

2009

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Recommended Citation

Lewis, M. K., & Lee, A. K. (2009). Critical Consciousness in Introductory Psychology: A Historically Black University Context. *Pedagogy and the Human Sciences*, 1 (1), 50-60. Retrieved from <http://scholarworks.merrimack.edu/phs/vol1/iss1/2>

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Critical consciousness in introductory psychology: A historically black university context

Michele K. Lewis¹ and Anna K. Lee²

Abstract. The objective of this paper is to detail pedagogical strategies for teaching the general psychology course in the context of a historically black university (HBCU). We identify strategies oriented towards specific areas typically covered in an introductory psychology course. Particular interest is paid to critical consciousness theory, issues of social justice, and socio-cultural perspective in psychology. The pedagogy we use in the general psychology course is consistent with a sociopolitical critical consciousness model, and recommendations of the American Psychological Association's commission. The significance of respecting the educational, sociopolitical and cultural expectations of students within the historically black university context is discussed.

I.

In 1994, noted author and scholar bell hooks wrote *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. In this work, hooks expresses that educators should directly and consistently educate students to critically discuss sexism, homophobia, racism, classism, and cultural respect (hooks, 1994). The theme of her text is applicable to any academic discipline; however, it is particularly relevant to the teaching of psychology.

Critical Consciousness Development Model

Critical consciousness represents the capacity to both critically reflect upon and act upon one's sociopolitical environment. Paulo Freire (1973; 1993) developed the concepts of critical consciousness and liberation psychology; this influenced later advances in sociopolitical development theory, which focuses on the analysis of and motivation to change sociopolitical inequity. Researchers have studied critical consciousness development addressing three broad areas: racism, sexism, and social injustice (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006).

Findings suggest that young people's perception of support from their family, community, and peers in challenging racism, sexism, and social injustice has been found to have a significant impact on the reflection component of their critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2006).

Family, community, and peers have been defined as "key social actors" in the lives of urban adolescents (Diemer et al.). The university professor should also be added to this category of

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key “social actors” due to research findings suggesting that more formally structured intervention programs can lead young people to challenge injustices (Campbell & McPhail, 2002). The psychology classroom offers a type of structured programming where students may potentially engage in peer driven or instructor driven social interactions, dialogue, and assignments about racism, sexism, and social injustices.

Focusing on students’ critical consciousness development in the psychology classroom provides an opportunity for teaching critical thinking to undergraduates. Developing students’ critical consciousness also has positive implications for students’ career development (Diemer & Blustein, 2006; Diemer & Hsieh, 2008), which has historically been of interest in the education of African Americans (Neufeldt & McGee, 1990).

Critical consciousness development has been measured by focusing on *action* and *reflection* components (Diemer et al., 2006). The action component of critical consciousness involves the degree to which persons move from being objects of oppression, to being subjects that act upon their sociopolitical environment. The reflection component measures thoughts during the process of developing critical consciousness. Specifically, this aspect of critical consciousness represents the capacity for critical reflection and the capacity for questioning inequities. In the psychology classroom, growth in the reflection component can be assessed via noting students’ increased depth of thought and questions about bias in research hypotheses, methodology, and findings.

A commission of the American Psychological Association (APA) has produced a report that relates to critical consciousness development in college students (Trimble, Stevenson, & Worell, 2003). The report details the manner in which introductory psychology textbooks should be infused with diversity throughout, suggesting that introduction to psychology texts should incorporate substantive material on aging, disability, culture/race/ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation in each chapter (Trimble et. al, 2003). Suggestions for teaching gender and multicultural awareness have also been specifically outlined for academic psychologists of various subspecialties (Bronstein & Quina, 2003), with attention given to social justice issues. Thus, developing students’ critical consciousness through teaching about sociopolitical injustices and diversity is significant in contemporary teaching of psychology.

