Revealing racism is ugly and uncomfortable

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REVEALING RACISM IS UGLY AND UNCOMFORTABLE
A White teacher’s autoethnography

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Introduction
28 January 20XX: We are back working on résumés today in language arts, and I completely avoided my period 2 Latinx boys, A and L. I prompted H to begin working, but only to type his name on the top of his paper. I never made it back to check on him or the other boys. They like to sit together, and I completely missed their side of the classroom. I also did not look at J’s résumé. He always seems so capable that I tend to pass over him unless he directly asks me a question. That also reminds me of the sheer lack of interaction with S in period 3. He is so quiet – he never says or does anything to catch my attention – that I tend to completely overlook him. We have had virtually no contact for the entire first half of the school year. The only time I really acknowledge him is when I am taking roll. I think I am taking his lead on the quiet and reserved thing, but this is odd. Why do I skip over him? He has poor attendance, so he often is unable to do what we are doing in class because he is missing some piece or part.

When writing the journal entry above, I wanted to understand the ways in which I engage in producing racism in schools. I am a White female teacher – the most common United States teacher demographic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012) – who is committed to social justice, but I suspect I unknowingly participate in creating a racist learning environment for my students of colour. I teach senior-level language arts and am now also a teacher librarian at a medium-size high school in the western United States. It appears White teachers can be exposed to education and training around race and racism, yet the exposure fails to eliminate acts of racism within their classrooms. Furthermore, it is possible White teachers’ classroom racism involves the less obvious behaviours that create racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are “brief, everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership” (Sue, 2010, p. xvi). Therefore, it is possible teachers’ microaggressions are effectively undercutting the palpable markers of overt racism while still maintaining the status quo.

An alarming notion is that these racist behaviours exist implicitly. They are practiced and reinforced blindly and unconsciously, thereby applied with a dysconscious (King, 1991) mindset. Microaggression perpetrators are often unaware of their doings (Sue et al., 2007),
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so I wanted to recognise and acknowledge how I commit racial microaggressions toward my students of colour. In light of this, I asked the following: when and how do I permit my racial microaggressions to emerge and transgress in my classroom and in what ways can a White teacher use autoethnography to detect and examine racial microaggressions toward students of colour? I approached these questions by becoming an autoethnographer in my own classroom.

Autoethnography is a powerful qualitative research method for acknowledging self and personal experience and bringing it forth to the academic conversation (Adams, Jones, & Ellis, 2015). Because of the teacher–student power structure in school, expecting students to voice their objections to racial microaggressions is not reasonable. The power structure does not encourage students to point out microaggressions and do the interrupting. Therefore, teachers must initiate a disruption of their own practice; autoethnography data collection techniques allow such a disruption by requiring reflection and reflexivity to pinpoint the moment or moments of decision and examining the situations surrounding those moments leading to microaggressions. Particularly since one of the core principles of autoethnography is to provide a basis for critique, describing and analysing the personal brings understanding to the cultural (Adams et al., 2015). In this case, the cultural experiences are teacher-perpetuated racial microaggressions found in the classroom. The in-classroom recording techniques (including periodic video, daily self-observation and daily field notes) helped to capture in-the-moment experiences surrounding microaggressions.

Limitations

This study is from a White (specifically, Iranian American, first-generation) female teacher’s viewpoint, so the receivers of the microaggressions are not directly addressed in the research study, even though the larger problem is related to their experiences with the adults in school. Another limitation could include re-fencing in which the autoethnographer misperceives an event and reorders and recategorises it internally so it fits a racial stereotype (Moule, 2012). A further limitation of the study includes using the term students of colour because it lacks an exactness. If the goal is to begin seeing students distinctly, then the term is too broad. Yet, it does describe people who are racialised and compared against the dominance of White supremacy (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012).

