Bringing Students into the Matrix: A Framework for Teaching
Race and Overcoming Student Resistance

Part One: The Context

To understand the challenges of teaching about race, we need to begin with an exploration of the context of post-racial ideology which informs students’ expectations and experiences in our classrooms.

Sociologists continue to document the many ways in which racial oppression remains entrenched across institutions of U.S. social life, including education, housing, workplaces, the economy, the criminal justice system and healthcare (Feagin, 2001; Plaut, 2010). Despite our history of “undeserved impoverishment” for African Americans and “undeserved enrichment” for whites, many white people believe that discrimination against people of color is a thing of the past (Feagin, 2001). Forty percent of whites and ten percent of blacks polled believe that racial equality has been achieved (http://www.pollingreport.com/race.htm). As Patricia Hill Collins (2004) argues, “recognizing that racism even exists remains a challenge for most White Americans, and increasingly for African-Americans as well. They believe that the passage of civil rights legislation eliminated racially discriminatory practices and that any problems that Blacks may experience now are of their own doing.” (p. 5)

The election of Obama has been frequently evoked to support claims that we are a color-blind nation (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Cunignen & Bruce, 2010). A color-blind perspective assumes that discrimination is a thing of the past, and denies the reality of race and racial inequality today. This approach argues that we should treat people as simply human beings, rather than as racialized beings (Plaut, 2010). Color-blind ideology leads to the conclusion that we’ve done all we can, therefore any differences we see in the success of racial groups is due to inherent differences in the groups themselves. While many people naively embrace this view as non-racist, it reinforces and reproduces contemporary systemic racial inequality by denying its reality.

When making race and racial inequality “visible” for those who do not see it, they often exhibit resistance. One of the most significant features of white privilege is that those who experience it do not have to think about it. People of color are confronted with the reality of inequality and oppression on a daily basis, and are thus more likely to “see” it, but those who experience privilege are often unaware of it and the full extent to which it impacts their own lives (Kendall, 2006; Kimmel and Ferber, 2010). Consequently, those with white privilege, or any form of privilege, often become angry when confronted by the fact of their privilege, having been taught to see their own accomplishments as based on their own efforts and hard work alone (Ferber, 2003; Stewart, Latu & Denney, 2010).
Many faculty have examined this resistance as it manifests in the classroom, and offered a variety of pedagogical approaches and activities to undermine this resistance (Keating 2007, Fox 2009). One of the significant challenges we face is balancing our efforts to reach resistant students with the educational needs of students that already “get it.” How do we create a learning community that fosters respect and learning for all students? Too often, our preoccupation with “bringing white people into consciousness about white privilege and racism” ignores the experience of students of color in the “anti-racist classroom” (Blackwell, 2010, 473). Deanna Blackwell recounts her own experiences in supposedly anti-racist classrooms, where students of color are expected to serve as “experts,” “witnesses,” or “cultural experts,” revealing their own experiences of racism for the benefit of white students’ learning (2010). Blackwell critiques much of the literature addressing student resistance for ignoring the needs of students of color. It is important for teachers to hear this critique, but I would add one caveat-- the division between the students in our classrooms that get it, and those that don’t, does not fall along strictly racial lines. For example, as the research shows, a significant number of people of color also embrace a color-blind perspective.

Part Two: The Framework

The framework I have developed for teaching about race is based on Patricia Hill Collins’ conception of the Matrix of Domination. In my twelve years directing and co-facilitating The Knapsack Institute: Transforming Teaching and Learning, my co-facilitators and I have developed what we call the Matrix of Privilege and Oppression Framework. This framework is the foundation of our Matrix Reader: Examining the Dynamics of Oppression and Privilege, designed for introductory race and gender courses. This framework is informed by both theoretical and practical priorities. First, it reflects our ongoing efforts to bring contemporary research and theorizing on both privilege and intersectionality into our teaching. My own research trajectory began with my work examining the construction of white masculinity, and the defense of white male privilege, in contemporary white supremacist discourse. Yet most of the classroom textbooks I found for my race and ethnicity classes included little if any focus on whiteness or gender.

