

Reflection on a Narrative by Faculty of Color

Marian Karch Stordahl
Keonghee Tao Han
University of Wyoming

As teachers become aware of the need for American classrooms to become culturally relevant, scholars in education ask why racial, ethnic, and cultural dominance arises and how it takes shape. A model of the formation of White identity (Helms, 1990) serves to illustrate for practitioners and students alike the keen but often unnoticed encroachment of manifestations of hostility toward persons of color in our schools. In a narrative of the collision between academic freedom and ethnic prejudice, a woman faculty of color (WFOC) described her experience in a rural American community college. The counterstory suggests that in the absence of thoughtful reflection, Caucasian American students and faculty—themselves participants in the lives of local communities—reproduce institutional discrimination.

Racialized attitudes form subtly and insidiously in the hearts of well-meaning people. Not easily

recognized in ourselves, such attitudes perpetuate a social context characterized by xenophobia and nativism. Before social transformation can occur, human responses triggered in professional settings must be acknowledged in ourselves and ultimately be confronted. Scholars working in the field of social justice urge teachers and students to begin a process of transformation by engaging in personal reflection: Discrimination unseen and unrecognized by its agents reproduces ignorance and social injustice (Han, 2014; Howard, 2006).

An analysis of the formation of racialized thinking in otherwise virtuous people is offered by Howard (2006) in his work aimed at educators and graduate students. Insights he gained early in human relationships led Howard to develop a detailed model of White Identity Orientation, in which racialized behaviors and attitudes are categorized and placed in logical sequence. Discrete phases of development arise in thinking, feeling, and acting as individuals move toward a transformationist White identity.

Howard (2006) hinted that human social groups are distinguished by orders of power arising from an ethological base: “Social hierarchy is a survival strategy that has been selected by many species

of primates, including *Homo sapiens*” (p. 35). Social stratification and hegemony may be inherent in civilization, inevitable and immutable, entrenched in human society. Such stratification may operate as a human survival strategy. Within cognitive development theory, Allport (1979) suggested that human beings need to organize the universe so that reality will make sense to us: Children build psychological categories by which they understand objects and events. The human tendency to categorize phenomena can give rise to prejudice by suggesting differences between people, enabling children to form the classifications to which Allport alludes. Mental categories separating people and objects form the basis for human “aggression, fear of strangers, a need for status, and for a positive self-image” (Sleeter & Grant, 2009, p. 94). Such mental categories may lie beneath an individual’s conscious awareness, yet they may exert influence on our daily encounters with others. Subconsciously-held predispositions toward people and objects may reasonably be construed to be the germs of the unrecognized White privilege said to affect the classroom behavior of some White teachers, and similarly to be the seeds of other hegemonic social structures. Social dominance may in this way be explained under cognitive develop-

ment theory.

Han (2014) has offered accounts of discrimination as it is evinced in an academic workplace. By employing *counterstorytelling*, a critical description of events that illustrate theoretical concepts (Yosso, 2006), the author presented a systematic critique of institutional and administrative failure to defend academic freedom for women faculty of color (Han, 2014). Her narrative stands as a reasoned, organized depiction of nativism and cultural dominance. Han, a South Korean-born professor of elementary and early childhood education, describes painful encounters with White students and surreptitious, behind-her-back consultations held between students and administrators. In hindsight, the actors in Han’s scenario perhaps regretted their words and deeds, but in moving forward, readers can try to become mindful of opportunities to preempt such occurrences in their own professional conduct.

Now an assistant professor in a four-year university, Han was born, brought up, and educated in the Republic of South Korea, earning a bachelor’s degree. Upon moving to the United States, Han achieved MS, MA, Ed.S., and PhD degrees, working for more than ten years in American classrooms. The universities in

which Han taught were predominantly White, with few non-White students or faculty. It was within an institution in a rural locale where evidence of White superiority as well as gender bias rose to the surface. Challenges to the instructor's preparation and competence emerged in student evaluations and in summonses to appear before administrative hearings, where authorities did not question testimony by [White] students. Among the members of the instructor's Tenure and Promotion Committee, however, ultimately stood a senior colleague who effectively placed allegations by students into proper context.

Launching Advocacy

In Helms' (1990) model of the development of White identity, we are offered a tool for helping illuminate a path to advocacy. Examples from Han's 2014 counterstory offer insight for American educators and students who seek to apply Helms' design in their own reflective process. Reproduced below, Helms' model features two phases, only one of which can be traced in the counterstory related by Dr. Han.