Significance of the study

Contemporary racism exists in the form of microaggressions. Teachers might believe they are being overtly racially sensitive, but still be racially biased to steadily and surreptitiously degrade minoritised students (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Saguy, 2015). White teachers who can recognise their participation in institutionalised racism by understanding how their Whiteness promotes racial microaggressions can become allies to interrupt racism in schools. Practicing individual awareness in the participation in racist behaviours such as microaggressions could be a step forward to eliminating them. At the least, teachers could examine ways in which they are promoting their Whiteness through their acts of microaggressions. Autoethnography can track and illuminate the instances of contemporary racism in a way that is personal and poignant to the researcher. Most importantly, autoethnography has the potential to become personally transformative (Sandlin, Wright, & Clark, 2011) to change one’s own practice. Likewise, in doing this work, other educators may choose to take up autoethnography as a tool to reflect upon and address their own microaggressions.
Method

It is possible to use teacher reflection and reflexivity, observation, and self-analysis to create an autoethnography that describes the circumstances surrounding the microaggression and the form in which it can be classified (microassault, microinsult, microinvalidation), the medium (verbal, behavioural, environmental), and classification by theme (e.g., alien in one’s own land, ascription of intelligence, second-class citizenry, pathologising cultural values/communication styles, assumption of criminal status and assumption of abnormality) (Sue, 2010). Reflection is a familiar tool in the education field, particularly in teacher education, but critical reflection is performed with the added intention of processing choice as an examination and assessment (Mezirow, 1998). Autoethnographers also use reflexivity to examine the choices in relation to one’s position of power, almost as if one was looking backward and connecting the clues deductively to understand why a certain phenomenon is occurring. Reflection and reflexivity are part of the autoethnography method inasmuch as they help describe the moment and the motive.

For the data collection process, I essentially created a means for myself to narrate my own day and thoughts in terms of examining my microaggressions. Narrowing the written accounts to incidents, rather than entire class periods, was more manageable to relay and more tangible to describe. Of course, I narrowed even further to study one class period per day containing one lesson and it remained demanding yet practical. As the school year progressed, I became better at both noticing and remembering what to record.

I used a journalistic approach to my reflexive and reflective data, and it worked well because it was logical and specific. I found it helpful to list out the experiences in the typical who, what, when, where, why and how format before jumping to the descriptive and narrative explanation. This, in my estimation, is a key step to telling the story of fact firstly before arriving at the story of feeling. Both are important in an autoethnography, but one should not precede the other. The reflective and reflexive processes made adequate space for both feeling and fact.

Coding, classifying and analysing the data was good in that it commanded direction, focus, and concreteness to the microaggressive experiences, but it was dually impactful for my teaching. To clarify, the data could have been reclassified and it would probably, in some ways, still answer my research questions. The coding, classifying and analysing gave me a way to organise and think about the data, but keeping the daily observations and field journals were nearly as telling. The individual microaggressions as expressed in the reflective observations and reflexive field journals, along with the video transcriptions, gave me a rich insight into my practice and remained the essence of the experience. Coding, classifying and analysing the data was unintentionally reflexive, too. All in all, writing down the data, reading the data and analysing the data signified necessary autoethnography habits (writing and reflexive analysis) essential to cultivating an antiracist identity in that one must identify what she does on a daily basis.

Reviewing the video, reflective observations and reflexive journal entries proved to be complementary and cross-informative. The 62 recorded microaggressive acts were illuminated by the sorting and classifying process because it required a re-examination of the experience with yet another perspective: time. Analysing the periodic video at the end was also helpful because it became another reference point for reality. The video helped me determine if I was writing down experiences accurately, but for this depth of introspection, video alone would not be as effective. The two media (written word and video) were most effective when used conjointly with the other data-gathering methods. Also, transcribing my own video was helpful. It provided another pass at the microaggressive experiences. Recursive analysis and re-examining...
my observations and journals helped me develop the findings showing what actually happens in my classroom when it comes to me perpetrating racial microaggressions.

As a White high school language arts teacher, autoethnography helps reveal the more immediate and subversive strains of racism present in the classroom. A teacher’s autoethnographical data on self-committed and self-reported racial microaggressions towards students of colour determines when and how racial microaggressions occur in the classroom. Such a study also determines autoethnography’s critical self-reflexivity can promote an evolving antiracist teacher identity. Results show during a span of four months and 35 lessons there were 62 recorded and recognised microaggression incidences. This averages 1.8 incidences per day with the possibility of more microaggressive incidents that were accidentally unacknowledged and therefore not recorded. Data were classified into microaggression form and medium and tallied to determine the most common instances of each. The microaggression form and medium occurrences were categorised into Sue’s (2010) taxonomy of themes (alien in one’s own land, ascription of intelligence, second-class citizenry, pathologising cultural values/communication styles, assumption of criminal status and assumption of abnormality).