Teaching Psychology in a Historically Black University Context

In order to answer the question, “*What does it mean to teach and learn psychology?*” – it is imperative that educators acknowledge 1) the significance of teaching critical consciousness, 2) the cultural context in which the learning takes place, and 3) the variety of types of learners; this is especially important in the ever increasing world of globalization and its social challenges (Haydon, 2006). Although America’s historically black universities and colleges (HBCUs) are far from monolithic, historically the expectations of these institutions has been twofold, to teach the same standard curriculum as any other institution of higher learning, while also using pedagogy to provide an education to black students that speaks to the students’ cultural and sociopolitical experiences and perspectives (Brown, Donahoo, & Bertrand, 2001). Increasingly today, HBCUs are changing in terms of faculty, staff, and students (Foster, 2001); the demographics of HBCUs are quite diverse. Even with this diversity, however, an important mission of most HBCUs still continues to be the promotion of black student development in college (Fleming, 2001). Research has shown that black students at the HBCU actually expect this type of educational experience, and also do better academically in such academic environments compared to black students who attend predominantly white institutions (Allen, Epps, & Haniff, 1991); thus, the pedagogy for psychology at the HBCU should incorporate contextually relevant socio-cultural and critical consciousness perspectives into every course. In some courses it is easier than others; however it can be less taxing if the focus moves beyond merely focusing on ethnicity and race, but also incorporates other important variables

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mentioned in the APA report (Trimble et al., 2003) such as aging, disability, gender, and sexual orientation. In addition, we have many students with more applied interests in psychology, such as social and community psychology. Teaching introduction to psychology from a critical consciousness framework provides students with not just a basic knowledge of psychology, but also tools for greater reflection and taking action to address applied social problems. The development of students' critical consciousness is a goal reflected in all stages of the pedagogical process.

III.

The General Psychology Course

The general psychology course is often regarded by new and seasoned professors as one of the most challenging courses to teach in the psychology curriculum; typically this perception is a reflection of the vast number of chapters in the typical introduction to psychology textbook, and the seemingly fragmented nature of these chapters because they are of varying levels of interest to students (Peck, Ali, & Levine, 2006; Lefton, 1997). Pedagogically, however, we view this seemingly fragmented nature as a potential strength. The diversity of the course's content makes the course potentially relevant, useful, and interesting to students across a wide range of majors. Our theory is that the variety of course content may not only be potentially of interest to a variety of majors, but may also potentially capture the interest of the "deciding" freshman student (Rajecki, Williams, & Appleby, 2005).

We structure the general psychology course to include coverage of eight consistently taught chapters during each semester, with optional chapters taught according to each professor's interest or expertise. We also teach the socio-cultural variables recommended by the APA commission (Trimble et al., 2003), with particular respect for the culturally relevant mission, values, and history of historically black colleges and universities (Brown et al., 2001). This allows us to address broad and specific issues of social injustice, both past and present. This also allows us to strive for critical consciousness development in our students. In the general psychology course, we address topics such as stress and health, developmental issues, personality, sensation and perception, learning, and research ethics.

Stress and Health

One pedagogical method utilized each semester is early coverage of a chapter on Stress and Health in the general psychology course. The stress and health chapter is covered during the third week of classes, and a student stress paper is required. This pedagogical approach is used because there is evidence that first year college students (many of whom are students in the general psychology course) experience daily hassles that are stressful and may be moderated by social support and coping style (Bouteyre, Maurel, & Bernaud, 2007). Having them to write about their stressful life experiences is used as a means of having them cope with early semester stress; research findings suggest that writing about general life stress has benefits (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003).

Another goal of this assignment is to have students reflect on multiple identity factors as related to stress. This allows us to address the reflection component of critical consciousness theory, as students are expected to reflect on the various ways that multiple identities and membership in marginalized social groups may relate to stress and coping. We teach the research findings on stress as related to various ethnic groups, social status, gender identities, religion, and socioeconomic status (Haslam & Reicher, 2006; Roytburd & Friedlander, 2008; Riggle, Whitman, & Olson, 2008). Course lectures also incorporate the text material and research findings about stress in college students, including findings based on African American students (Baldwin, Chambliss, & Towler, 2003; Clark, 2003).

