In the Guise of Civility: The Complicitous Maintenance of Inferential Forms of Sexism and Racism in Higher Education

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In this paper, I examine and explore the continued existence of inferential forms of sexism and racism in higher education. Situated in autoethnography and using complicity theory and narrative analysis, this essay addresses issues and experiences related to civility, sexism and racism on a largely Euro American campus. More specifically, I critically examine the interdependence of sexist and racist ideologies that persist in university classrooms in the guise of civility. I argue that inferential sexism and racism are endemic to U.S. higher education and classrooms and are as dangerous as overt forms of sexism and racism because they are harder to identify, and more naturalized and acceptable.

Introduction

There is no easy way to describe the interlocking systems of domination that plague our society daily; i.e., the integration of ability, class, gender, race, and sexuality. The complexities become apparent when we begin to recognize the infinite ways in which marginalizations become normalized and naturalized through communication and action. Social institutions are sites where we see the power and influence of communication and action upon our daily lives. Institutions such as education, government, law or media not only have influential power, but these same institutions in some ways meet our needs, needs that vary based upon our situated experiences (class, gender, race, sexual orientation, etc.).

In my work bringing in perspectives and experiences of marginalized peoples into class curricula, I have encountered resistance from many students (both females and males from a variety of ethnic groups) to acknowledge the privileges, double binds,¹ and marginalities that people face. Despite the fact that many students have said, “I didn’t know that

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existed anymore," most students do eventually acknowledge that men, in general, are more advantaged in certain respects than women, that sexist attitudes remain predominant in the classroom, and that racism is equally as palpable. I believe that people are consciously taught not to recognize any privileges they may have, particularly those related to gender and race. Unfortunately, this lack of self-awareness supports the growth of what Fiske (1996) has called inferential racism.

According to Fiske (1996), there are three types of racism: overt, denied, and inferential. Overt racism refers to those actions that we can point to and say, "that's racist;" (e.g., the lynching of James Byrd in Jasper, Texas in 1998, cross burning, Jim Crow laws). Denial of racism, a strategy most often practiced and favored by conservatives, is the belief that racism does not exist or that only a few "bad people" practice racist behavior (Fiske, 1996, p. 39). Denial of racism renders the ethnic minority experience "invisible even while we are hiding in plain sight" (Dyson, 1 February, 2001).

Inferential racism, also known as nonracist racism, is "ultimately more dangerous [than overt or denied forms of racisms] not only because it is harder to identify, but because it is often exerted by liberals with an explicitly anti-racist intent" (Fiske, 1996, p. 37). Fiske goes on to say that, "Inferential racism is the necessary form of racism in a society of White supremacy that proclaims itself 'nonracist.'" Until relatively recently, the U.S. was legally segregated. Since the Civil Rights movement and desegregation, "White America [has been] left with the belief that desegregation has produced a nonracist society, and thus the problem of continuing its racism in nonovert ways" (Fiske, 1996, p. 37).

Inferential racism affects and prohibits co-cultural and cross-cultural understanding of one another, thus impacting domestic and international intercultural communication. Several factors belie the realities of living in a White supremacist society. Notable among them are the myth of merit; the myth of a "politically correct" culture; the myth of the melting pot; Whites experiencing "reverse racism;" and the labeling of those who talk about experiencing racism as "too sensitive." According to Andersen and Collins (2001):

Schools certainly have been central to reproducing ideas about race, class, and gender. At the same time, schools have also formed the focus of much activism by historically excluded groups who pushed for changes to school curricula. Schools are often the site of struggles between those who hold traditional
views of race, class, and gender oppression as natural and inevitable and people of color, women, poor people, and other historically excluded groups who challenge these inequalities. (p. 224)

To shed light on the salience of everyday inferential forms of sexism and racism in a White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic society, in the following pages I review several instances of inferential racism in a higher education classroom. Using autoethnography, narrative analysis, and complicity theory (defined below) as the theoretical foundation, I argue that sexism and racism in higher education have been allowed to continue in the guise of civility. These “isms” are often entrenched in higher education through policy and the inadvertent actions of administrators, faculty, staff, and students. On a macro level, this essay addresses issues and experiences related to civility, sexism, and racism on a largely Euro American campus. More specifically, this essay critically examines the interdependence of sexist and racist ideologies that persist in university classrooms in the guise of civility; in particular I argue that hegemonic civility is so ingrained that it shows up everywhere, even in semi-private journal entries crafted to be read by a visibly non-White professor. Therefore, this essay is a critical autoethnographic exercise that aims to deconstruct the actions of students who can reinscribe the White supremacist hegemonic order.

Representations of Diversity in Higher Education

The university is not merely an instructional site where learning takes place, but rather it is a social institution that both has the power to shape current political and cultural thought, and is also shaped by current public response to cultural, political, or social issues. Although universities are believed to be liberal and tolerant institutions (often more accepting than the general population), Luz Reyes and Halcon (1991) argued, “the university mirrors the same attitudes and generalities about cultural/racial differences that plague larger society” (p. 171). For example, universities often try to address diversity in the environment by creating policy, such as diversity requirements and multicultural education requirements, which are often taught and talked about in terms of class, gender, race, and sexual orientation and thought to be beneficial for all students since they will be entering a diverse workforce.

Diversity requirements have increased dramatically in the last decade. According to a recent national survey of 543 universities and colleges conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities
(2000), "sixty-two percent of colleges and universities report that they either have in place a diversity requirement or they are in the process of developing one." Twenty-five percent of institutions with requirements have had them for more than 10 years. The majority of institutions (45%) have had diversity requirements in place in the past five to ten years. Thirty percent of institutions have had their requirements in place for fewer than five years. Eighty-three percent of institutions with requirements offer one or more courses addressing diversity in the U.S; 65% offer one or more courses addressing international diversity concerns; and 76% offer one or more non-Western cultures course (http://www.diversityweb.org/Digest/F00/survey.html).