Results

Racial microaggressions are present in classroom interactions between a White teacher and students of colour. Autoethnography prompts a necessary disturbance so White teachers, once oblivious to the racial microaggressions they exhibit and how they perform them in classrooms, can learn to spot their racism in action. Autoethnographic research methods are key to exposing implicit racial bias into explicit moments of teacher decision-making, transforming dysconscious racism into conscious, concrete thoughts, and interpreting previously unseen racist acts into seen and recognisable perpetrations. White teachers can use autoethnography to detect and examine racial microaggressions toward students of colour; critical self-reflexivity can promote an evolving anti-racist teaching identity.

Data show I am most likely to treat students of colour as second-class citizens or treat them with an assumption of abnormality. When I treat my students as second-class citizens, I behave in ways that show I believe students of colour are somehow less worthy or important than my White students. When I treat students of colour with an assumption of abnormality, I act as if something about them is abnormal and that my White students are somehow normal.

Based on the themed incidences in the data, I further examined the situations surrounding the racial microaggression moments and created six loose scenarios in which those themes occurred. The scenarios were later developed into two robust findings – uninterrogated Whiteness in the classroom and hazardous non-learning times – with specific instances of racial microaggression emergence and transgression in my classroom.

It is possible to identify self-perpetrated racial microaggressions. It is possible for White teachers to self-monitor and self-assess their racial microaggressions towards students of colour. It is possible to use critical self-reflexivity to promote an evolving anti-racist teaching identity. With these three things possible, it is also therefore possible to teach teachers how to engage in antiracist pedagogy by means of self-reflective and reflexive criticism. Doing so means directly addressing what King (1991) describes as the “uncritical habit of mind … that justifies inequity” (p. 135) of dysconscious racism. To acknowledge one’s own racism is to begin to address one’s own racism. To address one’s own racism is to diminish one’s own racism. The input of racist messages from society-at-large demands a means of neutralising such input. Self-identifying racist messages to students of colour is at the forefront of this work. Uninterrogated
Whiteness dominates all aspects of the classroom, extending from teaching to White students’ behaviours; transitional time, non-academic teacher talk and other unstructured time remain especially hazardous for students of colour in terms of receiving teacher-perpetuated racial microaggressions.

**When racial microaggressions emerge and transgress**

The moments of opportunity to commit racial microaggressions seem to appear at particular instances during the class period. They are less likely to appear during direct instruction and more likely to appear during student work time or student-led activities where the teacher has less control of moment-to-moment involvement. Since aversive racists are afraid to show their racism and, instead, avoid situations where racism might occur, the avoidance of students of colour (aversive racism) appears in the unseen, unscheduled moments, much like the earlier journal entry describes. When structure is weak, guidelines are vague and judgment is undetectable, discrimination can occur (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005). The unstructured moments are when my racism as a White teacher emerges, as described by finding two: transitional time, non-academic teacher talk and other unstructured time remain especially hazardous for students of colour in terms teacher-perpetuated racial microaggressions.

**Uninterrogated Whiteness**

Throughout the entire month of September, I had been mispronouncing Phoenix’s (pseudonym) name both to the student personally and aloud to the class publicly, so I looked back at my original roster on the first day of school when I initially took roll. I wondered if I had ever made a note about the pronunciation of Phoenix’s name. I wanted to see if I had paid any attention at all. As it turns out, I did handwrite how to phonetically say Phoenix’s name. What I failed to do was follow-through and learn it, which shows more blindness than awareness on my part; it shows more uninterrogated Whiteness as a standard for my classroom operation. I did not feel the urgency to look back and check earlier.