The second concern is pedagogical and strategic: minimizing student resistance to examining inequality and oppression, and meeting the needs of all students in our classrooms. Each year, this is the most frequent request we hear from faculty attending the KI: how do we deal with student resistance and hostility? How do we respond in those instances straight out of faculty nightmares: when a hostile student says something incredibly offensive; when the class erupts into a shouting match; or when students storm out of the classroom in the middle of a lecture.

Key features of the Matrix of privilege and oppression framework:

1. **Sees Classifications of Difference as Socially Constructed**: This framework is based on a sociological approach which examines race, gender, disability, etc. as socially constructed systems of classification and power. These socially constructed systems vary cross-culturally and historically, and take different forms in different contexts.

2. **Brings in Privilege**: This framework emphasizes that oppression and privilege are two sides of the same coin; you cannot have one without the other. While sociology as a discipline has long focused on issues of race and ethnicity, it is only recently that whiteness and white privilege has entered the literature. Those with white privilege have greater access to rewards and valued resources simply because of their whiteness. Our failure to interrogate white privilege has serious
consequences. The invisibility of whiteness serves to “reinforce the existing racial understandings and racial order of society” (Doane, 2003, p. 11.) Making whiteness visible allows us to examine the ways in which all white people gain benefits from their race, expanding the discussion of racism and racial inequality beyond the actions of individual “racists” to examine institutionalized, systemic racism and the racist culture which nourishes it (Feagin, 2001; Hartigan 2010). White privilege can be a highly contentious subject to teach, and can potentially increase white student resistance. However, by examining white privilege in the context of intersectionality (see below), this resistance is preempted. Instead, the focus on privilege is turned into a pedagogical strength by making clear that everyone’s life is shaped by their race, and thus about and relevant to, every student.

3. Intersectional: The matrix framework emphasizes that forms of privilege and oppression interact and intersect at multiple levels, and in everyone’s lives. No one has just a racial identity. Intersectionality leads to an examination of diversity within racial groups, emphasizing that no racial group is homogenous group. The experiences of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latin@s, Native Americans and Whites vary depending upon other social identities such as gender, class and sexual orientation. Employing an intersectional theoretical foundation is key to minimizing resistance.

4. Inclusive and Connectionist: Anna Louise Keating argues that faculty must embrace a “connectionist” approach in the classroom. A “connectionist approach is relational, starting with what ties people together, beyond their differences, and is non-divisive” (Keating, 2007). While the danger here lies in the potential avoidance of issues of power and inequality, we avoid this pitfall by focusing on privilege as the point of connection. When we begin with privilege, situated in an intersectional context, students are connected by this shared position. This framework emphasizes that everyone experiences privilege (whether race, gender, sexual orientation, class, age, ability, or nationality). Students see themselves as part of a larger struggle for social justice, where each of them must be accountable for the privilege they are the beneficiaries of.

5. Does not blame individuals: Another assumption of this approach is that privilege and oppression are not characteristics of people, but of society. According to Allan Johnson, “Oppression and dominance name social realities that we can participate in without being oppressive or dominating people” (13). Emphasizing this sociological insight also contributes to minimizing resistance, as well as feelings of guilt or shame that often accompany the recognition of privilege.

6. Sees oppression and privilege as harmful to everyone: We emphasize that narrow group identities can be harmful to everyone, even those in the privileged group. For example, boys experience many negative effects from our culture’s narrow definition of masculinity and others have examined the negative effects of white privilege on whites. While being careful not to allow this point to lead students to conclude that everyone is thus equally oppressed, noting these harms increases student buy-in.

7. Proactive: The matrix framework recognizes that we are all a part of the problem and the solution. Racism can no longer be assumed to be just a people of color problem. We all must
take ownership for these issues and responsibility for creating change. Emphasizing this point can be empowering for students, and can help minimize the hopelessness and despair many students feel once they understand the reality and extent of inequality. It is helpful to provide examples of role models from privileged groups fighting to end inequality, and to examine what it means to be an ally. This also serves as a mechanism for community building in the classroom.