Growing numbers of female students have added to the diversity of the national college population. In 1970, "8.2% of all women had received college degrees, compared with 14.1% of men" (Rosenblatt, 2001). In 2000 the census figures showed that "23.6% of women have completed a college education, compared with 27.8% of American men" (Rosenblatt, 2001). In 1992 women accounted for 33.2% of all full-time faculty. Nearly a decade later, "women account for 36% of faculty. Women make up 50% of faculty at institutions without rank, 48% of faculty at two-year colleges with rank, 40% of faculty at general baccalaureate institutions, 39% of faculty at comprehensive institutions, and 31% of faculty at doctoral-level institutions" (Bellas, 2001).

As compared to past years, another increase has been in ethnic minority student graduation rates. For example, in the 1997-1998 school year, 23.3% of all ethnic minorities (African American, Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaskan Native) graduating from institutions of higher education were granted Associate Degrees; 20.5% earned Bachelor degrees; 20.3% gained Master's degrees, 16.8% earned Doctoral degrees; and 22.6% graduated with professional degrees. In the 1999-2000 school year, 21% of graduates were ethnic minority students (70% were White and 9% were non-resident aliens or individuals whose race was unknown). Of the aforementioned figures, African American women accounted for 64% of the degrees awarded to African Americans; Hispanic women accounted for 57% of the degrees awarded to Hispanics; and American Indians or Alaskan Native women earned a higher proportion of Bachelor degrees than the average for all females. As of 2000, female graduates were expected to take 56.3% of all Bachelor and 57.8% of all Master's degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000b).

A slight increase in ethnic minority professors has also occurred. In 1992 13.5% of college and university faculty were ethnic minority pro-
fessors (.5% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 5.2% Asian/Pacific Islander; 5.2% African American; 2.6% Hispanic; and 86.5% White) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000c). By 1999, that number had risen slightly, to about 14 percent (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000c). Sixty-three point seven percent of faculty were males; 36.3% were females (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000a). Tenured male faculty still heavily outnumbered tenured female faculty. “Sixty percent of men compared with 42% of women had tenure in 1998. About 51 percent of the faculty at public institutions had tenure (men = 60.9%; women = 39.6%), compared with 49.8 percent of faculty at 2-year institutions (men = 52.7%; women = 47%)” (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000a). Regarding race and tenure, Whites had the highest rate of tenure (54.3%) followed by African Americans (43.9%), Asian Americans (49.1%), Hispanics (48.5%), and American Indian/Alaskan Natives (29.4%) (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2000a).

While these statistics show that nationwide, the stereotypical images of student and professor are changing, as Benjamin (1996) notes, diversity requirements are not a “cure” for problems on campus; complete solutions “remain farther [in] the future” (p. 117). Representations that include difference are complex. Often organizational and institutional change happens on the surface, while beneath the surface the status quo has been maintained. Representational change has a way of producing “new” knowledge systems; however, that change can still be inscribed with relations of power and control. “Power, it seems, has to be understood here, not only in terms of economic exploitation and physical coercion, but also in broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way—within a certain ‘regime of representation’ ” (Hall, 1997, p. 259). This “regime of representation” has largely been in the hands of Anglo and Euro Americans and has remained largely invisible as it continues to influence, negotiate, and reinforce the status quo and impact notions of civility.

**Civility**

The myth of political correctness has given rise to and has reinforced the tenets of civility. In its earlier definitions, civility referred to “a social virtue and an old idea” (Barrett, 1991, p. 146). Originally from Greek, civility involved adherence to the four cardinal virtues: courage, temperance, justice, and wisdom” (p. 146). Civility was a term contrasted with hubris: “excessive pride, insolence, and arrogance” (p. 146). Carter (1998) defines civility as “an attitude of respect, even love, for our fellow citizens,
an attitude, as we shall see, that has important political and social implications. Moreover, civility is a moral issue, not just a matter of habit or convention: it is morally better to be civil than to be uncivil” (p. xii). I define a problematic civility, then, in contrast to this idea. What I will call hegemonic civility refers to normalized or naturalized behavior—appropriate behavior—even as the action can be incivil or even silencing in order to uphold the hegemonic order. This is different from civility that supports a common good for an inclusive collectivity. Hegemonic civility is an organized process which results in suppressing or silencing any opposition, in favor of the status quo. For example, the concept of hegemonic civility receives support from the Whiteness literature.

According to Nakayama and Krizek (1995) in describing the location of Whiteness, the “discursive frame that negotiates and reinforces White dominance in U.S. society operates strategically” (p. 295). The strategic negotiation of Whiteness can be thought of in terms of civility. For example, McIntyre (1997) critically analyzed how talk controlled the discourse of Whiteness so that the participants did not have to “shoulder the responsibility for the racism that exists in our society today” (p. 45). Talk, as McIntyre concluded, “insulated White people from examining their/our individual and collective roles(s) in the perpetuation of racism” (p. 45). Talk can be experienced and understood or coded as “civility.” Civil talk, or controlled discourse, is used as a strategic means to resist and distance oneself from personal accountability for sexism or racism. Civil language is carefully framed not to elicit critical analysis because the nature of civility is not to “disrupt the niceness in which they [dominant groups] embed interpersonal relations, and not wanting to deal with the discomfort of personal racism [or sexism]” (p.46). It is through the mask of civility that hegemony and inferential racism are reinscribed. This mask of civility has prohibited a critical examination of and dialogue about individual, institutional, and societal forms of sexism and racism. Thus, the barrier of civility allows us to ignore the complexities of sexism and racism. A prime example of this can be found in McIntosh’s (2001) description of what she refers to as the invisible knapsack of White privilege.

