

Taking the Perspective of Others: Teaching about Racial Inequality*
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ABSTRACT

We describe two exercises that teach students about two themes in the sociology of race: (1) the significance of racial symbols in constructing how people think about and experience race; and, (2) the cumulative and structural basis of racial inequality. The two exercises, one on the use of Native American mascots in school sports teams and one on the issues surrounding racial reparations, ask students to step outside of their own perspective (sometimes taking on views different from their own) and to present coherent arguments supporting the view they are assigned to. Asking students to take on different viewpoints, with multiple viewpoints represented in the class on one issue, is a teaching tool that helps students understand racial issues that are often complicated, emotional, and controversial.

INTRODUCTION: TEACHING ABOUT RACIAL INEQUALITY

Bach and Lucal assert that "nearly everything sociologists teach is potentially controversial" (2002: 1). This is particularly true when teaching a class about racial inequality. Students enter such classes with numerous presuppositions and experiences of their own-both of which create unique challenges in about race. Students of color may think that only they know the "correct" experience of race. White students may think they are not part of a racial group, thinking that race is something only others experience. Classroom discussions are then shaped by the misperceptions students have of each other and the misinformation they have regarding race. Classroom dynamics can be further exacerbated by the fears that different groups have of each other: Students of color may fear being insulted by White students; White students may fear making an unintended racial remark. Students also tend to think about race in individualistic terms-as prejudice or overt racism. Teaching them more sociological lessons about the subtle ways that race is socially constructed and embedded in social institutions is a hard lesson-one that goes against the grain of most of what they have previously thought.

We describe here two exercises that we developed to teach students about two themes in the sociology of race: (1) the significance of racial symbols in constructing how people think about race; and, (2) the cumulative, structural basis of racial inequality. These exercises have proven to be effective in meeting these two objectives. The two exercises, one on the use of Native American mascots and one on racial reparations, ask students to "take on role of the other" (Mead 1934). Each exercise asks students to step outside of their own perspective and present coherent arguments supporting a view they are assigned to by these exercises.

One of the first challenges in teaching about race is breaking students out of biologically determinist or individualistic conceptions of race. This means showing them that race is a social construction, not something based on fixed categories or biological fact, but a social construct that has been created through historical, political, and economic processes and institutions. We challenge race as a fixed category, but emphasize that it is nonetheless "real" in its social effects. We ask students to think about who has the power to define groups as races, pointing out that although race may not be "real" in the genetic sense, it is "real" in the social sense. We then analyze the social, economic, and political differences that have marked group opportunity, drawing extensively on Feagin's (2000) concept of systemic racism and the related concepts of unjust enrichment and unjust impoverishment. It is here where the exercises we have developed build on the sociological perspective established early in the course.

THE CLASSROOM CONTEXT

We teach this course on a state university campus that is primarily white (85 percent of the student body), and draws mostly from suburban, middle-class populations. The students on our campus are economically privileged (more so than is typical of state universities) and socially sheltered. The White students tend to come from racially segregated schools and neighborhoods; the African American and Latino students come from more integrated backgrounds, but are similar in social class background to the White students.¹

The typical classroom at the university has a small number of students of color. Thus, White students seldom sit, learn, or think with students whose racial background is different from theirs and they tend to be naïve about race, except insofar as they are influenced by the mass media. White students, like many in their generation, tend to think that to acknowledge race is to be racist, thus they seldom explore actual knowledge or conversations about race. They believe that if they are color-blind, they are not implicated in the nation's racial problems (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2003).

The class in which we used these exercises is *more* racially integrated classroom than is typical on this campus: About half of the class is of European background and half of African American or Caribbean American background. There were only a few Latino/Hispanic students in the class. We had one Asian American student and a few biracial students who identified as

primarily either Black or White, depending on how they were seen by others and how they defined themselves. For instance, one student who was half European-Jewish and Puerto-Rican in background kept ties with both sides of her family; because she appeared "White," she was treated by everyone as White, no matter *how* many times she said that she was also Puerto Rican. Another student who was half European-Jewish and African American in background and appeared to others as "Black" was treated by others as Black. Being treated primarily as "Black" became a salient part of his identity in college. The integrated setting of our classroom helped show White students the diversity in backgrounds and perspectives of students of color. Students tended *to* sit in racially-segregated patterns in the classroom, however. The exercises we developed reintegrated them in smaller settings and allowed them to interact work with people they may not have interacted with before. It is not necessary for a class to be diverse to use these exercises, though. In fact, in less diverse classes, it is equally important to get students to think beyond their own experience and to take on the perspective of those whose experiences differ from their own. A diverse class is ideal, because it helps to break down group stereotypes, but this exercise can be effective in various classroom settings.

