Color Blindness and the Domains of Power Framework: Opening Up Dialogue About Racism in the College Classroom

Margaret Austin Smith
University of Maryland College Park

Abstract

Teaching the social construction of race may foster the belief that race does not exist and as such that it cannot have real effects on lived experiences and on material inequalities. Such beliefs, even when well intentioned, may operate in support of the rhetoric and practices of color blind racism. The exercise presented in these notes aims to help instructors develop a discussion with undergraduate students about the real and significant effects that the social construction of race has upon the lived experiences of individuals and of larger social groups by illustrating the threat color blind rhetoric and practices pose to dialogue and democracy. The activity allows students to practice using Patricia Hill Collins's (2009b) domains of power framework to analyze, question, and challenge the multiple and complex ways in which race— and racism—are embedded in social relationships.

Margaret Austin Smith is a doctoral student in the Sociology of Education at the University of Maryland College Park. Her dissertation research looks at student engagement in academic work. She is the leader of an undergraduate research and writing group that focuses on the development of teaching and learning relationships in higher education.

Race and Color Blindness: Approaching Dialogue in the College Classroom

In this post-civil-rights era, as racial barriers in high economic and political realms are apparently shattered with predictable regularity, race itself becomes an increasingly proscribed subject. ... Because race is ostracized from some of the most impassioned political debates of this period, their racialized character becomes increasingly difficult to identify, especially by those who are unable—or do not want— to decipher the encoded language.
–Angela Davis (1997: 264)

The challenges of teaching the social construction of race have been well documented (Khanna and Harris, 2009; Obach, 1999; Alicea and Kessel, 1997). In articulating many of these challenges, Khanna and Harris (2009) observe that they may stem from many Americans' perception that racial categories are fundamentally real and indicative of natural divisions in the population. While this tendency to view race as real and natural may be characteristic of the general populace, it is increasingly likely that students enrolling in U.S. institutions of higher education have been exposed to some discussion of race as a social construction— whether in the increasing number of high school sociology classes (DeCesare, 2008); in mass media spectacles (Chavez, 2008); via discourses regarding, for example, Barack Obama's racial identity or racial profiling in Arizona state legislation and the issue of "looking illegal"; through the presentation of self and friends on social networking sites (Boyd, 2007); or elsewhere. Many students in U.S. higher

education may in fact arrive in the classroom ready to acknowledge that race *is* a social construction, and to acknowledge it in this way: *"... but race is* just *a social construction. It doesn't exist!"*

As such, a challenge at least equally as important as exploring with students the processes by which race is socially constructed is ensuring that students understand how social processes of constructing race continue to have real effects on lived experiences and on material inequalities. It is imperative that students understand that achieving deconstruction of those processes by which meanings of race are socially constructed is not equivalent to achieving social justice. The purpose of these notes is to describe an approach to discussing with undergraduate students the real and significant effects that the social construction of race may have upon the lived experiences of individuals and of larger social groups. In this way, instructors can help students examine significant processes through which race is socially constructed in relation to intersecting systems of power that may obscure inequities even as they reproduce and reinforce them.

Race and Color Blindness

As DeCesare (2008) has noted, students are increasingly being exposed to sociology in high school, and thus many may be familiar with some key sociological ideas before they ever set foot in a college classroom. This increasingly widespread familiarity, along with increasingly active participation in and observation of identity construction on social networking sites

(Boyd, 2007), and exposure to a variety of mass media discourses invoking contested ideas of race mean that college students are likely to have encountered the idea of "social construction" in reference to race. In my experience teaching undergraduate students in lower-level sociology courses at a large public university, those students who have already associated "race" with "social construction" are likely to explain their understanding of the social construction of race with statements like these: "But race is *just* a social construction!" or "Race is socially constructed—it doesn't exist!" However, this equation of social construction with nonexistence endangers students' capacity to grasp and question how the processes of socially constructing race can also construct, reproduce, and reinforce real, material inequalities.

Students present their well-intentioned logic in the following way: If race is a social construction and not a natural category, then it doesn't really exist. And if it doesn't really exist, then any indicators of race—such as skin color—must be illusory. By this argument, color blindness would seem to be a way to avoid being misled by an illusion. But rather than debunking myths about racial boundaries and classifications, this social-construction-equals-nonexistence thinking serves, as Angela Davis observes in the epigraph above, to "ostracize" race from social and political discourse; the racialized character of social relationships becomes "increasingly difficult to identify" (Davis, 1997: 264).

