Utilizing Mindfulness and Contemplative Practices to Promote Racial Identity Development for White College Students

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Abstract

The values of diversity and inclusion have been widely accepted within the field of higher education. While these values exist in the classroom, there has been little exploration of the experience and capacity for engagement in diversity education that students bring, specifically for students who racially identify as white. Literature indicates that white students have had fewer interactions with diversity than their racially minoritized peers and that most of these students need more development to promote their skills in successfully engaging racially diverse communities. For white college students to develop their own racial identities, they must engage in higher-order cognitive processes, including reflection, perspective taking, and empathy building. Contemplative practices, including meditation, may serve as useful tools in developing the racial identity of white students by promoting capacities such as self-awareness, presence, perspective taking, emotional regulation, and empathy in students. In this paper, the author demonstrates how mindfulness practices can be used with white college students to promote their racial identity development and reduce harm to racially marginalized students in diversity education.

Keywords: Mindfulness; Identity development; Techniques; Whiteness

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"Just awakened, I hope that every person will attain great awareness and see in complete clarity." – Hanh, 2003

Diversity Education on College Campuses

Opportunities for college students to engage in diversity education are more abundant than ever. The demographics of student populations are increasingly more diverse, which has resulted in profound changes for what student engagement looks like on college campuses (Harper & Quaye, 2015). While compositional diversity enriches the educational experience, it is the ongoing and intentional efforts to meaningfully engage with campus diversity that leads to profound learning and growth (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). From academic requirements to co-curricular workshops and trainings, today's college students are surrounded by diversity education. Most diversity trainings and workshops outside the classroom are not mandatory, and as a result many students do not attend (McCauley, Wright, & Harris, 2000). Thus, there is a compelling incentive to incorporate this curriculum into collegiate academics to ensure that all students are engaging in diversity education.

The prevalence of these efforts in higher education stems from the many positive learning outcomes associated with diversity education, including individual student development, interpersonal communication, and more generally, fostering inclusive communities (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zúñiga, 2009). Engaging in diversity has been shown to promote a greater collection of perspectives and an increased exposure to diverse thoughts and opinions (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005). Additionally, research has demonstrated that diversity education positively impacts the psycho-social outcomes of cognitive complexity and self-awareness in college students (Antonio et al., 2004). Considering the many beneficial aspects of diversity education, it is understandable that colleges and universities have widely incorporated these efforts into the educational practices across their campuses.

Despite the many opportunities for college students to engage in diversity education, however, the goal of inclusion remains elusive. Racially minoritized students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) feel pressured to conform to stereotypes and experience alienation, isolation, and marginalization (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012). The culture of most institutions in higher education reflects a white or Eurocentric perspective, which reinforces the dominance of whiteness through artifacts such as artwork, architecture, rituals, and traditions (Gusa, 2010). Given these pervasive realities, it is no wonder then that fewer than 43% of Black, Latino, and Native American students persist to attain a college degree within six years, compared to 63% of their white peers (Jayakumar & Museus, 2012, p. 2).

In this paper, I will demonstrate how mindfulness practices can be used as a tool for developing racial identity in white college students to promote sustainable engagement in diversity education. Additionally, mindfulness may give white students skills that can reduce the negative impact of defensiveness and silence towards students of Color in diversity education. These outcomes could contribute to a campus culture in higher education that fosters student success for racially marginalized as well as white students. Contemplative practices, such as

meditation, increase self-awareness (Magee, 2015), reduce negative bias (Lueke & Gibson, 2015; Stell & Farsides, 2015), improve appreciation for difference (Song & Muschert, 2014), and develop resiliency for navigating challenge (Keye & Pidgeon, 2013). These capacities are essential for the cognitive development that is required for white students to engage in racial identity development. Using contemplative and mindfulness practices can allow educators to promote the goals of diversity education at colleges and universities.