McIntosh confesses, “I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted, as neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody, just as I once thought of a male-focused curriculum as the neutral or accurate account that can speak for all” (p. 100). This knapsack of privilege has left a legacy of sexism and racism disguised as civility. The discursive practice of civility is linked to dominance and this domi-
nance can appear in the classroom. As McIntyre (1997) argues, “There is an interdependency between Whiteness and educational reproduction, between Whiteness and control of discourse, and between Whiteness and teaching” (p. 125). It is this oppression that continues to shape academia. For example, Frankenberg (1993) refers to the ways in which corporate culture and the culture of academia are culturally marked (White) and gendered (male). She finds that these sites and the cultural practices therein, marked “White, American male,” negatively affect those who do not automatically participate in this “privileged” zone (p. 234). These marginalizing cultural practices are shaped through hegemonic civility.

Hegemonic civility subverts our ability to actively engage in the centering of marginality. Thus, the hegemonic order is reinscribed. As McIntyre (1997) argues, civility is engaged in structural, institutional, and cultural dominance which prevents us from “naming injustice, holding each other accountable for injustice, or from enacting principles of equity and justice as these creep into consciousness” (p. 46). Therefore, an increase in the number of women and ethnic minorities will not remedy issues of marginalization that occur on campuses, particularly if there is no challenge to marginalized issues and concepts surrounding hegemony—especially discussions as they pertain to current U.S. racial hegemony.

The Interdependence of Hegemony and Civility

Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who first described hegemony, argues in his 1920 essay “Notes on the Southern Question” that the proletariat in Italy could only become the “leading” or “dominant” ruling class insofar as it “leads the allied classes [and] dominates the opposing classes” (Gramsci, 1992, p. 136). The notion of hegemony includes all classes, not just the proletariat alone. As Gledhill (1997) explains:

Since power in a bourgeois democracy is as much a matter of persuasion and consent as of force, it is never secured once and for all. Any dominant group has to a greater or lesser degree to acknowledge the existence of those whom it dominates by winning the consent of competing or marginalized groups in society. Unlike the fixed grip over society implied by “domination,” “hegemony” is won in the to-and-fro of negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces through which power is contested, shifted or reformed. Representation is a key site in such struggle, since the power of definition is a major source of hegemony. (p. 348)
The negotiation between who is at the center and who is at the margin has been an ongoing struggle in the United States. For example, earlier constructions of the hegemonic order reified Euro Americans (most often Euro American males) as the center and marginalized anyone who deviated from that hegemonically-supported standard. Currently, the racial hegemonic order continues to support Euro Americans as the centered group. However, through the negotiation process (since the hegemonic order is unable to remain stagnant), other marginalities have been recognized: chief among them, class, gender, and sexuality. According to Omi and Winant (1994),

Race, class, gender (as well as sexual orientation) constitute “regions” of hegemony, areas in which certain political projects can take shape. They share certain obvious attributes in that they are all “socially constructed,” and they all consist of a field of projects whose common feature is their linkage of social structure and signification. (p. 68)

Fairclough (1998) describes hegemony as socially constructed and supported. Hegemony, as much as it is “leadership,” can also be thought of as “domination across the economic, political, cultural, and ideological domains of a society” (p. 92). Fairclough echoes Omi and Winant (1994), claiming,

Hegemony is a focus of constant struggle around points of greatest instability between classes and blocs, to construct or sustain or fracture alliances and relations of domination/subordination, which takes economic, political and ideological forms. (p. 92)

In other words, the interests of certain races, classes, genders, and sexualities are valued over the interests of others. This hegemonic hierarchy seems to be supported through the power of centered groups.

Because “the traditional role of the university [is] . . . the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain White supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom” (hooks, 1994, p. 29). Instead, hegemony has given way to (in)civil behavior through the normalization and naturalization of certain actions and thought. For example, political correctness, a term that
became popular in 1990, initially began as a movement to promote equality by making people aware of the power of labeling and language as it pertained to age, dis/ability, ethnicity, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation. This phrase also describes “the efforts of those seeking to deal politically with such social political issues as (1) bias related to race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender, and age; (2) prejudice against the physically or mentally impaired or those of a stature outside perceived norms; and (3) neglect of the natural environment. It also refers to efforts to open the literary canon to works of minorities and, in general, to consider their accomplishments and voices in American life” (Herbst, 1997, p. 182). But despite its laudable intentions, political correctness has been heavily criticized and mocked. Once thought of as transformative, political correctness became more commonly known (pejoratively) as “PC.” The backlash was signaled by “such phrases as PC Police (thought police) in reference to the alleged repression of ideas and behavior not viewed as ‘correct’ ” (Herbst, 1997, p. 184). Since the advent of the backlash, an allegation of “political correctness” can threaten the progress many universities make toward inclusion and achievement of a positive campus climate (Henley, et al., 1992; La Belle & Ward, 1994). Assimilationist organizations such as the National Association of Scholars even push for the continued existence of Eurocentric curricula and denounce “affirmative action, sensitivity workshops, multicultural studies, and race-targeted scholarships” (p. 7).²

In such a climate, calls for civility can be interpreted as a strategy enacted by dominant groups to silence those who challenge the status quo, because civility obscures systemic sexist and racist perceptions and behaviors. According to McKerrow (2001), “civil behavior may be more than politeness, but in its execution it may also serve to mask very real differences in power relations. In a word, civility may perpetuate servitude” (p. 9). Civility is inextricably bound with power because it precludes overt or covert challenge to the White supremacist hegemonic order. As Hall (1997) reminds us, power includes economic exploitation, physical coercion, and cultural or symbolic representation (p. 259). Universities are inextricably bound with power and often in conflict with traditional definitions of civility. But the university’s nature as a large, powerful institution means that it is likely to value eight elements of civility: knowledge and awareness, will, respect, courage, ability, independence, freedom, and responsibility (Barrett, 1991, p. 148-150). However, the reality can be that universities mirror, rather than challenge, the same
attitudes and generalities about cultural, gender, and racial differences that plague larger society.