Students are expected to provide reflective examples in their papers of *avoidance-avoidance*, *approach-avoidance*, *approach-approach*, and *multiple approach-avoidance* conflicts that cause stress in their own lives, as well as for persons outside of their own self-identified group (s). Again, here, the goal is to have students become more reflective about socio-political issues of social injustice that may cause stress for various groups, with a goal of developing students' critical consciousness. Evidence that we are meeting our goal is exemplified by the change in depth of understanding from first lecture to paper submission, following two weeks of exposure to course content on stress.

During the initial phase of presenting this chapter, students are placed into small groups by their declared or intended majors. The small groups are instructed to write down examples of the four types of conflicts. Our findings with this exercise are that approach-approach and avoidance-avoidance conflicts are easily understood after hearing the initial lecture. However, *approach-avoidance* and *multiple approach-avoidance* are more difficult for students to grasp.

After having students listen to a lecture including the events of *Hurricane Katrina* and its relationship to stress for the residents of New Orleans, many students are eager to engage in dialogue about the various reasons why many persons may not have evacuated when forewarned to do so. This has been an effective example of a real life event that helps students to understand the multiple factors related to approach and avoidance that affected the residents' behaviors. This example has been effective as demonstrated by students' ability to critically think about multiple pros and cons of moving away from one's long standing home, in the face of imminent danger. Using this example has helped students not only grasp the difficult concept of multiple approach avoidance conflict, but it has also enabled them to think of situations in their own lives where they had many possible outcomes to consider (positive and negative), which caused stress. Following the *Hurricane Katrina* discussion, students are then put back into their respective small groups to produce their own example, one not previously presented in the text or in class discussion. Compared to the initial attempts with this group assignment, all groups are able to think of an example that accurately demonstrates understanding of the more difficult concepts. The discussion has also resulted in students demonstrating critical consciousness development with respect to the specific issue of socioeconomic status and social injustices of poverty. We are subsequently able to lecture specifically on the work done by health psychologists, giving students an opportunity to think about this as a possible career interest. At least a few students each year (approximately 3) are intrigued by the notion of working as a psychologist to affect change for poor adults and children in the aftermath of natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes, sunamis, or tornados. This is also significant because at the start of the semester when discussing subdisciplines of psychology, the majority of students are not aware of health psychology.

Another effective pedagogical tool that we use for addressing the significance of socioeconomic class and stress is our presentation of a documentary. On January 26, 2007, ABC New's 20/20 with Diane Sawyer aired *Waiting on the World to Change*, a special report on poverty in the city of Camden New Jersey (Paul, 2007). The documentary actually begins and ends with a call to action for viewers; this is in line with critical consciousness development's objective. Thus our goal is to have students think critically about chapter material, the documentary, and ways that see getting involved to assist with this social problem.

Students are told prior to viewing the documentary that it addresses poverty in a major U.S. city. They are also told to jot down (without name) as many stressors that they can think of related to being poor. At best, students' responses are initially very superficial, i.e., "not having money, period..... is stressful for anybody". Subsequent to viewing the documentary, students are given a handout to complete about the significance of specific issues such as transportation, mental health, employment, neighborhood crime, housing, and the judicial system as related to stress

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among poor families. Each of these issues is presented by example in the documentary that the class views. Students are also asked to think of solutions for the families in the video. Following seeing the documentary, students' responses to the issues are reflective, substantive, and adequately inclusive of suggestions for the creation of non-profits, schools, and community programs. We view this as evidence of increased development of critical consciousness for this course material. Finally, based on the examination performance (questions regarding types of conflicts are answered correctly by 90% of the class) and scores on the stress paper (above average for 80% of students), our methods used to teach stress and health are effective. *Identity Development and Personality*

The topic of development of ethnic identity in the general psychology course is taught to emphasize the critical reflection component of critical consciousness development. Students demonstrate interest in learning about the developmental significance of racial/ethnic identity across varying ethnic groups and across gender. Research has demonstrated that having students dialogue in the context of exploring broader issues of ethnic identity and intergroup relations can lead to greater student insight and richer personal understanding and empowerment (Schoem & Stevenson, 1990).