The rhetoric of color blindness has grown to thrive in the social, political, and cultural environment of the post–Civil Rights era (Bonilla-Silva, 2001, 2003). In this context, where overt and violent forms of racism are legally and socially punished, subtle and symbolic practices serve to justify inequalities related to race. Consider the media and legal outcry following the tirade of explicitly racist language comedian Michael Richards, best known for his role as Kramer on the TV series *Seinfeld*, launched upon a patron of a comedy club in November 2006 (Farhi, 2006). And then consider the argument around the state of Virginia's 2010 declaration of the month of April as "Confederate History Month." When Republican governor Bob McDonnell initially announced this memorial to promote Civil War-related tourism and education in honor of the sesquicentennial anniversary of the state's secession, the official declaration contained no mention of slavery and its profound and inextricable relationship to these events. Structurally, race and racial injustices were removed from the official discourse. Once this omission was criticized, McDonnell issued formal and informal apologies and self-defenses: "The failure to include any reference to slavery was a mistake, and for that I apologize to any fellow Virginian who has been offended or disappointed"[1] his official statement read. But he explained to the *Washington Post* that mention of slavery and injustice had not entered into the original proclamation solely because he was focused on commemorating issues he thought were most "significant" to

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[1]http://voices.washingtonpost.com/virginiapolitics/2010/04/mcdonnell_issues_thorough_apol.html (Accessed 13 December 2010).

Virginia and Virginians.[2] Race and racial injustices apparently did not meet his criteria of significant. Within a day, McDonnell made an amendment to the proclamation describing slavery as "an evil and inhumane practice that deprived people of their God-given inalienable rights and all Virginians are thankful for its permanent eradication from our borders."[3] Later that same year, the state's attorney general decried U.S. Department of Justice oversight of decennial redistricting to ensure that new voting districts do not discriminate against racial minorities stating that Virginia has "outgrown" institutionalized injustices related to race.[4]

Erasing language that refers to race and to inequities related to race becomes a means of ignoring and reproducing social injustices. Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that civil rights legislation in fact sets the stage for this sort of discourse by propagating the idea that democratic ideals of equality and justice are achieved in

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[2] Kumar, Anita. "Virginia governor amends Confederate history proclamation to include slavery." *The Washington Post*. April 8, 2010. http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/07/AR2010040705100.html (Accessed 13 December 2010).

[3] http://www.governor.virginia.gov/OurCommonwealth/Proclamations/2010/ConfederateHistoryMonth.cfm (Accessed 13 December 2010).

[4] McNeill, Brian. "Governor may intend to form redistricting commission." *The Daily Progress*. http://www2.dailyprogress.com/news/2010/dec/07/governor-may-intend-form-redistricting-commission-ar-701376/ (Accessed 13 December 2010).

completion once "nobody's skin color is taken into account in governmental decision-making" (Crenshaw, 1997: 284). Being blind to color (where "color" represents race) is assumed by both liberals and conservatives to be the opposite of racist ideas and practices (Carr, 1997: x). In this way, a status quo that ignores and reproduces real, material inequities may be discursively represented as a political, social, and cultural state in which equity and justice are completely achieved—a state in which inequalities can be attributed to lack of merit on the part of the individual. This privatization of responsibility to the individual for the realization of democratic goals is a common frame through which dominant groups justify their position over the disadvantaged, says Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) and is one of four frames he identifies as comprising a rhetoric of color-blind racism. In his book *Racism Without Racists*, this first frame—where "frame" refers to a relatively durable set of meanings for interpreting information—is what Bonilla-Silva calls "abstract liberalism." Abstract liberalism uses generalized classical liberal ideals of free and competitive markets where success is won and those who succeed do so by their own sweat and merit. Successes and failures in existing systems are attributed to the quality of an individual's choices and efforts.