PHASE I: ABANDONMENT OF RACIST IDENTITY

- Contact
- Disintegration
- Reintegration

PHASE II: ESTABLISHMENT OF A NONRACIST WHITE IDENTITY

- Pseudo-independence
- Immersion-Emersion
- Autonomy

The Contact stage of Phase I characterizes students and administrators described in Han's 2014 counterstory. Incipient cultural prejudice revealed itself in Han's students' disclosure of never having met a person of color and of their exhibiting a mono-dimensional concept of truth and a Western-centric perspective on education: "You are small and minority... If... teachers are from our own background, we have similar values and ideas, but when we have different [diverse] teachers, we put a guard up or have negative views on them" (Han, 2014, p. 134). Students went on to state that they did not "know about other people's cultures and [we] choose not to know" (p. 134), revealing their willful avoidance and ignorance of diversity. Denial again emerged in a sentence extracted from a student evaluation: "Let me preface this statement by saying my feelings toward [her] are in no way affected by her cultural background or language differences. I feel as if [she] is not an effective teacher" (p. 134). Discriminatory attitudes and behavior were to be found

in the distance and isolation existing between the teacher and others, in overt hostility, and in abuse of power and control exercised in executing clandestine meetings between students and administrators regarding an instructor's supposed fitness as a teacher.

Rather than continue to suffer indignities from administrators and students, Han (2014) proactively, and intelligently, changed tactics after a few years' teaching practice in the rural school, adopting instructional strategies more to the tastes of her student audience. Readers are not shown whether the students, faculty, and administrators in her institution ever became aware of their own clinging to White identity. It was Han, the Asian instructor, who made changes in behavior. Her classroom modifications included bringing multimedia and popular culture into the classroom. In addition to tailoring course materials to the students' cultural sensitivities, however, the teacher extended herself personally and professionally by holding face-to-face consultations with students, thereby allowing them to get to know her on a human level. While improved teaching evaluations are commendable and enviable, they belie the existence of an instructor's academic freedom "to teach with a diversity of ideas and to determine what is

taught, as well as how to grade and assess student learning" (Han, 2014, p. 142).

Han revealed the positive results of her own introspection, but responsibility for self-examination rests not on a single individual but on all participants in an institution, including students and administrators. Because discrimination on their part is rarely noticed by people born into the dominant culture, educational settings may be the very places to begin identifying racialized feelings and thoughts. The preservice teachers described in Han's (2014) counterstory, for example, undoubtedly had no knowledge of Confucian-based educational practices found in Asian classrooms. The students might have benefited by participating in an introductory professional development session, perhaps presented by a colleague who could have helped explain the distance in the cultural background between the Asian instructor and themselves. Transformation calls ultimately for advocacy and collaboration in an effort to dismantle hierarchies of domination. Scholars urge students and education practitioners to take the reins in promoting culturally relevant classroom discourse. If, as Howard urged readers, we are to build activist White identities, educators must first reflect upon and then consciously

heed a transformative message by responding critically to occurrences of discrimination in institutions of learning.

References

- Allport, G. W. (1979). *The nature of prejudice* (25th anniversary ed.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Han, K. T. (2014). Moving racial discussion forward: A counterstory of racialized dynamics between an Asian-Woman faculty and White preservice teachers in traditional rural America. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7(2), 126–146.
- Helms, J. E. (1990). *Black and white racial identity: Theory, research, and practice*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Howard, G. R. (2006). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools*. New York, NY: Teachers' College Press.
- Sleeter, C. E. & Grant, C. A. (2009). *Making choices for multicultural education: Five approaches to race, class, and gender* (6th ed.). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Yosso, T. J. (2006). *Critical race counterstories along the Chicana/Chicano educational pipeline*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

About the Authors

Marian is a certified English teacher, having taught in high schools in Missouri, Illinois, and Wyoming. She has taught communication and speech courses at the university and junior college levels. Currently teaching English as a second language, Stordahl received her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction, University of Wyoming, in 2017. Literacy education and English as a second language were her foci. Stordahl's research interests are writing development, writing assessment, culturally relevant pedagogy, positioning theory, and discourse analysis. She is currently involved in projects in elementary ESL writing development and peer mentoring in women's correctional facilities.

Professor Han, who was a practicing teacher in the public elementary schools for thirteen years, teaches courses that focus on literacy studies and methods, English as a second language (ESL), and diversity in education. Her research interests include preparation for teachers for sociopolitically responsive education; social justice for historically underrepresented students and faculty in predominantly White educational settings; social justice education, ESL, and critical literacy preparation of teachers and students. She currently serves on the editorial board of the *Journal of Literacy Research* and provides leadership for the Literacy Research Association. Han has published in journals such as *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *Colorado Reading Journals*, *Urban Education*, *The Urban Review*, and *International Journal of Progressive Education*.