

INTRODUCTION TO THIS RACE AND POVERTY CLASS

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GOAL

Prepare students to think differently

DIVERSITY OR SIMILARITY: DOES IT MATTER?

THE ASSUMPTION OF THIS CLASS is that, at this point, students are not ready to “talk race” as a class. Discussion about the relationship between race and poverty is difficult to make meaningful and productive. This chapter will try to set the tone for future discussions and prepare students to be able to talk race so that everyone will benefit from the conversation and this class and book.

Studying race at the college level presents a particular challenge because people with a variety of backgrounds, different levels of maturity, and different bodies of knowledge will attempt to talk about a very controversial and complex issue. A hurdle that must be overcome in order to talk race as a class is the information or knowledge students bring to the class. This body of knowledge was primarily acquired during students’ primary and secondary education. Normally, and generally throughout society, education is considered to be a good thing; it is the most promoted way to improve one’s lot in life. Thus, people are encouraged to attend schools to acquire more knowledge. The nature of this education and knowledge that students bring to this class or have when reading this book will be examined.

It is common to see a favorable emphasis on diversity in many schools today. When diversity is currently invoked, many assume the conversation is about racial diversity of some kind; diversity can also be interpreted

geographically, by gender, by age, and by nationality—just to name a few. In spite of all the hype over a narrowly defined idea of diversity, this class would like to point out the way most students are similar to each other. The focus on diversity can cause students to miss the great similarity they share with each other. This similarity was taught or inculcated to most students through the American public education system prior to college.

While students were learning knowledge in elementary, junior, and senior high school, they were also being **socialized** to know, think, act, and believe in similar ways about a variety of issues to become citizens of the nation. In other words, students were not necessarily taught how to think independently; rather, they may have been socialized to think and understand things in the same way as other students in their classes. Students might have a hard time realizing this shared mentality amidst all the signified diversity. The U.S. school system has taught students how to identify, approach, and solve problems encountered in life. The result is a significant amount of consensus when discussing specific contemporary and historical social issues. This is advantageous for community life in which everyone gets along with each other because they hold the same values and speak the same language. However, this also gives students the impression that they are learning the truth or the only and right method of thinking and problem solving. In other words, it is difficult to think “outside of the box” when everyone is taught to think outside of the box in the same way. Have students even left the box? In order to think outside of the box, one must first know and see the box. This class and book will try to teach students how to see the box, after which they can decide whether they wish to stay in the box or leave it.

A couple of simple, non-scientific exercises will be conducted below to illustrate to students just how similar we are to each other in the way we think. Often, we make similar assumptions, and the way we interpret problems and generate conclusions or solutions are also similar. Take a look at the following series of three numbers, and guess what the next number in each sequence would be:

- 0, 1, 2, ?
- 2, 4, 6, ?
- 3, 5, 7, ?

The answers most often given are 3, 8, and 9. The third series of numbers appear to be a series of odd numbers; in that familiar pattern, the next number would be 9. However, the third series is also a series of

prime numbers (numbers that can be divided evenly only by 1 and itself), thus making the next number in the sequence the next prime number, an 11. Focusing only on the result that almost all students will say "9," one could say that those who answered with "9" were taught to identify and solve this kind of problem in the same way. Individuals often make assumptions to make life a bit easier and to make decisions and choices quickly. In almost any given situation, as soon as one recognizes similarity with an already known problem or situation, the answer for the already known problem is offered as the solution for the current problem. It is rare for students in this example to ask for more information in the data set or to offer alternative solutions to a problem (e.g., "the answer could be either 9 or 11"). Students are generally not trained to think in this way.

Another example involves math expressions:

$$0 + 0 = ?$$

$$0 + 1 = ?$$

$$1 + 1 = ?$$

The answers given here are typically, 0, 1, and 2. However, the equations could also be in binary (a number system with only 0's and 1's), which makes the answer 10 instead of 2 for the third equation. What is recognized as a simple math equation may not be a simple math equation in the way we assume it to be. Our knowledge tells us that we recognize what we see and jump to a conclusion or response. In a similar way, when people encounter a situation they have been taught to recognize and identify in a particular way, most people automatically cruise in auto pilot and react in the way they were taught to react. If something perceived appears to be something signified as racist, then the individual automatically shifts into "I have to educate this racist" mode, the mode they were taught to have. These examples are simple thought exercises to illustrate how easily people can be mistaken in their understanding of various situations. People make this kind of mistake all the time; however, they generally do not consider this to be a problem or even consider why this happens.