The next frame Bonilla-Silva identifies is that of "naturalization"—a frame through which dominant groups naturalize both their own dominance as well as the disadvantage of other groups by arguing that disadvantaged groups choose to practice and maintain their own

disadvantage. The reproduction of inequity is then represented as a natural product of "self-segregation" (Bonilla Silva, 2003: 37-39). A third frame of "cultural racism" operates through arguments that "blame the victim" and represent socially complex phenomena as "cultural" practices: For example, blacks prefer "ghetto life" (41, 103), Mexicans don't care about education (28). The final frame Bonilla-Silva articulates is that of minimization. Here, disadvantaged groups' efforts to discuss injustices related to race are thrown off as "hypersensitivity" or "playing the race card." Those who attempt to create dialogue around issues of race and racial inequities risk being labeled racists themselves. In sum, frames of color blind racism enable a perspective that allows color blind groups and individuals to ignore their own complicity in maintaining the privileges associated with the status quo. By proclaiming the completion of equality and justice, the rhetoric of color-blindness falsely represents democracy as already achieved rather than as a process requiring diligent and on-going engagement and dialogue for its survival (Collins, 2009a, 2009b). And while the rhetoric of color blindness declares that this equality and justice are already achieved once skin color is removed from institutional decision-making, the very social processes by which race has been constructed in U.S. society have also constructed meanings of race that are about much more than skin color.

I teach race and racism in introductory sociology courses at a large public university. Among objectives for our discussions of race is attention to how the

social construction of race is not solely about skin color but about relationships among intersecting systems of power (Collins, 2009a; 2009b). Color blindness is then approached as a discursive frame that obscures how systematic power relationships shape lived experiences and social relationships. By ignoring social experiences of race, the concept of color blindness creates a barrier to the questions and insights that emerge from inquiry on "the social relational substructure of our experience," to use Dorothy Smith's words (1990: 42). Difference, as DuBois has observed, emerges through interaction. There can be no innate recognition of how one is different beyond social interaction (DuBois, 1903). If race is a kind of difference, it is only expressed through social relationships. It is connected on the micro and macro levels to individuals' experiences of family, heritage, history, culture, community, resources, and identity. Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994) describe these experiences as taking place within the context of "racial projects"— ongoing processes by which social, political, and economic forces shape racial categories, which are in turn shaped by dynamic interpretations of racial meaning. These racial projects "large and small, to which everyone is subjected" ensure that "everybody learns some combination, some version, of the rules of racial classification, and of her own racial identity, often without obvious teaching or conscious inculcation" (1994: 60).

Patricia Hill Collins (2009b) suggests observing and questioning power relationships by analyzing four interrelated

domains: the structural, the disciplinary, the cultural, and the interpersonal domains of power. To understand and challenge unjust power relationships, Collins argues that it is necessary to understand how a particular practice of power is supported or undermined by institutional structures; by norms and disciplinary practices; by cultural representations, images, and ideas; and by interpersonal interactions. Color blindness is a practice of power that works to delegitimize claims that race and racism continue to shape social experiences, not to mention claims that race and racism remain sites of on-going oppression and injustice. Color blindness is present in the structural domain through institutional practices that are highly racialized but that do not acknowledge race explicitly: for instance the state of Virginia's 2010 declaration of April as Confederate History Month without acknowledging the Confederacy's relationship to slavery; the process of redrawing voting districts so that racial minorities are packed into the boundaries of a district in order to dilute their electoral power if their political preferences tend to oppose the incumbent party; or voter photo-identification requirements. The disciplinary domain refers to unwritten rules or norms of everyday life that tend to reinforce existing power relations. This might include the presence of metal detectors in urban, majority-minority schools, or retailers who monitor scrupulously the shopping activities of their nonwhite customers. The cultural domain involves the sharing of meaning and the construction of ideas about race through the ways in which race is represented in images, discourses, consumer products,

media, and art. For example, this might include "tokenism" in blockbuster films, where white protagonists are often supported by peripheral characters of color (Hall, 1997). Finally, the interpersonal domain describes relations and interactions between individuals in which people may reinforce and/or challenge racial hierarchies even without intending to do so.

In my experience, many undergraduate students, especially those from privileged groups—not simply privilege of race; privilege of class appears to me to be similarly influential—tend to foreground the interpersonal domain in their understanding of social relationships around race. *My friends are of all different racial backgrounds*, they'll argue. Or, *This campus is completely diverse—everyone is represented*. As such, I attempt to help students discuss and question complexities of race and power. Collins's domains of power framework gives us a language with which to get at this complexity so that we may try to question what is concealed and suppressed in the discourse of color blindness. Being able to articulate these questions then helps us to see how this ideology of color blindness may discourage engaged participation in democracy *as a process*—and to see how discouraging such participation forecloses on much of the potential that democracy holds for learning and for education.