A Lack of Experience and Preparation

One factor contributing to the continued discrimination experienced by marginalized students and the persistence of white culture on college campuses may be that those students with privileged identities are not coming to college prepared to meaningfully engage with diversity. Indeed, recent studies point to white students' lack of experience and preparedness for diversity education (Cabrera, 2012; Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017; Cabrera, Watson, & Franklin, 2016; Gusa, 2010; Picca, 2015). Specifically, white students have been shown to have fewer interactions with diversity than their racially minoritized peers (Reason, 2015; Reason & Evans, 2007; Saenz, Ngai, & Hurtado, 2007). As a result, white students may benefit from additional racial identity development to foster their ability to successfully engage in diversity education while in college.

When white students engage in diversity education without exposure to the necessary racial identity development, the result is a burdensome responsibility placed on their racially minoritized peers. White students struggle to own their racial privilege and biased assumptions when participating in diversity education (Helms, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1995/2005; Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000). As a result, many white students respond with resistance or silence when challenged about their whiteness (Blum, 1998; Denevi & Pastan, 2006; DiAngelo, 2011, 2012). This fight or flight mentality requires students of Color to protect themselves against defensive attacks and carry the weight of explaining their racialized experiences to educate their white peers.

White Racial Identity Development

One way to avoid the problematic outcomes associated with unprepared white students participating in diversity education is for them to undergo racial identity development. In the 1960s, researchers began studying the experiences of individuals from various racial identity groups with the goal of developing theories that might be used in practice (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson III, 2001). While development models have been constructed for many racial identities, some scholars have examined the developmental trajectory of white racial identity (Hardiman, 2001; Hardiman & Jackson, 1992, 1997; Helms, 1990, 1995; Helms & Cook, 1995/2005). Growing out of counseling psychology, racial identity development theories have been applied in various educational contexts, including higher education (Jones & Abes, 2013).

According to Hardiman's (2001) White Identity Development (WID) model, many white students enter college with a consciousness characterized by naiveté due to their lack of awareness about race. After they experience racial diversity in college, many white students enter the acceptance stage, which is characterized by the learned belief that the agent group

(white people) is superior and the target group (people of Color) are inferior. If white students continue to experience racial diversity in college through diversity education, they may enter the resistance stage of their development where they begin to question their socialized dominant assumptions about race. From here, white students may become interested in racial justice efforts, which leads them to a redefinition of their whiteness. Finally, once white students have integrated racial justice into their daily behavior, they enter a stage of internalization where they continuously raise their racial consciousness while striving to end racism.

In order for white college students to develop their own racial identities, they must first engage in higher-order cognitive processes, including reflection, perspective taking, and empathy building (King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Perez, Shim, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2015; Reason et al., 2005). Indeed, King and Baxter Magolda's (2005) developmental model of intercultural maturity demonstrates how students who mature along cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal dimensions can more successfully attain racial self-awareness. Additionally, a strong sense of self-worth, time spent on personal reflection, and the ability to see from different perspectives are all critical factors in white students' racial identity development (Broido & Reason, 2005).

If the racial identity development of white college students occurs through the processes of self-reflection and perspective taking, educators can be creative in their pedagogy. Considering the troubling burden that is put on students of Color in most cases of diversity education, it is vital for college and university educators to seek innovative practices that can facilitate white students' racial identity development without asking racially minoritized students to take on additional emotional labor. To avoid causing further harm to students of Color while still fostering the skills necessary for white students' racial identity development, higher education can look to the pedagogical tools emerging from the field of mindfulness and contemplative practices. Indeed, the use of meditation and mindfulness in higher education has the potential to improve racial self-awareness in white students while simultaneously reducing the negative impact on students of Color associated with traditional diversity education.