For example, academics tend to believe in a common desire to foster cultural diversity. The notion of civility has been integrated into college and university campuses and classrooms. Civility is expressed as the notion that a campus community is a “family,” and the university is “home” to administrators, faculty, staff, and students. But if a university is “home” and an institution that welcomes a diverse range of people, how do we account for retention rate concerns and the “chilly climate” women experience (Romaine, 1999; Sadker, 1994; Sandler, Silverberg, & Hall, 1996; Wood, 1994)? What accounts for attrition and low retention rates particularly among non-Euro American students who are at the greatest risk for withdrawal at predominantly White institutions, and African American students who are at the highest risk overall (Allen, 1992; Astin, 1993; Brown, 1994; Duster, 1993; Feagin, 1992; Galicki & McEwen, 1989; Giles-Gee, 1989; Gosman, Dandridge, Nettles, & Thoeny, 1983; Dumas-Hines, Cochran, & Williams, 2001; Grier & D’Onofrio, 1996; Hendrix & Nelson, 1986; Mallinckrodt, 1988; Seldacek, 1989; Strange & Alston, 1998; Taylor & Olswang, 1997)?

Complicity Theory

Through the societal maintenance of civility, it is easy to see how civility is wedded inextricably with complicity theory. The theory of complicity demonstrates how we as a society have maintained the mask of civility. Complicity theory encompasses complicity, implicature and coherence theories. I will be using complicity theory as it has been developed in McPhail’s Zen in the Art of Rhetoric: An Inquiry into Coherence (1996). A way to further develop this theoretical treatise will be to invoke implicature theory (implicature will be developed later in this paper).

Complicity “arises out of a failure to acknowledge and call into question the essentialist presuppositions of critical discourse grounded in their foundationist or conventionalist justificatory strategies” (McPhail, 1996, pp. 74-75). “Complicity [theory] examines how assumptions can inhibit the desires called forth by policy because there is a failure to question and acknowledge those institutions that can prohibit revolutionary change from occurring” (Patton, 2000, p. 42). Using complicity theory requires people to examine and reflect upon how they tacitly maintain privileged spaces and discourses, and how their behavior affects or maintains a situation. In other words, in invoking complicity theory one must be willing to recognize one’s own perpetuation of dominance on society or
a specific group and on the self. "Inherent in complicity theory is the belief that language and action play an important role in the construction of justificatory strategies" (Patton, 2000, p. 43). Language is intertwined with complicity because socially constructed knowledge, language, and action shape the present situation and the status quo which, in turn, has the power to shape the individual and the institution and to reinforce the hegemonic order (Hall, 1997).

In higher education, it is the responsibility of not only instructors but also the university/institution as a whole to be increasingly aware of cultural differences. According to Allen (1992) "A host of barriers calculated to insure the perpetuation of a status quo rooted in an unfair system of racial stratification is reproduced within the university" (p. 42). Among the barriers Allen cites are culturally- and economically-biased standardized tests; administration and faculty that are largely White male; high tuition costs and inadequate financial aid programs; an emphasis on competition; and a lack of cultural pluralism and diversity. Allen states that the "nation’s colleges and universities seem to be not only content with, but committed to, the current system of structured inequality, a system in which African Americans [and other ethnic minorities] suffer grievously" (p. 42). Change in higher education and in pedagogy, Allen notes, will only come when universities feel more responsibility to change and challenge the current status quo.

If we fail to respond creatively and effectively to this challenge, not only will history judge us harshly, but this country will also continue to suffer the negative consequences, such as the loss of its competitive edge in the world market, that have resulted from its failure to develop fully and utilize the talents of all its people, without regard to race, gender, or class. (p. 43)

Whether intentionally or not, universities and classrooms can signal their collusion with the White supremacist hegemonic order through such things as policies that seemingly address the status quo, yet upon closer inspection, ultimately maintain it. Complicity theory helps us to understand inferential racism and its deployment in the "guise of civility" because it entails self-reflexivity. Complicity theorists question hegemony, examining the status quo and what institutions, policies, or people do to maintain it (McPhail, 1996).
Analysis of Difference

Representations that critically analyze difference are rather complex—we need to engage theories, experiences, and research to help deepen our analysis. Salient statements from students that have resonated with me, and have affected me and my experience in the classroom, are excerpted here. The statements caused me to pause, reflect, and ultimately critique the ways in which the university and the classroom can maintain the White supremacist hegemonic order. These experiences, coupled with the reported experiences of other women of color faculty, have illuminated the fact that educational institutions can, even if inadvertently, maintain the hegemonic order, and that classrooms can be the frontline where maintenance of the status quo occurs. When teaching intercultural communication, I challenge students to learn not only about intercultural communication (both domestic and international), but also to develop and refine a critical cultural consciousness. I encourage students to study themselves, the world, and their place in it, examining their language and behavior through an intercultural lens. It is within this critical dialogic exploration of classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, racism, and sexism that transformation is possible.

In order to create another avenue for students to communicate their perspectives or struggles with their own ideas and voice, I ask students to keep journals, which I collect four times per semester. The average length of each journal entry is 10 pages. By the end of the semester, the average student has written 40 typed pages. The entries are not anonymous. I have found journaling to be a successful educational tool, particularly in this class, because journals are seen as “safer” than oral discussions surrounding “ism” topics—particularly racism, which is often shrouded in silence for fear of being labeled a racist.

The excerpts that I have included here, while varied in articulation, correspond to statements, questions, beliefs, or perspectives that I have heard numerous times. The statements made by the students were unprompted and unsolicited. The excerpts elucidate the intersection of sexism and racism shrouded in the cloak of civility. The statements also represent student struggle—struggle because what the student learns directly challenges the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order by shedding light on viewpoints that are normally invisible.