The (Color) Blindness Activity

The following activity was designed for use in lower-level undergraduate sociology courses in which students are exploring a broad range of sociological

themes and concepts (e.g., stratification, crime, deviance, culture, identity, interaction, institutions, and so on) and in which the primary objective in exploring each of these themes and concepts is to arrive at some understanding of the depth of their influence on social relationships. It is a simple activity—a performance of a simplified concept of blindness—meant to initiate discussion more than it is meant to reflect the logic of color blindness itself. I suggest it because I have found it to be a way of engaging the collectivity of a group of fledgling sociology students with differential relationships to the logic of color blindness in a discussion of how this color blindness shapes social relationships, reproduces inequities, and frustrates the practice of democracy.

This activity primarily helps students consider how what we see is only one register through which social relations are interpreted and in turn constructed, and thus how color blindness is a profoundly inadequate logic for understanding relations of race in democracy. I use this activity in my department's introductory-level sociology course. The introductory course is a requirement for all sociology majors, but also fulfills a general education requirement for the bachelor's degree. Thus, while many students are sociology majors or go on to become sociology majors, most are not. Our university is the flagship campus of a state public university system with over 25,000 undergraduates. Twelve percent of undergraduate students at the university self-identified as black, 15 percent as Asian or Pacific Islander, 6 percent as Hispanic, and 58 percent as white. Undergraduate men

number somewhat higher than women at 53 percent and 47 percent, respectively. Seventy-six percent of students are state residents, 23 percent are out-of-state, and 2 percent international. My classes typically have 60 students. They are primarily freshman (though quite a few sophomores and often a few upperclassmen as well), and each semester that I have taught it, over half the students have identified as white.

Our discussions of race and racism really begin to take shape around the seventh week of the semester. The first three weeks of the course are devoted to examining what sociology is, ways of asking and exploring sociological questions, and ways of constructing sociological knowledge. These weeks correspond to chapters in most introductory textbooks that present sociological theory and methods. The next three weeks tend to focus on ways of questioning and examining identity, institutions, and inequality sociologically. Once we have established that a sociological perspective on inequality means looking at the ways in which privilege and disadvantage are embedded in institutional structures, we then begin discussing specific systems of power, primarily focusing on race, class, gender, and sexuality. We examine each of these systems of power in order to better understand the ways in which they co-produce each other (Collins 2009a).

Our discussion of race and racism begins with the activities designed by Khanna and Harris (2009), designed to demonstrate both that race is a social construct and that skin color is not an adequate descriptor of what race is, of how

racial categories are formed, or of how race affects social relationships. The objective of the (color) blindness activity is to see how interpersonal interactions are shaped by institutional structures and contexts, by discipline and social norms (and the ways in which individuals are rewarded and punished for the ways they relate to those norms), and by cultural understandings and representations. The interpersonal interaction, then, is not just an isolated event between two people—it is embedded in these larger social contexts, and *it is embedded in power relations*. The (color) blindness activity helps us begin a dialogue about how the rhetoric of color blindness relates to these power relations, and how this rhetoric reproduces injustices related to race.

This activity asks students to temporarily give up their ability to see their social surroundings. "Blindness" is used as a clumsy but convenient metaphor for color blindness. I do not say this to the students outright, though it is not difficult for many students to figure this out as the assigned reading for this class meeting is Patricia Hill Collins's *Another Kind of Public Education* and the date on the syllabus is followed by the theme: "Color Blindness and the Domains of Power Framework." Depending on the size of the group, this activity works in the classroom or outdoors, so long as the space selected is one that will be fairly familiar to all students. I ask for six to ten volunteers to come to the front of the room. I then ask these volunteers to close their eyes and introduce themselves. Those who have remained in their seats (the majority of the class) are assigned to observe the interactions of their "blind" classmates. I tell

them that they will need to shut their eyes and keep them shut until further notice.