I somehow neglected learning Phoenix’s name, even though I obviously asked the student about it on the first day of school, and it revealed another problem. I asked students to remind me and correct me if I mispronounced their names and I made that announcement daily the first week, saying, “Keep reminding me if I mispronounce your name. Please keep correcting me and I’ll eventually learn it. I won’t be annoyed, I’ll be thankful.” My norm for interaction appears friendly and conscientious, but it functions almost like a sideways step into permitting me to keep committing racial microaggressions by expecting students to correct me. I always thought asking them to correct me somehow released me or excused me from making mistakes because I acknowledged I might have trouble. But really, it shows how little I care to make a real change because I can keep pronouncing names incorrectly. I likely have a fear of confronting my White privilege because it means addressing my responsibility for racism in my classroom. To acknowledge I am benefitting from the privilege of choosing whether or to not to change how I address students of colour’s names in the classroom proves there is White supremacy occurring there (Sue, 2011). The uninterrogated Whiteness I have sustained in the classroom means no one stops me, especially myself, so any error communicates an unfamiliarity and difference: it is another way to other Phoenix.

Ultimately, it was my responsibility to pronounce names correctly. My constant mispronunciation was a verbal insult and an assumption of abnormality about the student. Phoenix
did not correct me, I did not learn Phoenix’s name accurately, yet I placed the blame on the student for not reminding me. Not only that, but I also changed the spelling and pronunciation as if there was something wrong with it.

Because I had now misspelled and mispronounced Phoenix’s (Latinx) name, I hesitated to even call on Phoenix for fear of making another mistake. For example, in the heart of class we were listening to *Macbeth* aloud and answering comprehension questions as we progressed through the play. I was at my desk running the CD through my computer and speakers which stands opposite to the side of the room in which Phoenix sits. When Phoenix raised a hand to answer a question, I nodded at Phoenix instead of saying the student’s name. Perhaps it would not have been so odd, except that I address everyone else by name when they answer a question or make a comment with a raised hand. This was completely about my unwillingness to make another error, but my reluctance was causing a different type of microaggression. I did not want to look bad, but I did not care enough to practice Phoenix’s name correctly. I engaged in a behavioural microinsult demonstrating my assumption of abnormality towards the student’s name and my discomfort with a language other than English.

Because of my racially implicit bias, I unconsciously believe English names should be used. Because of my aversive racism, I am too scared to admit I did not pay close enough attention to use Phoenix’s correct name and I allowed myself to act differently (Sue, 2011). I have different expectations for myself and others, so nodding at a student somehow seemed acceptable rather than saying the student’s name like I normally would. Practicing Phoenix’s name was not a priority, even though I could have easily repeated it one afternoon on my drive home and perfected it. Instead, I only appeared to care in the moment when an error affected me and how I looked.

**Hazardous non-learning time**

Non-learning time is hazardous for students of colour in terms of receiving racial microaggressions. The time before class begins, after class ends and the transition times between activities appears to contain opportunities for racist remarks and interactions to occur. Examples in the data include times when a student of colour asked me for the date and I did not look up to answer or when a student of colour inquired about missing assignments and I responded less encouragingly than I might to a White student. These are moments when I have pretended there is some other issue at play (e.g., a direct answer, but not a friendly one; missing assignments are a student’s responsibility). Instead, such neglect confirms “discrimination will occur when an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race” (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2005, p. 620). Hazardous non-learning time also includes moments of decision-making when students are not involved, such as determining how much effort to exert when tracking absentee students who miss assignments.

**Teacher-warmth**

Often during the hazardous time periods, but not limited to them, are moments where I, as the teacher, am more accepting of off-task, disruptive, or non-academic behaviour from White students than from students of colour. Even students who interject ideas by interrupting one another receive a more positive response from me if they are White. I more closely identify
with White students and was more lenient with them because of our in-group status (Dovidio et al., 2015). Though I would rationally argue I do not want to treat my White students differently, I seem to do it whether I want to or not (Bonilla-Silva, 1996).