During discussion of the *identity vs. role confusion* stage of psychosocial development, often students who identify as biracial or multiracial speak up about their personal experiences in coming to define who they are. These discussions are held in the context of exposing students to research on the positive and negative implications of having multiple racial identities (Shih & Sanchez, 2005). Students of varying racial identities provide commentary that demonstrates critical reflection about this material:

I laughed when I found out that Tiger Woods identifies as Caublasian; he can make up words all he wants to, but people still see a black man when they look at him; I say, that if your Daddy is black then you are black! (Student 1)

I disagree with that; my mother is white and my father is black. I was raised by my mother and have grown up around mostly her family. So, I find it hard to identify as solely black. And since today there are lots of mixed families, we may soon see that multiracial people become the majority. (Student 2)

Well, isn't it true that most of us are mixed anyway? You cannot really tell someone's racial makeup based on how they look; I don't see anything wrong with Tiger's Caublasian identity. (Student 3)

The discussion of ethnic identity generates passionate commentary from students; this may be because the development of ethnic identity is a critical facet of adolescence, particularly for adolescents of color (French, Siedman, & Allen, 2006). Based on the students' questions and essay responses to the readings, they demonstrate increased reflection about this aspect of identity development. We also challenge them through critical thinking questions presented on the course's online discussion board. Students are given an opportunity over the course of the semester to log on and respond to a series of critical thinking questions that expand upon provocative class discussions, "psych in the news" readings, or research articles. Points are assigned based on the degree to which students demonstrate reflective responses as well as actions they feel psychologists could take to address social problems. These types of assignments are incorporated into the course components as a means of enhancing critical consciousness development.

During our presentation of the personality chapter, we also take the opportunity to engage students in a discussion of research that suggests a relationship between personality traits and one's sense of identity (Lounsbury, Levy, & Leong, 2007). A number of psychological scales have been developed to measure racial/ethnic identity (Cokley, 2007).

In light of this literature, one author poses the following questions to students, 'What does it mean to be Black?' and 'Do all Black people embrace their ethnicity in the same way?' After obtaining the students' responses to this question, the core components of the Multidimensional Index of Black Identity (MIBI) developed by Sellers and colleagues (Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, & Smith, 1997) is presented for the students' critical analysis. Students are instructed to critique the Index by writing about what they agree or disagree with concerning its usage, and why. This allows for exchange with one another in small groups, and enhances their reflective consciousness development about the diversity of black identity.

We have experienced relatively greater difficulties increasing students' respect for and understanding of the fluidity of gender identity across human development. This may be due to the challenge of advancing students' mindsets beyond the limiting dichotomous categorizations of male/masculinity and female/femininity (Mckenzie, 2006). One of our goals is to foster transcendence beyond heterosexism and strict gender boundaries. Another goal is to utilize this discussion as a means of developing students' critical consciousness regarding the social injustices of transgendered persons.

In order to facilitate students' ability to reevaluate their beliefs about gender and sexuality, we devote class time to in-depth discussions of the development of gender and sexual identity. During this discussion, there are some students who present very rigid ideas about the relationship between sexual genitalia and ascribed gender roles:

I don't know what the big deal is about "her" having a baby? "She" was born a woman anyway, and that's what women do.....have babies.

The previous quote is from a student in response to the news that a transgendered male and his wife are having a baby. The newsworthiness of the event was that it is the transgendered male, i.e., the husband, who is pregnant with the child. The student's difficulties stemmed from having a rigid conception of gender, and a lack of understanding of transgender identity. Often too, students espouse heterosexist views and possess stereotypical attitudes about same sex attraction suggesting lack of clarity on the distinctions between development of gender identity and development of sexual identity.