Contemplative and Mindfulness Practices in White Racial Identity Development

Contemplative and mindfulness practices are ways of being that facilitate the focus of one's attention on the present moment and actively paying attention to common activities to reduce stress and promote a healthier life (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Mindfulness can help focus one's attention as well as increase the ability to evaluate and control thoughts, emotions, and actions. Additionally, contemplative practices like meditation can lead to an improved relationship with the world where moments, experiences, and relationships may be fully understood. Research around contemplative practices indicates that mindfulness and compassion, when used in educational environments, can promote capacities such as self-awareness, presence, perspective taking, emotional regulation, and empathy in students (Magee, 2015).

Many white students enter college with a race blind perspective, which seeks to minimize racial differences (Hardiman, 2001; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007). Despite the sincere efforts of many white students to ignore the realities of race on college campuses, they continue to focus on racial identity through everyday interactions with their peers of Color (Sue et al., 2007). White college students do, in fact, see race and other social identities,

resulting in unconscious and implicit bias favoring people with white skin (Staats, 2014). Mindfulness can be a tool to increase white students' awareness of the connections between internalized racial bias and patterns of systemic racism (Magee, 2015). Through mindfulness practices, students can become more conscious of "the multitude of feeling tones, thoughts, sensations and perceptions by which we know the world … becoming more aware of habits and patterns associated with the phenomenon of race in our lives" (Magee, 2015, p. 9).

Contemplative practices can be a powerful tool in helping white students identify and investigate racial bias. A study conducted by Lueke and Gibson (2015) outlines the ways in which mindfulness meditation reduces race and age bias as a result of a reduction in the automatic activation of negative associations. Through mindfully observing identity threats, or instances when race results in negative feelings or outcomes for individuals (Steele, 2010), students can understand how everyone is negatively impacted by racism. Increased awareness might result in the acknowledgement of personal actions that may perpetuate negative bias and discrimination (Hicks & Furlotte, 2009). This recognition may well lead to a change in individual assumptions, attitudes, and behavior.

In addition to an increased awareness of race and racism, mindfulness practices can develop a greater appreciation for racial differences in white college students. Contemplative practices allow those who practice them to better understand the interconnectedness of the world (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Rockefeller (2006) demonstrates how meditation can increase an individual's connection to diverse others, resulting in increased empathy and compassion. A study conducted by Song and Muschert (2014) revealed that mindfulness can be a significant pedagogical tool for increasing the "sociological understanding of intersections between individuals, groups, and society" (p. 333). Thus, students are more appreciative of racial differences and feel more responsible for the well-being of others.

Finally, the use of mindfulness practices with white college students can lead to increased resiliency for making mistakes in diversity education. As Magee (2015) articulates, "mindfulness can be a powerful tool for raising awareness of the limitations of our own experiences and assisting in communicating with others to learn more" (p. 14). A study by Keye and Pidgeon (2013) demonstrates a correlation between mindfulness and academic self-efficacy, resulting in increased resilience and psychological strengths for navigating change. Given the lack of experience that many white college students have with racial diversity, many are fearful of making mistakes in diversity education (Bedard, 2000; Kivel, 1996; Sleeter, 1992). This fear holds many white students back from authentically engaging in diversity education in the first place (DiAngelo, 2012). Using mindfulness, white college students can become more resilient and prepared for challenging interactions that may occur in diversity education.

Contemplative and Mindfulness Practices Beyond Whiteness

While it is outside the scope of this article to investigate the potential of using mindfulness practices to reduce bias with other student populations, research from Jones and Abes (2013) indicates that social identities (e.g., race, class, gender, etc.) cannot be understood in isolation and that they are all equally influenced by larger systems of oppression. Drawing on Black Feminist Theory (hooks, 1984; Lorde, 1983; Smith, 1982), Intersectionality Theory

(Crenshaw, 1989), and the framework of interlocking systems of domination (Collins, 2004), Jones and Abes (2013) conclude that identity development is not influenced by a hierarchy of oppression. College educators may then choose, for example, to approach male students with gender privilege or wealthy students with class privilege, from the same developmental frameworks that are utilized with white students. Implementing mindfulness practices in the college classroom may also be beneficial for students of Color with dominant identities outside of race, including sexual orientation, ability, and religion. However, further research is necessary to determine the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in reducing other forms of bias with students from multiple privileged identity groups.