The excerpts are taken from the journals of students taking an intercultural communication course at a Midwestern university, during the 2000-2002 academic years. The university is 87.7% Euro American; 2.6%
African American; .3% American Indian/Alaskan Native; 2.6% Asian/Pacific Islander; 1.8% Hispanic; and 4.9% International (Midwest University, Fact book, 2001-2002).

The four classes were female dominated (with an average of 21 women and five men per class), and Euro American dominated (with a total of three non-Whites and one international student). The intent of this analysis is not to “set up” the students or portray data that work in favor of my argument. Rather, it is my contention that these statements can be found in even the most visibly diverse classrooms (Tatum, 1997). Using autoethnography, Fisher’s (1995) narrative analysis, and complicity theory, I have woven together a variety of narratives to help answer the research question: Do the discourse and action behind the cultural prize of hegemonic civility reinscribe the White (patriarchal) hegemonic order in higher education? In other words, is hegemonic civility so ingrained that it shows up everywhere, even or especially in semi-private journal entries crafted to be read by a visibly non-White professor?

**Autoethnography and Narrative Analysis**

Any story, any form of rhetorical communication not only says something about the world, it also implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways. If a story denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world . . . . The only way to bridge this gap if it can be bridged through discourse is by telling stories that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves. (Fisher, 1995, p. 285)

Narratives convey ideas not only about the self or one’s group, but also about culture.

Cultural interpretation involves trying to understand some group, culture, or cultural aspect, by “Observing and describing the actions of a group, just as one might examine a written text, and trying to figure out what they mean. Another term for cultural interpretation is ethnography” (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 213). Turning that critical cultural lens on oneself becomes autoethnography. Autoethnography encourages the critical, passionate examination of one’s lived experiences, and allows our narratives and our experiences to be treated as primary data (Jackson, 1989; van Maanen, 1995), which is critical in understanding, analyzing, and voicing the experiences of marginalized groups (see Ashcraft & Pacanowsky,
1996; *Communication Theory*, 1999; Denzin, 1997; Geist & Gates, 1996; Murphy, 1998). Allen, Orbe, & Olivas (1999) found that, “this methodological approach appears especially appropriate [in] articulating how our dis/enchantment is shaped by, as well as shapes, our experiences in the academy” (p. 405).

Narrative analysis is also a powerful theoretical apparatus. I used Fisher’s narrative analysis to examine the included excerpts because narration encompasses nearly all discourse. According to Fisher (1995), the narrative paradigm describes five features: 1) humans are essentially storytellers; 2) the paradigmatic mode of human decision-making and communication is “good reasons” (Wallace, 1963), which vary in form across situations, genres, and media of communication; 3) the production and practice of good reasons are ruled by matters of history, biography, culture, and character; 4) we judge stories by the criteria of narrative probability (what constitutes a coherent story) and narrative fidelity (whether the stories resonate with what we know to be true in our lives); and 5) the world offers a set of stories among which we must choose (i.e., the world is a set of stories) (p. 279).

In other words, narratives are a reflection. Not only do the stories and experiences say something about the storyteller, but they say something about society as a whole. In this case, the autoethnographic narrative concerns marginalized experiences that focus on inferential forms of sexism and racism in higher education.

**Positioning the Subject: The Interdependence of Sexism, Racism and (In)Civility**

It is naïve to assume that the increased number of women and ethnic minority students and professors will ensure equity. Inferential forms of sexism and racism are entrenched in higher education. Sexism and racism are interdependent because the bodies of women are marked in such a way that the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order is retained for the common good—in the name of hegemonic civility. While the visceral reactions toward gender or race may vary, women as a whole often face the task of having to prove themselves in extraordinary ways in order to accomplish their work, attain their goals, and succeed in academia. Assimilation is ultimately not an option (particularly for non-White women) because one can only assimilate into an organization if one is allowed to cross that border—if, that is, assimilation of the individual serves to retain the hegemonic order. Thus, the problematization and interdependence of
gender and race provoke crucial questions about civility, border crossing, and the intersection of sexism and racism. This is illustrated in the following five excerpts from student journals.  

Excerpt 1

_I was happy to be paired with an Asian American female student in my class. I thought she was really smart. I was surprised to find she was really just an average student._

This statement is indicative of inferential (or “nonracist”) racism, which often appears in statements, actions, or beliefs that have explicitly anti-racist intent. The student who made the comment would believe that she is complimenting the female Asian American student, rather than enacting a harder-to-identify form of racism. Is the female Asian American student somehow smarter than non-Asian American women because she is Asian? Can a woman automatically be considered smart because she is Asian or Asian American? In this statement, the Asian American student is made to carry the “model minority” stereotype (Lee, 1996; Omatsu, 1994). On the surface the Asian American student appears to receive a “positive” stereotype: “I thought she was really smart.” In fact this student is invoking Fisher’s “good reasons” to support her belief. Based on what she knows of Asian Americans her statement is informed by stereotyped history, culture, and character. Further, her belief is supported by Fisher’s “narrative fidelity”—what she knows about Asian Americans (as they have been stereotyped) resonates with what she knows to be true in her life; i.e. the model minority stereotype. The model minority stereotype, although an apparent compliment, is actually inferentially racist because, “the model minority image authorizes flat denial of racism and structures of racial dominance, and silences those who are not economically successful. It also denies and silences Asian America’s tradition of militancy and liberation, and a tradition of building solidarity with other oppressed racial groups” (Omatsu, 1994, quoted in Lee, 1996, p. ix). Further, once the student is recategorized as “an average student,” this female Asian American student is marginalized because she cannot successfully uphold the model minority stereotype. The question then becomes, who is average? To whom does average refer? Is an average student anyone except an Asian American student? Does average mean that this person should be excused from upholding the model minority stereotype? While the statement may appear benign and complimentary, it illustrates what makes
inferential racism so dangerous—it has been naturalized and appears civil and politically correct.