THE EXERCISES

The exercises we developed break students into smaller working groups in classrooms that may enroll larger numbers of students. They can be adapted for use in courses of varying size. Our class enrolled 53 students and met three days a week in 50 minute periods, with two periods of lecture and each student assigned to one of two smaller (25) discussion groups (led by the teaching assistant) that met weekly during the third period. The exercises were done in the discussion sections, but could both easily be done during the "lecture" class.

Students work in small groups of 4-6 students each. We assigned students to groups in ways that would break up any cliques that formed in the class and so that groups would be racially mixed. The instructor can assign students to groups or have them count off "one through six," arranging all the "ones" in a group, "twos" in a group, and so forth. Either way, it is important not to let students self-select their group.

The School Mascot Exercise

Prior to doing the first exercise on school mascots (which takes only one 50 minute period), students are required to read the article, "Playing Indian': Why Native American Mascots Must End" (Springwood and King 2001).² This article discusses the national debate about school mascots by identifying various groups that support or protest the use of Native American mascots in sports, analyzing how the controversy culminated into a national debate, and presenting the arguments pro and con. After reading the article (instructors could use other reading material at this point), students are assigned to one of

five mock groups: 1) Alumni organization (including major donors), 2) Native American Student Association (NASA), 3) Multiracial Student Alliance (MSA), 4) Student sports teams (including cheerleaders, pep team, etc.), and 5) Local school board. The groups are told:

A high school, "West City High School" has a school mascot, the Scream in , Red Indians, that has been the school's mascot since its founding eighty years ago. The school colors are red and white and the symbol of the school is a Native American.

A controversy has developed because students (and external supporters) from the Native American Culture Center have challenged use of the mascot on the grounds that it is insulting to Native Americans. They argue that use of this symbol perpetuates racism and prejudice and that the school should abolish the symbol and the name. The Native American Student Association is being supported by the Multiracial Student Alliance, a group of white, African American, Latino/a, and Asian-American students who recently organized an anti-racist movement on campus. The school-indeed the town-is engaged in a heated discussion about this issue. Your task is:

- 1. Describe what the mascot symbol looks like (draw it if you have some artistic talent in your group).*
- 2. Working in the group to which you have been assigned, develop all the points you would make to support your position on this issue. (Try to be exhaustive). You should select a spokesperson from your group who will make your case before the school board. (If your group is the school board, try to anticipate all of the arguments you might hear, but don't reach a conclusion).*
- 3. Each group will be given two minutes to testify before the school board. The board will then decide (by majority vote) whether to continue the mascot. If the decision is to abolish the mascot, the board will also be responsible for designating the new mascot and its symbol.*

The instructor should read the scenario to the class and describe each of the five groups before assigning students to groups of 4-6 people. Each group assigns a transcriber to keep notes on the discussion and a speaker who will later present the group's case to the class. Groups are given 15-20 minutes to develop their arguments, making sure that students understand they must represent their assigned group's likely perspective, not their personal beliefs. Some students had difficulties taking a position that they personally opposed (sometimes vehemently), however, this typically made other students in their group work harder at developing arguments that could be made from the assigned group's perspective. During this phase of the exercise, the instructor should visit the different groups, overseeing any possible conflicts and ensuring that students understand the role they are supposed to play.

Once the groups have identified their arguments, the spokesperson gives a two minute speech to the entire class. The group representing the local school board sits at the front of the classroom, as if they were a public hearing board. At this point in the exercise, students tend to really "get into" their assigned roles, acting in ways they think would characterize someone, for instance, on the school board (with a dignified and authoritative air). We have the speaker from the Native American Student Association make their group's arguments first, so the class can hear how the mascots were flagged as a problem. Then the other groups speak in turn. After each group has made their case (remember, only give the speaker of the group two minutes - this will hone their argument skills), the school board members take a minute to discuss their decision, then votes on whether to keep or abolish the mascot, and explains their answer. (If they abolish the mascot, they have to come up with a new mascot.)

The class then has a chance to respond. In their discussion, students raised a number of issues, sometimes including ones we had not previously considered. They brought up: money and power (who has the power to decide what the mascot is?); who is likely to be on school boards (the White elite); the need for historical continuity and sense of school culture; the identity for people on school teams; controlling images and stereotypes; and, the connection between violence and sports. One student pointed out that no one would accept a mascot that was "The Loud and Angry Blacks" or the "Flaming Gays." Well-known Native American mascots, such as the Cleveland Indians and the Washington Redskins, were discussed by the class, as well as their fans' behaviors, such as the "tomahawk chop." Although some students insisted that images are not "real," and do not really hurt people, many students could see the problems that Native American mascots posed for not just Native Americans, but everyone who hopes to ameliorate racism. Stephanie Fryberg's research (2003) on the actual harm done to Native American children who are exposed to caricatured mascots is useful to bring in at this point.