Recommendations

The use of mindfulness practices in higher education has the potential to transform the ways in which white students engage in diversity education. College educators can incorporate elements of mindfulness into their pedagogy to promote diversity education by making connections between contemplative practices and racial identity development. Rhonda Magee (2015) suggests that educators do this through what she calls ColorInsight, which is a combination of meditation and racial justice education. One example of the ColorInsight pedagogy can occur through a simple body scan, focusing on the skin and the ways in which students' skin influences their physical, cognitive, and emotional states.

To conduct this body scan meditation, educators can begin by asking students to bring their attention to the body, closing their eyes if they feel comfortable. Next, students should take three deep breaths, continuing to focus on the body. Educators can then bring the students' attention to the feet and the skin covering the feet for one breath. Moving upward, educators should ask students to focus on the skin of the legs, pelvis, torso, back, chest, arms, shoulders, neck, and face, taking a full breath at each part of the body. Finally, this meditation concludes with students taking three deep breaths while contemplating the skin that covers the entire body.

Additionally, a study from Stell and Farsides (2016) reveals that just seven minutes of guided loving-kindness meditation (LKM) can reduce racial bias. Specifically, this brief LKM begins by asking students to close their eyes and take a few deep breaths. Next, the LKM asks students to "imagine people who deeply cared for them standing on either side of them, sending them love" (Stell & Farsides, 2016, p. 142). After approximately four minutes of this visualization, students are asked to open their eyes and redirect the feelings of love they had been contemplating towards a photograph of a person of Color. For the next three minutes, the LKM asks students to send the person in the photograph wishes of health and happiness.

Finally, educators seeking to incorporate mindfulness practices into their pedagogy with white college students may look to the study conducted by Lueke and Gibson (2015), who demonstrated that mindfulness meditation can reduce implicit race and age bias. Their method included asking students to listen to a ten-minute mindfulness recording that focuses on the body, the heartbeat, and the breath. Examples of mindfulness audio recordings for college students can be found at www.korumindfulness.org (The Center for Koru Mindfulness, 2017), www.mindful.org (Foundation for a Mindful Society, 2015), or www.headspace.com (Headspace Inc., 2017). Following the meditation, students are asked to complete the Implicit

Association Test (IAT) for skin color, a tool developed by researchers at Harvard to gauge the automatic association of constructs like race and ethnicity. The brief assessment can be found at https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/iatdetails.html (Project Implicit, 2011). After reviewing the results of the IAT, educators can engage students in a dialogue about the meditation and their assessment results.

Conclusion

Contemplative practices can equip white students with a greater sense of self-awareness, a reduced tendency toward implicit bias, and an increased capacity for empathy and compassion, as well as a greater ability to remain resilient when faced with racial dissonance (Lueke & Gibson, 2015; Magee, 2015; Song & Muschert, 2014; Stell & Farsides, 2016). According to college student development theory, these are exactly the skills necessary to promote white students' racial identity (Jones & Abes, 2013; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Perez et al., 2015). Improving this aspect of student development will in turn advance the positive outcomes associated with diversity education, including a rich array of experiences and opinions that promote learning for all students at colleges and universities (Broido & Reason, 2005; Reason, 2015; Reason & Evans, 2007). Additionally, the skills developed by white students through contemplative practices can serve to reduce the negative impact experienced by students of Color in diversity education, including white defensiveness and silence (DiAngelo, 2011, 2012). Diversity education that serves both students of Color and white students equitably may result in college graduates who are more prepared to dismantle systems of oppression beyond the walls of academia. Thus, mindfulness as a tool for promoting racial identity development in white students not only effectively facilitates diversity education at colleges and universities, it also has the potential to contribute to the broader goal of ending systemic racism.

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