Research has shown that same sex attracted individuals are more likely than heterosexuals to have demonstrated early childhood indicators of gender nonconformity (Rieger, Linsenmeier, & Gygax, 2008); these gender non-conforming persons also recall more childhood rejection. We highlight the rejection issue when presenting this material on gender identity and non-conformity as a means to enhance students' critical consciousness about the social injustices of being transgendered or being same sex attracted. We present students with one of two hypothetical but probable scenarios. Some of the students receive a scenario describing the conception of a child who has a 90% chance of being gay, lesbian, or transgendered. Other students receive a scenario describing having a child who is gay, lesbian, or transgendered. The students are placed in small groups and asked to describe how they would address the rejection issues with their child, or also, would they want to keep the child in the case of having conceived a likely transgendered child. We have found that most students make statements indicative of reflective and action components of critical consciousness development when it pertains to having a gay, lesbian, or bisexual child. However, our students show more resistance and bias towards transgendered identity. This may be a reflection of the general need for increased curricular attention to educating students about transgendered identity in ways that are both innovative and effective (Dittman & Meecham, 2006). We have found that at the onset of the lecture on this material, few students have substantive knowledge and understanding of what it means to have transgendered identity. Our exercise stimulates students to think critically about their beliefs and about the new information that has been presented in class (Yanchar & Slife, 2004). Finally, given the relative paucity of research, health services, and funded programs for

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transgendered persons (Meyer & Northridge, 2007), the possibilities are endless for students to take sociopolitical action and affect change in the trans community, consistent with critical consciousness development theory.

Sensation and Perception

Pedagogically, we link presentation of the sensation and perception chapter to the discussion of dreaming because students in our classes typically show great enthusiasm for learning about dreams. In an effort to be more inclusive of marginalized populations, students are required to read and discuss articles about the dreams of persons with various sensory deficits. For example, students have had to think critically about research findings on the dreams of hearing challenged individuals (congenital or acquired). Students have been enlightened by dream research using samples of sensory challenged persons. Specifically, students often for the first time think about the meaning of findings that those with hearing loss or deafness use sign language in their dreams, the same as they do when they are communicating while awake (Gilliland & Stone, 2007). On the final exam for the semester, we include a surprise optional bonus item for students to answer: *“This semester we discussed the results of several research findings in psychology. List the findings from 5 different studies that you learned about this semester”*. The study of the dreams of hearing challenged persons is often among the list of studies recalled. We view this as evidence that learning about this information resonates with students. Also following reading this study, students are further interested in research on the dreams of those with visual impairment.

The sensation and perception chapter provides an opportunity to discuss the premium that humans have always placed on vision compared to other senses (Gallup & Cameron, 1992). For example, students are asked to consider whether physical attributes (i.e., race/ethnicity, nose, eyes, body weight) would be as important if they could not see a potential or current mate. This generates a lively discussion with students representing a variety of opinions. During one semester, a business major, was prompted by this discussion to research whether there are dating services for sensory challenged persons. Again, his motivated interest in this is an example of the action component of critical consciousness development regarding the need for services for a marginalized population.

Social Learning and Conditioning

In the introductory psychology course, we present the standard content on operant and classical conditioning. However we also infuse this content with a social problem that stimulates student discussion. Subsequent to learning the basic principles of classical conditioning, a student posed the following question, “Is it possible that someone can be classically conditioned to be aggressive towards a particular type of person, say a black person?” As a result of this question, one of the authors subsequently assigned a research article that is relevant to the student’s question.

The assigned article presents findings relevant to social learning and conditioning theory. Based on personal and professional background, some law enforcement officers may be biased towards more quickly shooting a black suspect than shooting a white suspect (Peruche & Plant, 2006). Students are further intrigued by findings that undergraduate students in a similar computer simulated situation are also more likely to mistake a black person on screen versus a white person on screen as carrying a weapon, resulting in mistakenly shooting the black person more often (Correll, Park, Judd, & Wittenbrink, 2007). Initially, student reactions reflect being appalled and outraged by these findings. Thus the initial reaction is emotional (the majority of our students are African American). However, we move beyond this to discuss how this behavior can be explained using classical conditioning theory and social learning theory.