Excerpt 2

Classes that focus on diversity issues are a joke. They [ethnic minority students] are only here because of special scholarships or sports. Universities should give the money to a more qualified White student. I just tell professors of diversity what they want to hear so I can get my grade and get out.

I count the above statement as another example of inferential racism. While some may view this statement as overt racism, I see it as inferential due to the fact that the belief expressed has become naturalized and normalized. It has become the foundation for arguments against affirmative action, when in fact, it is White women who benefit the most from affirmative action (Fine, 1995; Wellman, 1997). Such statements have been widely reported in a variety of media. When a non-White student is not on scholarship or is not an athlete, rather than that being taken and accepted as the norm (which it is) it becomes touted as the exception. In marking non-White students in this way, the student not only maintains the White supremacist hegemonic order, but also further marginalizes non-White students on campus with this incivil and inferentially racist attitude. The student demonstrates that it never crossed her mind that non-White students at the university could be more qualified than White students and that is why they are there. The student does not take into consideration the “special scholarships” that may exist for some White students like legacy admissions, or that not all non-White students receive special scholarships or are athletes. This student invokes Fisher’s narrative fidelity: supposedly unqualified non-White students taking up space reserved for white students is “truth” as she constructs her world. And in order to support her world view she chooses amongst stories. She is not using “traditional” high-achieving academic students to uphold her stereotypes, but rather invokes the stereotype of the “dumb non-White athlete.” Additionally, while the student might view her statement as normalized and “common sense,” the student violates one of the tenets of “true civility:” respect for the other. As Madrid (2001) explains, “if one is the other, one will inevitably be perceived unidimensionally; will be seen stereotypically; will be defined and delimited by mental sets that may not bear much relation to existing realities” (p. 25). Finally, the student does not consider
that diversity encompasses much more than race and ethnic minorities and includes, but is not limited to, ability, age, class, gender, religion, and sexuality perspectives and experiences.

Excerpt 3

Racism doesn't exist. I am so tired of people like you showing me ways you think it exists. Perhaps you are far too sensitive. Perhaps you need perspective. For once, can't anything not be about race?

The student's first sentence is clearly a denial of racism. The denial of racism is popular because of the belief that we live in a PC culture. Even the *U.S. News and World Report* denies the existence of racism in its 2001 article, "Sensitivity police: The Democrats are intent on racializing every issue," which concludes by saying that Democrats are searching for racism that no longer exists. "As racism fades those who can't accept the good news are sure that it is still there, just below the surface, posing as welfare reform or colorblind politics" (Leo, 2001, p. 12).

This student's statement is also inferentially sexist and racist. This student stated numerous times throughout the semester that I was his first "Black female professor." Merely my presence and my voice in the classroom violated his educational status quo. Further, the subject matter decenters the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order because we are learning material that makes the non-White and non-American perspectives visible by bringing marginalized views and beliefs to the surface. Therefore, when the student states, "racism doesn't exist. I am so tired of people like you showing me ways you think it exists" and "for once can't anything not be about race?" he is not only invoking Fisher's narrative fidelity (what he knows to be true in his life) and choosing which set of stories matter to him, he is also inferentially demanding that I return to my rightful place in the hegemonic order. The student wishes that the subject matter covered continued to reify hegemony—not challenge it. Because this class educates students about issues that are often masked through our language, thought, or action—we are civil people—the seamless foundation of denial and inferential racism is cracked due to my physical portrayal and my voice. I am cloaked in the visibility of gender and race, when I become "people like you" who are "perhaps ... far too sensitive," which are attempts to deny my personal experience with the interdependence of sexism and racism. As Nicotera (1999) so aptly says,
academia is “a place where our professional, intellectual, personal and institutional lives collide” (p. 430).

Excerpt 4

Special laws for ethnic minorities and respecting them hurt our culture and society. We are all respectful of one another.

This student uses Fisher’s “good reasons” to support her belief. In her mind she is using society’s rules, history, culture, and character to exhibit concern for “special laws” aimed at ethnic minorities. However, her concern and her use of the word “respectful” becomes a coded word for civil—in other words, (to quote Rodney King) why can’t we all just get along? As this student demonstrates, though, “getting along” is inferentially racist because many important issues regarding diversity, racism, and White supremacy must be glossed over in favor of the greater common good—which happens to be the good of the White hegemonic order. In addition, laws that protect marginalized people are ignored.

This statement indicates and promotes inferential racism because it is convenient for the majority and maintains the status quo. Why worry about anyone else? “Getting along” and acting “civil” means “a willingness to conduct oneself according to the socially approved rules even when one would like to do otherwise” (McKerrow, 2001, p. 9). But just because we wear the mask of civility does not necessitate equality in power and domination issues. McKerrow continues, “A sense of civil society is meaningless in that it merely serves to perpetuate the dominance of those already in positions of power. It is one thing to play nice with the cultural other; it is quite another to accept that person as an equal—an inescapable condition of being civil in the first place” (p. 9). If the mask of civility is tainted with inauthenticity, not only will intercultural, cross-cultural, and co-cultural relations be compromised, but also interpersonal and intercultural relations will be destroyed due to the barriers of mistrust.

Excerpt 5

I believe that there is a dominant culture of our class that is more feared than accepted. The dominant culture, in my opinion [,] is the actual class itself. I have grown up and lived in the Midwest my entire life. I have lived with and have experienced many forms of bigotry and racism from my friends and even my family.
I believe I have somewhat of a grasp of the hatred in the world. I know I will never be a black person living in the south during the 1960s, ’70s or even today, but I try to understand and deal with the kind of ignorance individuals have the best way I know how . . . I have worked my entire life trying to have the opposite feelings and thought concerning people of different ethnic backgrounds. This all means nothing though if I cannot put my conscious recognition of minorities or people of another race aside and just judge individuals for who they are and what they have previously done.