When we did this exercise in spring of 2004 we expected that both class sections would vote to abolish the mascot. Instead, the first section's: school board" voted to abolish the mascot, while the second section voted to keep the mascot, but change the image and name to be more "respectful."

The School Mascot exercise asks students to take a perspective often different from their own, collaborate with other students to solve a problem, and form reasoned arguments. By making Native American school mascots problematic, students can better understand how everyday racial representations are constructed and/or transformed, and how they negatively affect people in all racial groups. Rather than dismissing the topic as "no big deal," students are able to comprehend the huge effect images and representations have on individuals and groups in our society.

Racial Reparations Exercise

The second exercise on racial reparations was designed to be done in three separate days, over a period of two weeks (we did the two first days in discussion sections; the final day was done in the lecture class). Before discussion on racial reparations, we survey the class, asking:

"A national debate is taking place about whether African Americans should be given reparations {form unspecified} for the historic experience of slavery and its aftermath. Some have filed class action lawsuits seeking damages--lawsuits filed against current corporations who benefited from slavery. I'm asking you today whether you support giving reparations to African Americans because of slavery and its consequences--yes or no?"

We tally their replies and hold them until the conclusion of the racial reparations exercise. For this exercise students are assigned the article, "Making the Case for Racial Reparations" (Ritt et al. 2000), in which prosecutors make possible legal arguments for racial reparations, laying out the numerous issues in creating a legal case--such as, what kind of suit will it be, who will it be against, who will be the plaintiff, who will pay, what kind of payment will be sought, and so forth. (Again, other articles on the subject could suffice here.) The students are given the following directions in class (in our case in the smaller discussion groups):

Your assignment is to imagine that a class action lawsuit has been filed on behalf of African Americans. The suit seeks reparations for the injustices of slavery and the historical facts of racial inequality. You should proceed as follows:

DAY ONE (in discussion section f! :rouvs): [I'm not sure what this is supposed to be. The same is true for the other discussion section headings. WFC] Each person will be assigned to one of six groups, with groups taking the roles described on the following page. Your group must discuss the issue and then reach a consensus on how you will represent your argument either for or against reparations. You may want to gather additional materials outside of class to help build your case. Suggestions for doing so are on the attached page; you should gather this information in the week between May 7th and May 14th. It would be reasonable to give different group members the responsibility for finding materials on such things as: recent lawsuits filed seeking reparations; reparations involving other groups (Holocaust Survivors, Japanese-Americans interned during World War II, etc.).

DAY TWO (in discussion sections): New groups will be formed with one member from each of the six "roles" in each new group. You must represent your original group while debating the relevant issues. You should listen carefully to arguments from each side and think about the different dimensions of this argument influence your judgment, but you must represent the assumed perspective of the group you are

representing! Before class ends, you should each return to your original group and decide what argument the group will make when you appear before "the jury."

DAY THREE (in class): A spokesperson from each of the original groups (that is Day One groups) will present the group's final argument before the entire class. After each group has presented its case, the class will act as a jury—each class member voting on their final opinion on the question of racial reparations (that is, your individual conclusion about this issue, not just the opinions of the groups you have represented).

Note: It is important for the success of this exercise that you examine as many dimensions of this argument as possible and think about your final judgment in the context of what you have learned this semester. For purposes of this class, there is no "right" or "wrong" answer—only answers that are well-informed!

Here are the groups to which you will be randomly assigned:³

- 1) The Legal Team Filing the Suit: What specific issues will you address (slavery segregation, continuing and cumulative advantage/disadvantage)? Who exactly are the plaintiffs? What damages are you seeking? Will you work pro bono? How will you work around the statute of limitations? What other groups might join your class action suit?*
- 2) The United States Government: What is the case against you? How are you going to defend yourself in court? Consider such issues as breach of contract, due process, as well as federal/state programs that have hindered/helped African-American progress.*
- 3) A Private Company that Benefited from Slave Labor: What is the case against you? How are you going to defend yourself in court?*
- 4) Descendants of Former Slave Owners: What is your case? How will you represent yourself in court?*
- 5) African Americans Who are FOR Racial Reparations: What are the implications of this lawsuit for you? How will you make your case?*
- 6) African Americans Who are AGAINST Racial Reparations: What are the implications of this lawsuit for you? How will you defend the position you are taking?*