**Theoretical Foundations**

This approach is built on the foundation of intersectionality. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins developed the concept to the matrix of domination to provide insight into the experiences of African-American women. Moving beyond approaches which conceptualized their experiences as dual oppression, or explained black lesbians as facing “triple jeopardy,” the concept of the matrix is not additive. Rather, it reveals the ways in which social identities intersect, are contingent and mutually constitutive. Theories of intersectionality have been most fully developed and advanced by women of color, seeking to understand the reality of their lives where race and gender could not be separated. Historically, women of color have repeatedly faced demands that they prioritize one or the other identity in their social movement activism, finding that their experiences end up represented in none. In the suffrage movement, women were divided by race when asked to focus only on gender; in the civil rights and chicano movements, women were often asked to abandon issues of gender and prioritize the struggle for racial equality. In these cases, the specific experiences, needs, and voices of women of color end up marginalized. Collins’ use of standpoint methodology shifted the focus specifically to black women, and started from their standpoint. Examining the lives of those who are multiply oppressed lead to the development of an intentionally intersectional approach arguing that categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, and others (depending upon the context) cannot be easily separated (Collins 2004; Crenshaw).

Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the term “intersectionality,” and her analyses demonstrate the need for an intersectional perspective in addressing major social problems. She examines issues such as domestic violence and affirmative action to argue that “Intersectionality is a concept that enables us to recognize the fact that perceived group membership can make people vulnerable to various forms of bias, yet because we are simultaneously members of many groups, our complex identities can shape the specific way we each experience that bias. For example, men and women can often experience racism differently, just as women of different races can experience sexism differently, and so on” (Crenshaw, 3).

Intersectional theorizing has blossomed to examine intersectionality on many levels, beyond just focusing on lived experience. For example, the work of Siobhan Somerville explores the nineteenth and twentieth century narratives of race and sexuality, demonstrating that “the concurrent bifurcations of categories of race and sexuality were not only historically coincident but in fact structurally interdependent and perhaps mutually productive” (286). Her research examines the ways in which racial ideologies influenced and made possible the arrival of medical definitions of homosexuality.

This approach has been very successful at limiting and preempting resistance for a number of reasons. Because the focus is on privilege from an intersectional perspective, “us vs. them” divisions among students are avoided. Instead, every student sees her/himself as experiencing some form of privilege, whether it is tied to gender, disability, nationality or some other social
identity. This allows us to focus on the dynamics of privilege and oppression without some students feeling like they are specifically being targeted as the villains.

This approach is also the best method I have found to respond to the negative experiences of students of color in many anti-racist classrooms, as suggested by Blackwell. The focus here is not about seeing and decentering whiteness, but coming to see all forms of privilege, and examining their intersections. Each student is asked to examine her/his own position, in terms of the interactions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability. In this context students are positioned in the classroom not as bad guys and victims, but as students who all experience some forms of privilege, which interact in shaping their lives. As we move beyond that point, it is crucial to examine the ways in which these experiences of privilege are nevertheless not the same, or equal, and we avoid attempts to rank them.

One of the common misperceptions of intersectionality is that it is a “let’s look at everyone” approach. Too often we slip back into an additive perspective. For example, when leading a recent teaching workshop, one participant objected and explained, “I don’t want to focus my efforts on women. I am interested in serving the Native American community. That is where my passion lies. I don’t want to shift my attention away from the Native American community to work on women’s issues.” Clearly she was imagining Native Americans and women as two separate and distinct groups, rather than recognizing that about half the Native American population is women, and their needs and experiences may differ from men’s.

Examining classifications of race, gender, and other classifications from the matrix framework, they are seen in their complexity and variability. “Contrary to the dominant framing of some of these issues, contemporary immigrants are not all Latino; prisoners are not all men; affirmative action beneficiaries are not all African American; and LGBTs are not all white and middle class. Recognizing that these constituencies are multiply-constituted means that interventions and programs designed to address group interests can no longer be framed in exclusionary terms. There are constituencies within constituencies that are not well-served by such categorical thinking” (Crenshaw).