This is my personal opinion, but I believe that many of the individuals in class are having their hands tied for fear of saying anything that would sound remotely racist. I have referred, in class, to the type of speak [sic] that some African Americans have toward one another by referencing how the term nigger has been used, but was then corrected and told that the term was “nigga.” I know of others in the class who have had similar experiences with feeling they cannot say what they really want to say for fear of being singled out as a racist or a bigot. This is a topic many will not talk to you about for fear of saying the wrong things . . . I think only by getting over hurdles such as this can we truly unbind our hands and speak freely.

The images a group or society constructs of the other, can amount to a naturalized definition of a person or group, and come to represent that person or group. This student’s statement is representative of inferential sexism and racism. On the one hand, I was appreciative of the fact that the student felt safe to disclose how he felt in the classroom. However, while he may have felt safe after the fact (I talked with this student regarding the situation and he reported feeling “great,” saying “I really liked the class”), I felt singled out in terms of gender and race. Initially, as I approached the situation with the student I thought it was about race and racism; as I learned more clearly, it was also about sexism. I asked a White male colleague how this student behaved in his classes, the colleague indicated that the student was quiet and respectful. Thus, my gender, along with my interactive-discussion teaching style, allowed the student to feel empowered to speak out. Because gender oppression exists, and because that oppression is not a simple matter of male versus female, we need to retain the ability to identify gender in order to challenge marginalizing and rigid stereotypes of gender. As Condit (1997) states, “we need to de-emphasize
the simplistic dimorphic account of gender and to replace it with a multiplicity of genderings. These genderings should not be universal, but contextually responsive, and they should not reduce persons to totalizing, stereotyped identities,” (p. 100) just as being a Black female professor should not carry the addition of the double bind.

When this student uses his Midwestern background as a way to increase his credibility, he is making an argument using his biography and culture through his use of Fisher’s “good reasons.” However, through invoking his Midwestern values and (White male) personal experience, he set up a climate of difference and marginalization. As this same student wrote, “The co-cultural communication does not contain different values, but rather different beliefs than the dominant culture that we [emphasis mine] have created.” It is clear in the preceding quotes that race became a powerful signifier in the student’s mind, superceding gender. The most palpable example of inferential racism can be found in the student’s repeated statement of being fearful of saying anything that might sound remotely racist.

Silence is often a very powerful form of communication. Silence can communicate an abundance of meanings: it can be employed to deter opposition, or it can signal peace, respect, or simply a lack of energy to communicate (Carter, 1998). However, silence in this situation, like sexism and racism, can cause a chilly classroom environment for professor and students alike. Due to this silence, sexism and racism in higher education as a whole have been allowed to continue in the guise of civility.

According to the student, because of my gender and race I am unable to offer any guidance or critique as the professor of the class: when I do exercise my “power” through correcting a White male student, I create a climate of fear, ultimately silencing this student and others. My skin is shrouded in all of the stereotypes of “Blackness” even as the student proclaims himself non-racist and seems to exert effort and knowledge not to perpetuate those stereotypes.

I have worked my entire life trying to have the opposite feelings and thought concerning people of different ethnic backgrounds. This all means nothing though if I cannot put my conscious recognition of minorities or people of another race aside and just judge individuals for who they are and what they have previously done.
As this student exerts effort and knowledge not to perpetuate stereotypes, he is applying complicity theory because he attempts to engage in self-reflexivity and to have the "opposite feelings and thought[s] concerning people of different ethnic backgrounds." However, despite this self-reflexivity, as this student constructs Blackness juxtaposed against gender, he "engages feelings, attitudes, and emotions and mobilizes fears and anxieties in the viewer [the student], at deeper levels than we can explain in a simple, common sense way" (Hall, 1997, p. 226). Thus my body becomes not only the representation of difference, it is the "discursive site through which much of 'racialized knowledge' is produced and circulated" (Hall, 1997, p. 244). It is through sexism and racism that I become stereotyped, fixed, and Othered even as the student has presented his statements in the guise of civility.

The student ends the journal entry believing he has created and maintained open communication with me. (I would argue that he has done so only insofar as it benefits him through the maintenance of the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order.) As the recipient of his comments, I am left with not only the belief that I have to navigate the double bind, but that even if I do so "successfully," it does not matter because I inhabit the space of fixed Otherness in his mind. The situation with this student crossed not only the borderland of gender, but also of race, where everyday I am forced to negotiate inferential sexism and racism cloaked in civility.

Limitations of the Study

Multiple marginalities could be examined in higher education; sex and race are just two of the possibilities. It is important to examine those other marginalities: ability, age, class, sexuality, and religion. Further, the analysis would benefit from an examination of civility extending beyond autoethnography to include a critical, empirical, or quantitative analysis that provides an overview of incivility across campuses. In addition, it would be helpful to study more diverse campuses, particularly in terms of moving beyond the Black/White dichotomous lens to include other racial and ethnic groups. More research will provide a broader understanding of sexism and racism in classrooms and in higher education. It is an important avenue to pursue as our campuses become more diverse in terms of gender, race, and ethnicity. One way to challenge sexism and racism in higher education is through dialogue; another is through action. Hopefully, through dialogue and action, bridges can be built and understanding across dichotomous views, perspectives, and experiences attained.
Conclusion: Acknowledging Complicity