Eyes closed, the students introduce themselves to each other (even though many will already be quite familiar with one another). The looks on their faces tend to indicate their self-consciousness—some exaggerate the eyes-closed command, squinting or holding their hands over their faces. Many laugh nervously, and some peek to see if others' nervous laughter is aimed at them. I try to assure them that they can relax. Once they have introduced themselves, the students are then asked to observe aloud something nonvisual about their surroundings (for example, temperature, noise level, how comfortable or uncomfortable the place where they are sitting is, etc.). The observers are asked to make notes on the volunteers' interactions. When the "blind" volunteers are told after their introductions and initial nonvisual observations that they now have five minutes to hang out with the other volunteers (so long as they keep their eyes closed), many seem unsure just what to do. More nervous laughter and inflected questions ensue: "Uh, what should we do?" "Should we, like, play a game?" or even "Why are we doing this?" Quickly, however, students fall into some sort of familiar conversation or activity. They may talk about how they feel with their eyes closed (for example, "awkward" and "dizzy" have come up on more than one occasion). They may comment on observations they might not have expressed aloud in a different situation (such as the feeling of the breeze or how dim or bright the lighting appeared). They may talk about past or

upcoming campus sporting events, about the weather, the workload of the course, or their weekend plans. Some students may even propose games. For example, in one class, students began a game of "two truths and a lie." Another young man suggested playing ring-around-the-rosy.

After five minutes of this, students may open their eyes, and we begin a whole-class discussion. I first ask those who'd kept their eyes open to share their thoughts on the initial nonvisual observations the "blind" volunteers made. I ask: What did people describe? How did these initial observations relate to the students' instruction to keep their eyes shut? Students note that many of the initial observations stemmed directly from the experience of having eyes closed (e.g., feeling "dizzy" or "awkward"). They also note that some of these observations may be related to the experience of not seeing, but are not exclusive to that experience (e.g., being aware of a breeze or a noise level).

I ask them next to consider the interpersonal relationships between students in this activity: What did the "blind" students discuss and do during the course of the activity? How were these discussions and interactions different from discussions and interactions they might have had if their eyes had been open? Some students point out that if eyes had been open, students might have checked their phones or read a text message during the course of the interaction. Others note that with eyes open, students might have initiated conversation about what someone was wearing. Yet even so, many remark on how ordinary they

perceived the conversations and interactions of the "blind" students to be. Sample comments:

> *[They] talked about sports. Guys always talk about sports.*

> *They talked about how much they hate* [one of the university's athletic rivals]. *[This university's]* students can always talk about how much they hate *[that school].*

> *Everyone has mid-terms now. That's all anyone can talk about.*

The *interpersonal domain* in which these interactions take place is clear enough: The students recognize that as classmates, peers, and participants in a strange classroom activity, they have multiple bases they can use to relate to one another. They recognize quickly that even without seeing their group members, they still make assessments of them based on things they say (one group member may mention a biology exam, while another brings up an English paper), ways of speaking (one student of mine mentioned group members poking fun at her "Long Island accent"), and general levels of comfort speaking or not speaking (shy students tended to speak less than their less shy group members, as they likely would have with eyes open). But what about power, I ask them: What kinds of

power relationships are shaping the interaction among individuals here? While some students suggest shyness and talkativeness as possible demonstrations of power, others point out that the "blind" students were also responding to an instruction from their teacher (me)—the person ultimately grading them. They readily acknowledge that the imbalance of power is significant in this interaction. In other words, it did not matter that the students could not see me: They were still aware that I was their teacher and that I was the one ultimately responsible for documenting their performance in the course.

With comments such as those above, it also becomes possible to show how context matters: Mid-terms, athletic rivals, and the experience of being students at our particular university are all points of reference in this conversation. Students recognize that as students of the university, they can often assume that they will have certain things in common, such as having to study for exams or supporting the university's athletic teams. They recognize that these assumptions grow from images and ideas that they encounter everyday: T-shirts, posters, photos, signs, conversations, and events declaring support for the university athletics surround them, as do discussions and images of exams and studying. Thus students recognize that they participate in reproducing these images and ideas with their own behaviors, and that at the same time their behaviors may be in some way influenced by these images and ideas that are all around them. I use this recognition to point out that even when

individuals are told that they can do "whatever they want to do," as I instructed the students to do during the activity, the context, and understandings associated with the context also shape the interaction. Context and understandings of it are not something separate from interpersonal interactions, but layered on top of those interactions. I tell students that this corresponds to what Collins (2009b) calls the *cultural domain*.