To go further, not only do we share a similar body of knowledge, but we also share similar ignorance for the same reasons. Because most people in America in any given era have been socialized to think and know similar things, most people in America from the same era are ignorant of similar things. This **shared ignorance** and **shared knowledge** often contributes to the impression that everything that should be known is already known when, in fact, our knowledge is simply what we already know and is not the

whole of relevant human knowledge. To illustrate this point is an exercise in which students must name the capital of the country in question:

- The United States of America: ?
- Mexico: ?
- Canada: ?

Perhaps distance from the Canadian border is a factor, but the overwhelming majority of students in any given semester cannot name Canada's capital; thankfully most were able to name Washington, D.C., and Mexico City as the capitals of the first two countries. Canada has the longest shared border with the U.S., and the U.S. only has two neighboring countries, yet usually over 90% of my students cannot name Ottawa as Canada's capital city. The explanation for this will not be addressed in this book. The relevant point is that just as many students will make the same mistake in recognizing an equation or problem, those same students will also be ignorant of choices or information that exists already. For example, many people in America believe the education system in America is one of the best in the world, but they do not understand why this may or may not be true. To be fair, most nations in the world can be found to have a similar phenomenon of shared ignorance and knowledge.

This ignorance is not restricted to knowing the capitals of the countries of the world. Our ignorance spills into many aspects of life, including, for example, energy issues. Most people are familiar with the problems of nuclear energy; the energy is relatively cheap and clean to produce, but there are many hazardous and toxic byproducts, and there are dangers in the process of using and disposing nuclear waste. Certainly if there was an alternative that had far fewer hazardous and toxic dangers, people would know about it, right? As a matter of fact, there is a material which is more plentiful, cheaper, and safer than and almost as productive as uranium; it is thorium. The ignorance concerning thorium is likely not accidental; rather, it is highly probable that those people who profit from the use of uranium-based technology lobby heavily to promote the use of uranium while at the same time try to squash the information concerning thorium. The issue is money and people in the uranium camp stand to lose their wealth, power, and influence if the world switched to thorium. The resulting common ignorance and knowledge shapes the debate over nuclear energy. The debate becomes a matter of: should uranium-based nuclear power plants be used or not; or, how can we make the uranium-based power plants safer? Simply switching to thorium-based power plants is often not discussed. The flow

and spread of information is as important as what is being promoted throughout society and by whom.¹

BARRIER TO LEARNING SOMETHING NEW

The problem of common knowledge and ignorance is that it becomes a barrier to learning something new and different. Our knowledge coupled with our ignorance creates a bias and prejudice because one assumes to know the truth already; further learning is not necessary. Prior knowledge hampers attempts at entertaining alternative solutions, explanations, and ideas. When I was in elementary school, a brain teaser that would stump everyone posited that a boy and his father had been rushed to an emergency room because of a bad traffic accident. The doctor on duty is shocked and cannot operate on the boy because the boy is the doctor's son. So, who is the doctor? Most of us, at the time, instinctively replied "the father" only to be reminded that the father was a patient, too. We were stumped until we were told that the doctor was the child's mother. The inability to entertain the logical solution (for the time) is indicative of the problems of prior knowledge. For some reason, it was difficult to imagine a woman as a doctor in an emergency room in the 1970s. We could not get to the answer because of our bias and prejudice, in spite of the obvious nature of the answer. Today, of course, the possible answers have increased, but the point remains. One can see the same thing today when it comes to racial issues and questions. Questions that are easily answered become difficult when a color qualifier is added. For example, the question, "How do people move into affluent neighborhoods?" would be answered by, "People have enough money to buy a house in affluent neighborhoods." The same question except with a color qualifier would look like this: "How do black people move into an affluent neighborhood?" Every time this question is asked in class, I get crickets; that is, silence. The answer is, of course, the same, but the situation is complicated by many of the student's preconceived notions concerning race and wealth.

¹ There are other directions and paths of discussion one could take in the energy debate that are equally not widely known, such as recycling "spent" uranium, as is done all over Europe; or the invention of the artificial leaf by Professor Daniel Nocera of MIT in 2008; or the ability to convert CO₂ emissions to electricity and water by Bert Hamelers and his team of researchers in the Netherlands. All three of these options are potentially far more inexpensive than the options currently pursued, which would have a direct impact on issues of poverty.

Another problem-solving brainteaser is the example of four people who need to cross a bridge in 17 minutes at night with only one flashlight. The bridge can only support the weight of two people, which means two people cross, and one person *must come back* with the flashlight. Each person crosses the bridge at different speeds; one person can cross in 1 minute, another in 2 minutes, the third in 5 minutes, and the last in 10 minutes. When two people cross the bridge they must travel at the speed of the slower person. When the person returns with the flashlight, do not forget to add the time it takes for that person to re-cross the bridge! They must cross the bridge before it collapses in 17 minutes. What is the order and pairing they must take in order to cross the bridge before it collapses?

