important things have happened in my life. First of all, I became a parent—twice, actually. As I father my two children (ages 5 and 2), I see more clearly than ever how lucky I am to have a foot in two cultures, one working class and one professional middle class. I chuckle a bit as I

purchase a book on folk songs for my 5-year-old who seems to enjoy listening with me to Springsteen and Dylan. Then I catch myself resisting the urge to enroll her in more than one outside activity at a time so she can, as my wife and I say it, "just be a kid." I can't help but think that despite all the mistakes I will surely make as a parent, I just might be able to find a healthy balance between the natural growth and concerted cultivation approaches to parenting discussed earlier in this chapter. In this way I think my slightly fragmented identity offers me the best of both worlds—now if I can just keep the kid liking Springsteen and Dylan!

The other thing that happened in my life is I moved from Detroit to southern Minnesota. By and large I no longer live surrounded by the rich diversity I experienced while living in Michigan. I miss it, the joys and the challenges that came along with being a white man in a truly diverse setting. Yet I was born and raised in Minnesota, and I am delighted I am home, at once rooted in my community and aware of those communities and cultures beyond my own. And, of course, things are changing here in southern Minnesota—new immigrants, more students of color on our campus, and an increasing, although still inadequate, emphasis on how we can better discuss, understand, and benefit from the diversity surrounding us wherever we might reside. The ongoing conversation that is the study of intercultural communication continues, here in southern Minnesota and hopefully where you are as well.

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