Intersectionality does not mean that there is equal emphasis on every social identity. This approach can be implemented in any class. For example, when I teach my “Race and Ethnic Relations” courses, I focus specifically on race, but from an intersectional perspective. This means that students see race within a broader context, where gender, class, sexuality and other social identities shape each person’s experiences of their racial identity, and we examine the ways in which systems of racial inequality are intertwined with other systems of inequality.

I have seen in my own classes the ways in which this approach changes the dynamics and impacts student learning. I have been teaching for close to twenty years. I remember examples from my first few years teaching about race that raised pedagogical questions I was not well prepared to deal with. On numerous occasions I had students of color in class that argued against the reality of ongoing racism. The first time this occurred I was shocked: a young woman who self-identified as African-American and multi racial, vehemently argued against racism as a contemporary issue, and claimed she had never experienced racism in her life. She had been raised most of her life outside of the U.S. in a very wealthy family. I had mistakenly assumed that all students of color would recognize that racism still exists. The white students in the
classroom quickly co-opted these students’ statements to support their contention that we sociologists need to stop making such a big deal about race, because even people of color were arguing it did not exist. In some cases this also led to students of color being pitted against each other.

In other cases, I remember reading the journals of some of the students of color that revealed the emotional distress the class was causing them. They expressed frustration, dismay, and hopelessness at the extent of inequality that still existed, the lack of knowledge most students possessed, and the resistance they were witnessing in classmates. These students often remained silent in class, feeling that their voice would not be heard in that context. I met with these students individually to try to address their needs, yet at the same time, did not know how to adequately address all students’ needs within the classroom itself.

Over time, my experiences teaching these same courses have changed dramatically, as I have gradually implemented an intersectional, privilege-focused framework. Using this framework, students in the class are connected in terms of struggling to see the ways in which they are privileged. This is still a difficult issue for students to engage, and requires a lot of emotional labor, but they see themselves as united in that struggle. There are still arguments and moments of tension, but they do not take place along color lines. It is not a case of white students trying to understand their privilege, and students of color having to teach them, and make themselves vulnerable at the same time.

In addition, this framework provides an avenue for students of color to come to understand their experiences of race more deeply. A few recent experiences demonstrate this. In a recent race and ethnicity class, an African-American student who declared on the first day that she never experienced racism and did not see race as a problem anymore, within a few weeks began to see her own experiences as shaped by her family’s class privilege. Over the semester, she came to examine race sociologically, understanding systematic and institutional racism, and her own position in relation to those structures. As a class we were able to focus on structural racism and the ways in which it operates in interaction with other systems of inequality so that individuals experience racial inequality differently. In this same course, a number of working class, white, male students followed a similar trajectory, moving from a position of denying racial inequality and blind to their own white privilege, to a position where they were beginning to understand the ways in which their lives had been shaped by class inequality, while at the same time recognize that they were nevertheless beneficiaries of white privilege. By minimizing the defensiveness that so often occurs, they were more open to learning about systemic racism.

In another recent course, the feedback I received from a Latina student is representative of a number of students’ experiences. She explained that it was the first course she had taken on race where she did not leave feeling angry each week. She recounted stories similar to those shared by Blackwell, where she felt she was always compelled to focus on educating white students. Instead, she felt her knowledge and understanding of Latina identity, culture, experience, and inequality deepened and became more complex. Working from an intersectional, privilege based approach, it was the first time she began to examine her own heterosexual privilege, and the way in which it manifests itself in her anti-racist activism. She began to examine issues of sexual orientation within Latina community organizations, and questions of who was being included or excluded. Bringing sexual orientation into the picture did not detract from the focus on race, but instead afforded an opportunity to examine diversity within the Latina community, and to
understand more clearly the ways in which Latina experiences of racial oppression vary, as well as to develop more successful strategies for bringing local Latinas together across their differences to work for social change.

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