These understandings also shape what people think of as "normal" in a given context—that it's normal to talk about sports or exams, and that since it is "normal," there is less chance of awkwardness or social punishment for such discussions. It is also possible here to examine moments or comments during the course of the activity that some students may have looked on as being abnormal. For example, when one of my male-identified students suggested to two other male-identified students that they play ring-around-the-rosy, the latter two students visibly flinched and rejected the idea. In discussing this as a class, students are able to recognize that the students who flinched may have felt that the suggestion violated what they considered to be a normal presentation of masculinity and of sexuality. Similarly, a comment such as, "Guys always talk about sports," indicates what the speaker assumes *is* a normal presentation of masculinity and sexuality—a behavior for which there is less chance of social punishment. We discuss how norms that students have identified in the course of this activity are not confined to the particular setting, but rather permeate multiple social settings that students have experienced, and

also permeate the images and ideas and cultural representations associated with these settings. I use such examples to illustrate what Collins means by the *disciplinary domain* of power.

To move our discussion of norms into a discussion of Collins's final domain, the *structural domain*, I ask students to consider norms for participating in class and how they are rewarded and/or punished for their performance in relation to these norms. They recognize that it is a norm to fulfill course requirements, and that not fulfilling course requirements can result in a lower grade. This lower grade is then structured into their relationship with the university when the university calculates the student's grade point average (GPA). This institutional process of assigning students a GPA has significant effects on the opportunities to which students have access: A low GPA may mean that students are unable to qualify for admission to limited-enrollment majors or that they are ineligible for honors societies or that their applications to graduate or professional school may be weakened. In this way, students are able to articulate for themselves the ways in which interpersonal interactions, cultural representations, disciplinary practices, and structural processes are related to each other and affect interactions such as those during students' five minutes of "blindness."

I point out here that even though the "blind" students could not see each other during the activity, they still responded to the cultural context, the norms associated with it, and the ways in which certain norms were not fleeting, but were actually

patterned into institutional processes that have a lasting impact on their lived experiences and on their future possibilities. Closing their eyes made it difficult to talk about clothing, physical appearances, and visible surroundings, but it did not impact their understandings of the context or of the norms associated with it, or of the ways in which those understandings and norms shaped their relationships with each other as individuals or with the university as an institution.

I propose to students that the discourse of color blindness does something similar: It makes it difficult to look openly at race in public interactions, but it does not make race insignificant to these interactions. To facilitate this turning point in the discussion, I ask students what happens when people do discuss race openly in public interactions. Both white students and students of color suggest that such discussions tend to be "controversial" or that such discussions make people fear "offending" each other. Students readily recognize that the fear of "offending" someone else is a fear of making an interpersonal interaction uncomfortable. But when we push the discussion further, many are able to identify personal examples as well as examples from the media in which talking about race results in being represented by others as a racist (e.g., a white student shares that she tells a white friend that another friend of hers is black, and the white friend says, "You're such a racist!"). Hence, students acknowledge that they have learned through experience that there are social punishments associated with talking about race in public, and that these

social punishments may entail being represented as a racist, a representation that students note can affect their relationships with other individuals as well as their standing in relation to institutions such as their schools and workplaces.

It is immensely important that students understand that race is socially constructed. But for this knowledge of the social construction of race to help students understand, discuss, and challenge privilege and oppression, it is necessary that students practice analyzing systematically the multiple and complex ways in which relationships of power shape everyday interactions; meanings people make of them; ways in which people are rewarded and/or punished for their interactions, understandings, and the ways in which they enact those understandings; and the ways in which those rewards and punishments are embedded in institutional structures, giving patterns to how social rewards and punishments are allocated. To understand and begin to challenge systematic privilege and oppression, students must also be able to identify and articulate how social experiences are shaped by (and understood in relation to) complex and layered systems of power.