Students are assigned to watch evening news programs and movies on several networks for the next 7 days. They are asked to pay close attention to images that they see of black males in the media, and write down these images that they see from news and/or videos and movies. When they return with their “data” we use what they observed to explain how via conditioning (association of black male image with crime in the media) police officers and ordinary citizens may have a conditioned response to defend oneself against a black male, whether the black male is armed or unarmed. Thus, in an attempt to answer a student’s question about conditioned aggression towards a black person, we assign an article that promotes critical consciousness development, as students reflect on the media’s impact (positive and negative) on our learning. Specifically we teach that in this situation, the unconditioned stimulus is “an attack/crime”; the unconditioned response is “fear”; the conditioned stimulus is “black male” associated with “attack/crime”. Thus, oftentimes just seeing a black male, may result in a fear reaction of aggression.

This assignment not only presents an opportunity to teach social learning and conditioning, but it also allows us to present to students how the research of psychologists addresses social problems. The relevance of the topic to real world issues and events that appear in the news media on a regular basis makes this a memorable and effective tool for teaching learning theory, while also addressing variables of race/ethnicity. Peruche and Plant (2006) include in their study that officers can be trained to break the association between black suspect and automatic shooting, thus this portion of the article also provides a good example of how a learned response may be extinguished. This study is also often one that students accurately recall at the end of the semester for the bonus item on the final exam.

Research Methods

Research findings pervasively appear in textbooks, television news reports, newspapers, and the internet. Due to the fact that students are often exposed to various research results, it is important that they acquire some basic skills in reading and understanding research. We also desire to increase students’ appreciation for the social application of psychological findings. In order to illustrate how results of psychological studies can influence society, we highlight the “doll study” by Kenneth and Mamie Clark (1939). We explain to students that in this study, black children during legal segregation, were presented with a black and a white doll and asked to choose which doll they preferred. The children’s preference for the white doll, and association of the white doll with more positive characteristics, was an indication of the children’s poor self concept.

After giving students a detailed description of Clark and Clark’s study, they are presented with an 8 minute documentary titled “A Girl Like Me” (Davis, 2005). The documentary features a high school student Kiri Davis’ replication of the Clark study, along with female adolescent reflections on identity issues. This activity gives students an opportunity to develop critical consciousness about similarities and differences in African American identity issues from the 1940s to present day. Students are assigned to groups and asked to identify the research methodology used in the study. They are also asked to list the advantages and disadvantages to the method used. Students are also asked to consider all of the factors that could contribute to the contemporary findings.

Students have provided us with written commentary via essay questions that reflects their development of critical consciousness about the negative impact of social injustice on healthy child development. Our inclusion of this material in our pedagogy allows us to provide students with evidence of how research in applied social psychology has the potential to produce findings that bring about social change.

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IV.

Conclusion

Our primary objective in this paper was to detail our pedagogy for teaching the general psychology course in the context of an HBCU. We specifically utilize pedagogy that infuses the standard course content of the textbook (Lahey, 2007) with readings, lectures, and assignments that have relevance to students' cultural experiences. We also more broadly use pedagogy that emphasizes issues of social justice, the socio-cultural perspective in psychology, and critical consciousness development (Diemer et. al, 2006). Our pedagogy used in the general psychology course is consistent with recommendations of the American Psychological Association's commission (Trimble et al., 2003), and another text published by the APA (Bronstein & Quina, 2003). We have also found support for our methods among academic scholars of other disciplines (hooks, 1994). Our pedagogy highlights the significance of addressing social justice issues and inclusiveness in the field of psychology, with a goal of developing students' capability for reflection and taking action against injustices. We also emphasize the significance of respecting the educational and cultural expectations of students within the historically black university context. Regardless of the ethnicity and gender of the students attending the HBCUs, the students have chosen to pursue their education in an environment that they expect will be diverse, relevant, and useful within the social context of their lives. We owe it to the students to make our pedagogy and curriculum complimentary to these expectations and the need for graduates with enhanced critical consciousness.

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