Most students pair the fastest person with each of the other people; 1 and 10 first, then 1 re-crosses the bridge; 1 and 5 cross and again 1 re-crosses the bridge, and finally 1 and 2 make the trip over the bridge; but this requires 19 minutes. These same students often rearrange the order of the pairs, but the time required is still 19 minutes. The solution is quite simple: 1 and 2 go over first, then 1 comes back; then, 5 and 10 go over, and 2 comes back; then, 1 and 2 cross over for the last trip; this totals 17 minutes. Being stumped or requiring a large amount of time to figure this out is an indication of how difficult it is for most people to propose alternative solutions to the same problem. Race is the “problem” for this class this semester.

We must realize that consensus is not a sign of being correct or a sign of knowing what needs to be known. Just because everyone around you might agree with you does not make your opinion the correct one; one is simply perceived as not being the odd one out. Majority does not dictate truth; rather, it is just an opinion, which could be wrong. Socializing through education may produce some degree of consensus but it does not ensure understanding of complex issues which life brings to attention.

To understand “race” as presented in this class, students will be asked to put aside their socialized opinions and beliefs to entertain alternative ideas. They will be asked to think critically about all of their socialization up to this point. Though this is often encouraged in classrooms in universities, it is required in a race class. In other words, this class and book will challenge students to go radical, go to the root of their prior knowledge, and sometimes, to start the learning process all over again. It has the potential to be disorienting.

To illustrate, look at Figure 1-1.

If one had to describe the sculpture in the picture, what would people say? What do you say? Imagine that this sculpture is the object of study

in some science or humanities class in the university. When it is not recognized, there is nothing with which people can relate the object, people fall back on their training and give simple descriptions with the impression that they are being accurate, that they are producing facts. However, this sculpture, by John V. Muntean (www.jvmuntean.com), is meant to be appreciated or “interpreted” by shining a light onto the sculpture in just the right angle so that people may observe the shadow it casts. When rotated with a fixed light source, the same sculpture will cast a different shadow, making three images in all; it is a 3-in-1 shadow sculpture (see figure 1-2).

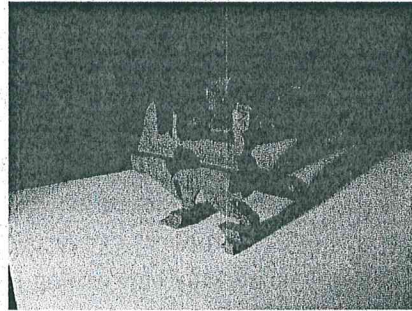


FIGURE 1-1 How would you describe the object in this picture?

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The point here is that basic observation and reporting may not be enough when studying something like race. Sometimes, the way to understand something complex is to do something complex. Our society’s desire to reduce and essentialize extends into issues like race. One must also not confuse detail and depth of description with understanding. This class will seek to challenge students and teach them how to look at things from a different perspective to understand just how complex, uncontrollable, and unpredictable life can be. Students can continue to believe what they want to believe and continue viewing things from their comfort zone, if they choose; however, students should take care when critiquing the opinions and views of others. Things might not be as they appear, and there may even be a better way of understanding what we observe and think is true.

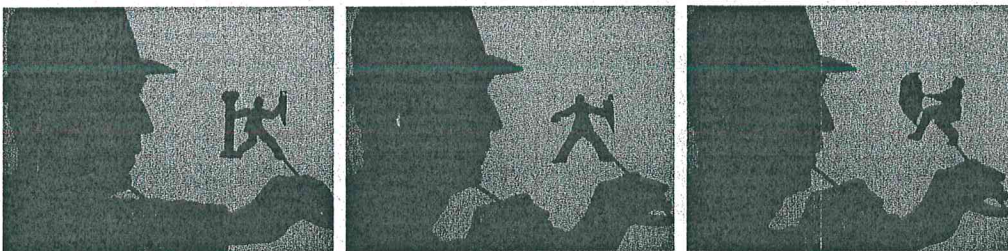


FIGURE 1-2 Sometimes understanding an object requires more than simple empirical description.

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SUMMARY

Students are encouraged to consider that their prior knowledge may not be much more than simple socialization. This means that students may not be able to think critically in the way that is necessary to understand race today. Understanding that prior knowledge may not be the truth will enable students to overcome their knowledge bias and learn new information, especially concerning issues of race. Phenomena that were thought to be understood completely already may only be a part of what can be known.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

1. How emotionally difficult do you think it will be to have your personal beliefs challenged?
2. How comfortable and patient are you when listening to another's perspective that you believe is completely wrong?
3. How do you approach someone who thinks she or he knows the right answer already when it may just be one of many possible answers?