**How racial microaggressions emerge and transgress**

The first finding helped me determine how my racial microaggressions emerge and transgress: uninterrogated Whiteness dominates all aspects of my classroom, extending from my teaching to my White students’ behaviours. I found specific situations arose around my spelling and pronouncing names, my responding to student questions and how I limited or expanded opportunities for students. The most common microaggression was a behavioural microinsult pegging the student as a second-class citizen or viewing the student with an assumption of abnormality. The abnormality results when the researcher, a person of the dominant White culture acts as if her “norms, values, and approaches are the only ones – the right ones – …” (Katz, 2003, p. 121) and anything else appears strange or different. They can be loosely grouped into situations that highlight the moments of thoughts, decisions and actions that arise to encourage racial microaggressions.

My own behaviours affect how students act towards one another, as well. I noticed if I allow White students to interrupt a presentation from a student of colour, I am less likely to correct their behaviour. If I allow White students to clap at the end of a presentation, but the student presenting was not actually finished yet, I have granted the White students of the class permission to exert their power over students of colour. If I appear annoyed by a question from a student of colour and somehow show exasperation, it seems as if I give permission to White students to show exasperation towards that student as well. Such exasperation gives grace to both implicit and explicit beliefs and systems of superiority that White students inherit (Gross, 2011). Therefore, my microaggressive behaviours become part of the classroom fabric and my behaviour perpetuates the continuation and acceptance of racial microaggressions.

Dangerously, my personal behaviour sets the tone as the norm for interaction. If it appears I have allowed racist or discriminatory behaviour on the part of myself or other students, it develops into an acceptable way to act day-to-day or moment-to-moment. I consider such behaviour allowances between myself and White students relating to Dovidio et al.’s (1997) theory of in-group benefits. White students benefit or feel satisfied by following my patterns and I, in turn, (unconsciously) approve of their behaviours as members of the same group.

Students appear to repeat and enhance the microaggressions I commit by repeating the patterns. For example, if I mispronounce a Latinx’s name and use what I consider to be an English substitution, then it seems to become acceptable for White students to also use an English substitution. Mispronouncing a Latinx student’s name, for example, upholds a pervasive US attitude that non-White names are unwelcome (Kohli & Solórzano, 2012).

Another example is when I talked to White students and guessed a nickname; by itself it is not racially microaggressive, except that I do not share the same level of familiarity with students of colour. The classroom norm becomes one of friendliness and familiarity (read: warmth) towards White students that is not shared with students of colour.

Shuffling a Black student’s paper to the back of the stack and the running out of time to talk to the student about her essay is an example of that student missing opportunity for feedback. Over the years, something like this has probably happened often enough to
directly impact the student’s learning. I thought my reasoning for saving it until the end was to have more time rather than less time to discuss the errors, but if more time was necessary, I should have talked about it first, not last. This example demonstrates the student having absolutely no control of how poorly a teacher might treat them. Shuffling a paper is relatively untraceable, yet something like it day-in and day-out likely affects every facet of learning. This is a prime example of aversive racism. Rather than admitting my discomfort with helping a Black student and acknowledging that discomfort directly, I found ways to avoid dealing with the student completely.

I communicate different expectations for students based off race, and it is not always done subversively. For example, when I encouraged students to apply to a variety of public and private colleges because certain colleges might offer more aid to students of colour, I was asserting that the student of colour applicants were poorer than the White students. Also, not offering to display an Asian student’s essay up on the wall with the rest of the essays was a way to punish the student because it was going to be turned in late. These are examples of the disguised hegemony used to place White students at the advantage point (Picower, 2009). Acting as if the value of accomplished, individual hard work (Jones et al., 2013b) was somehow threatened because the student wasted time in class quietly gave me an excuse to put that student in a disadvantaged role of not allowing her essay to be displayed.

Another time, I interrupted a Latinx student during a presentation to ask if his paper was finished. I did not ask everyone else if their papers were finished before they gave their presentations, but it was because I was assuming the Latinx student’s paper was not finished. I was demonstrating my different expectations based off race by dysconsciously doubting and questioning my Latinx student’s ability to finish on time.

**Autoethnography to detect racial microaggressions**

Research question two asks what ways a White teacher can use autoethnography to detect and examine her racial microaggressions towards her students of colour. Sue et al.’s (2007) theory of microaggressions is durable enough to contain the daily microaggressions of the classroom. The biggest challenges include detecting microaggressions as the perpetrator and making time to record the transgressions as they occur in the moment. Learning to also create moments for reflection is possible, but it is a skill.