Through the daily choices we as individuals make, we determine the limits of true "civility." We must collectively recognize and actively confront issues of incivility thinly veiled as civility. Inferential forms of sexism and racism are embedded within our society. Inferential sexism and racism, like civility, are linked with power. Through the naturalized positioning of inferential acts of sexism and racism, we allow the complicitous, marginalizing notions of civility to thrive. Enactment of civility in a variety of educational contexts that reify hegemony can be seen in language (words of tolerating diversity), racial tracking (segregated education where often Euro and Asian American students are placed in college prep courses and Black and Latino students are placed on a vocational track), or the model minority stereotype. In the guise of civility and society’s complicity with the White supremacist (patriarchal) hegemonic order, we reinscribe this order. Hegemony is strongly inculturated within the United States, thus keeping most people unaware of the daily incidents of inferential sexism and racism that occur not only on our college and university campuses and classrooms, but throughout society. “Social institutions are the fundamental conduits for race, class, and gender oppression in this society, even though they are often presented as entities far removed from these experiences” (Andersen & Collins, 2001, p. 214). Civility, as it is currently constructed, reifies the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order. It is not dynamic or inclusive. It is not a conversation, but a fixed pronouncement. Therefore, the question remains: Can faculty of color create an environment in which dialogue can emerge in the predominantly White classroom?

In academia we often talk about an engaged classroom, but not about how to engage a classroom when one’s mere presence is enough to disrupt the learning that is supposed to take place. We may be forced to commit to a class that is reluctant, resistant, or resentful of our presence as teacher. Our presence may make the classroom uncomfortable or unsafe for students. But what about our safety? What about our comfort? Disrupting the notion of a harmonious classroom is positive if it means challenging the status quo in favor of an enhanced learning environment that allows students to think "outside the box," to engage in critical thinking and learning. Through disruption and exposing certain truths and biases we may be able to decenter and open up the classroom, and the decentered classroom offers a myriad of possibilities. One location of possibilities in the decentered classroom is anonymous journaling or anonymous discus-
sion questions and the incorporation of those questions/thoughts into classroom discussion and teachable moments. Peer-to-peer learning can also be a powerful educational tool, particularly if students are hesitant to speak because of the professor’s presence. Therefore, it may be important that a student sees the same ideas that the professor is trying to teach expressed by a peer, which, in turn, may make what the professor says more effective.

A second location of possibilities is in dialogue. According to Arnett and Arneson (1999), “Dialogic civility works to keep conversation going that seeks to enrich a life lived meaningfully through others—persons, institutions, places of work, and long term friendships” (p. 288). We need to deconstruct hegemonic systems embedded not only in our institutions, but also in our classrooms. Dialogue asks us to consider and value experiences, perspectives, and ideas different from our own. To achieve an empowered dialogue that seeks to center aspects of beliefs, values, and assumptions “is, perhaps, the ultimate challenge for a pedagogy of dialogue, in part because we live in a culture where, on all fronts, people are being encouraged to be stronger identities—personal, ethnic, cultural, and subcultural” (Hyde & Bineham, 2000, pp. 216-217). In other words, “Compromising our identity or seeking to compromise the identity of the Other, is also the wrong communicative path. Being civil in a manner that erases our collective soul may yield agreement, but may also impoverish us as a people” (McKerrow, 2001, p. 10). These sentiments render those who suffer from the White supremacist patriarchal hegemonic order invisible and further marginalized. Therefore, “dialogue must bring with it a new conceptualization of power in order to create equitable conversations in the face of knowledge [and experience] differences” (Zoller, 2000, p. 198). We need to reflect on the conditions of inequality in the classroom and across campus that might lead to (in) civility, complicity, and marginalization. One avenue to begin the dialogue may be a one-minute in-class anonymous written response to what is being discussed. This anonymous dialogic invitation may be what is needed to encourage classroom discussion.

A third location of decentered possibilities is implicature theory. “Implicature extends the notion of empathy [and dialogue] from the psychological to the physical by acknowledging that self and other are never separate and distinct, but are always interdependent and interrelated” (Dace & McPhail, 1998, p. 440). Implicature “represents a transformative evolution of the symbolic and social possibilities of dealing with dissonance and difference in communication” (p. 436). Implicature theory
proposes that people are interrelated and interconnected and invites the perspective that we as members of society are accountable. Through dialogue, implicature is enacted because "dialogue asks us to hear the voices of those whose language, meaning, systems and social locations are different from our own" (Zoller, 2000, p. 193). Implicature allows us to see our interrelatedness and our collective accountability, encouraging us to recognize our responsibility for creating inclusive environments for all.

References


Notes

1According to Fryce (2001) “one of the most ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind—situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure, or deprivation” (p. 49). In this manuscript, the double bind specifically refers to women who are also ethnic minorities. Due to this double marginality ethnic minority women are often put into a bind, particularly within discussions of race and gender, because of an either/or mentality that is produced—does a woman fight against sexism or racism? Is it possible to fight against both successfully? Often one issue is prioritized over another.

2The traditional canon encompassed “Socrates to Wittgenstein in philosophy, and from Homer to James Joyce in literature; Plato, Shakespeare, Aristotle, Augustine,
Luther, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Marx, and Freud” (Shuman & Olufs, 1995, p. 232). Assimilationists believe that the knowledge the canon has to offer students is essential, the best that education has to offer and is the “backbone of our civilization,” claiming among other things that recognition of ethnicity promotes divisions, exhumes ethnic conflicts, and leads to the Balkanization of society (Banks, 1994, pp. 115, 124-125).

3Midwest University is a pseudonym.

4In my autoethnographic process, my personal reflections were facilitated through conversations with others. The conversations with others increased consciousness about the interdependence of sexism and racism in the classroom, which resulted in personal journaling. Journaling allowed me to dialogue with myself, frame the situation for myself, and reflect upon my experiences.

5It is important to note that students orally discussing with their professor and students writing in journals are two different communicative acts and spaces. However, the excerpts here illustrate that hegemonic civility can be and is expressed both orally and textually.