To continue developing this capacity, I ask students to reflect in an open-ended writing assignment (about two typed pages) on how they have seen or experienced the discourse of color blindness. I include excerpts from five students below (with their year in school and the racial and gender identities they use to describe themselves):

The idea that when you interact with someone you should see them as exactly the same as yourself has never made sense to me. ... I feel race is something which is directly linked to one's identity, background, beliefs, traditions, and one's culture. A subject that is often associated with being color blind is because you do not see one's race, how can you be racist. Equality is something that many would say we have achieved in our society, saying how can we not have equality if the two candidates for president in the last election were a woman and an African American man? (B., sophomore male, white/Irish and German)

[In a recent conversation with my boyfriend, who is white] he started to get frustrated and said, "I'm sick of talking about race all the time, why do we need to talk about it, it doesn't matter." Although this is true for him, I told him that the reason it is important to talk about is because not everyone thinks like he does. But he just doesn't understand because he hasn't had the same experiences as me. ... [I]n any location where there is a mixed race population ... people feel the need to make it known that they are not racist or discriminatory. For example, me being in an interracial relationship, I have experienced my boyfriend's grandmother saying things like, "I don't care that she's black" when no one asks if she did. (J., freshman female, black)

[Using the example of Michael Richard's November 2006 outburst][5] *So this is ... really obvious racism. And people who are in the public eye don't want to be seen as obviously racist or they get a lot of attention for being obviously racist. But racism can also be subtle, and I think that's the point talking about color-blind racism.* (H., junior male, white/Russian, Jewish)

I think that color-blind racism will always be a problem if people are not educated about the concept. It is my view that many people in the United States are not even aware of this term [color-blind racism]. The first time that I heard of this was from this class. I believe that if people had a complete understanding of color-blind racism and the problems connected to it, they may start to think about perspectives that they have not thought about before. ... (A., sophomore male, Chinese American)

I have students bring these reflection papers with them to the following class meeting. In this class period, they work with a small group to identify potential structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal relationships of power shaping the experiences or observations on which they and their group members reflected. After they have had time to share and discuss their reflections with their small group, I ask each group to replicate Collins's fourfold table with one box for each domain of power (2009b: 54), filling into each box respectively the examples their group identified as structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal relationships of power. So if the excerpts above comprised a group, their table might look something like this[6]:

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[5] In November 2006, the comedian Michael Richards, best known for his role as Kramer on the TV series *Seinfeld*, launched a tirade of explicitly racist language at a patron of a comedy club who was allegedly heckling Richards during a stand-up performance (Farhi, 2006).

[6] Note: The two tables shown on page 14 are examples that I have constructed using excerpts from students who have allowed me to quote their work.

Structural Domain	Disciplinary Domain
• Schools/workplaces only recognizing "overt" racism as problematic	• Feeling silenced by others' desire not to have to talk about race • Social punishments/attention for being "obviously racist"
Cultural Domain	**Interpersonal Domain**
• Representations suggesting that because a black man and a white woman are running for president, race (and gender) don't matter anymore • Media paying lots of attention to overt racism but not too subtle, embedded racism	• Friends/classmates/significant others expressing frustration at being asked to talk about race • People stating that they are "not racist"

With the time remaining in the class, each group constructs a second fourfold table, identical to the first, except that this time, rather than filling in the boxes with their examples of structural, disciplinary, cultural, and interpersonal practices of power, they fill in the blanks with ideas about how to challenge those practices of power. (Again, they may use the assigned text [Collins 2009b: 89] as a model.)

Structural Domain	Disciplinary Domain
• Talking about race and racism in school	• Talking about race and racism with classmates, friends
Cultural Domain	**Interpersonal Domain**
• Media paying more attention to subtle, embedded racism	• Pointing out how "I'm not a racist, but …" silences conversations about racism and racialized injustices

If time permits, groups can share their work with the class. Alternatively, they can post their tables in the course's online forum, where classmates can read each other's work and add comments to it. When students have a shared language for discussing how racism is embedded in power relationships, they can use it to question their own observations and experiences and to engage in dialogue with each other. They are also well prepared to apply this language to the practices of power that construct gender and sexuality when we begin our discussions of heteronormativity later in the semester. The activity suggested here supports students in developing this shared language for analyzing power and oppression, and as such, it lays groundwork for questions that can open up dialogue. I both hope and believe that such dialogue can help students develop their capacities not only to see ongoing oppressions and injustices, but to challenge them.

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