The realisation that my practice is changing does two things. First, it reminds me that for the 62 microaggressive acts I noticed, there might be another 62 that went unnoticed. That is unsettling but expected; it is the ugly and uncomfortable element of revealing my racism for public and professional scrutiny. Critical self-reflexivity is the wholly personal side of the professional being. Complementing that is the second observation: the practice of trying to recognise microaggressions strengthens one’s ability to do so even more. It is not that I am altogether stopping racial microaggressions in my classroom, but the practice is helping me become better at recognising them more quickly and head them off. Practice is productive for cultivating an antiracist teaching identity.

Matias (2016) declares White people as having a responsibility to enact racial change and such change stems from acknowledging race in the first place. She likened maintaining Whiteness as abuse, and I agree. I also agree that centring the White experience of a White subject might provide a worthless and self-indulgent catharsis that does not aid racial security (Leonard, 2013). So, then, how do White teachers really change? Engaging with the internal work of applying social justice both personally and professionally (Abrams & Todd, 2011)
inspires teachers to move forward with the work, as if it builds momentum. So, examining the self encourages more ongoing and relentless inspection.

In terms of noticing race, White teachers must be actively combating racial microaggressions regardless of how ugly and uncomfortable it may feel, since unaddressed teacher racism creates hostility (Leonardo, 2002) in a classroom, anyway. So, one must confront it, or the alternative becomes confirming racism in the classroom. Sue (2011) identifies ways in which White people fear examining themselves and their race. Those fears include appearing racist, realising one’s racism, confronting white privilege and taking responsibility to end racism.

One of the pitfalls of mitigating specific and personal changes is being wary of what I think is useful change for “us” in the classroom. I must watch that I am not deciding what is right for the collective us when there is no such thing; that would be assuming I know best for each race and centring my Whiteness in the middle of it all. I must consider that I have a White identity that may ultimately make it hard for me to see (Apple, 2003; Matias, 2016) what “we” need unless I continue to interrogate my White identity through reflective and reflexive practices (Freire, 1970). I do not want to become what Hayes and Juarez (2009) deem a White liberal who believes she deserves a “good White people’s medal” (p. 740), much like an aversive racist might function. Forging an antiracist teaching identity is not about persona, but, rather, it is a pursuit taking the form of a project rather than an image (Leonardo, 2013).

White teachers like me often are unwittingly committing racial microaggressions in the classroom (Hytten & Warren, 2003; Sue et al., 2007) and part of combating institutionalised racism is interrupting those patterns of behaviour. To interrupt the pattern, teachers must first recognise those patterns of behaviour in themselves and acknowledge their roles in social and historical issues of power. It is not easy, per se, but it is in every way accessible. It is complex work with simple ingredients; to examine one’s own microaggressions in this aspect, one needs no special equipment, no special computer program, no special permission, no special recommendation. One unintended benefit of the research process is that I watched each class period for racial microaggressions, even though I was only writing about one. Also, I was reflecting on all aspects of the lesson, assessment, student interaction and experience and my own shortcomings as a professional alongside the microaggression focus. It was excellent professional development in terms of examining all elements of my practice as a teacher. Truly, I gave myself a wealth of data on many aspects of my teaching in addition to the racial microaggressions.

**Conclusion**

A White teacher who can make the implicit become explicit, the obscure become obvious, the covert become overt is not solving racism, per se, but rather bringing racist practices and attitudes to light and solving some of the mystery of racism. The amelioration can begin when a teacher owns the vulnerability it takes to become a White ally.

My findings support that it is possible to self-identify some racial microaggressions through autoethnography, which is encouraging since 83% of the US teaching force is White (NCES, 2017). White teachers can continue the important work of teaching students, but they can identify and transform their practice as they go, improving year after year instead of habitualising racist attitudes and practices. Revealing one’s own racism is ugly and uncomfortable, but altogether necessary for practical transformation of those charged with the enormous task of teaching children in a complicated, racialised society.
References