As in the school mascot exercise, we assign the students to groups of 4-5 students. This is especially important here, as students who miss the first day of the exercise are still expected to be responsible to their assigned group for the following days. The students are given an entire class period on the first day of the exercise to meet with their assigned group, assign a transcriber and an orator to make the arguments for the group on the final day. The instructor moves among groups, helping students frame the pertinent issues and answering any questions. For instance,

many students do not know that there have been previous legal cases against companies that have benefited from slave labor (leading to the Slave Era Disclosure Act) or that there have been reparations given to Holocaust Survivors or to Japanese-Americans who were forced into internment camps during World War II. The instructor encourages students to do research outside the classroom, such as by using LexisNexis to learn about actual court cases or by searching the web for discussion of racial reparations.⁴

Some students express discomfort with taking on a certain group's perspective (such as Descendants of Former Slave Owners). We reassure them that the class will understand that they were assigned to this role and that their success in the exercise is determined by how convincing they can be in this role's perspective. It helps to tell them that they will later be better able to present their own arguments if they know the perspective and assumptions of those with whom they may disagree. Thus, students are better able to understand how various arguments are crafted in public debate. This may be the first time some students have ever thought about the issue of reparations. Or, they may have dismissed the idea as preposterous or may unthinkingly support reparations without being able to articulate why. By taking what they have learned about in class-racial inequality and segregation, racial accumulation and disaccumulation, white privilege, color-blind ideology, and how race is imbedded in all levels of social structure-the students are expected to make informed arguments about racial reparations.

One week later, students meet with their originally-assigned groups for ten minutes so that they can share any new information they have gathered throughout the week. In our sections, many students found information on the Web on reparations in general, as well as newspaper articles on various legal cases dealing with reparations.

Once they have briefly discussed what they have found, form six new groups, with one student from each of the six original groups represented in each group. In other words, the new groups formed should include one student from each of the different groups whose opinions are being explored. Forming these second groups can be tricky, especially if there are absent students or students who were not present the previous week. There is no way to avoid this pitfall, other than using a reward system for those who show up each day. In any case, absenteeism may require the instructor to do some creative grouping on Day Two.

When the new groups have been formed, each person representing their original group should make their case (briefly) to the mixed group. Tell students that they will want to take notes for their future papers and for the group's final arguments to the class.

After giving these mixed groups some time to hear the arguments from different sides, students return to their original groups to develop the final arguments they will make to the whole class.

On Day Three, one representative from each of the original groups stands up before the entire class and has two minutes to make the group's case. (In a class of approximately 50 and

where there are two class sections this means there will be two speakers representing each assigned group.) We ask the legal team filing the suit to speak first so that they can layout the case for the class. When we did this exercise, students who were the legal team took this task very seriously (some were students considering law school after graduation), and they used actual court cases to make their arguments, including historic cases we had studied in class such as Plessy v. Ferguson and Brown v. Board of Education. Students representing this group argued that because racial discrimination was established by law it should be remedied by law. One of the legal teams argued for funding for social programs for disenfranchised African Americans as damages, while the other team argued for 400 billion dollars in damages, to be dispersed among all African Americans. The second legal team argued that because there has been a continuous violation of constitutional rights of African Americans (not just as slaves), there need to be racial reparations.

The next group to make arguments was the U.S. government. Students argued that reparations have already been given in the form of affirmative action programs and other social programs that benefit African Americans. They also argued that because only the descendents of slaves are alive, there is no one who actually lived through slavery to whom reparations should be paid. A second group representing the U.S. government argued that reparations will simply cost taxpayers (including African Americans) more money.

Next, the descendents of former slave owners spoke. They argued that slavery was legal and fully supported by industry and the U.S. government at the time. They also pointed out the extreme stretch on the statute of limitations, where neither parties under scrutiny (slave owners and the slaves they owned) is alive to make their case. One of the representatives of former slave owners presented the scenario of their land being taken away after the Civil War, to point that they have not benefited personally from the accumulation of capital over the years, and thus had no money to give to descendents of former slaves.

The third group to make their arguments was African Americans for racial reparations, who stated that they were there to support the legal team's case. They made similar arguments to the legal team, but added that reparations would not merely take the form of a check from the government for every African American, but rather would be a positive symbol to African Americans that the government takes responsibility for past and continuing racial inequality. Because there has not even been a formal apology from the U.S. government to date, they argued that reparations would help improve racial relations in the United States.

African Americans against racial reparations spoke next. They argued that reparations were irrelevant to this generation of African Americans, and that they need to be responsible for their own condition, rather than get payment from the government.

Furthermore, they argued that it is next to impossible to put an actual price on slavery, and they questioned which African Americans would get reparations--descendents of slaves or anyone who is considered "Black"?

Last, the private companies argued that they were not the actual slave owners and were not breaking any laws at the time, and thus there is no historical mistake to pay for. Also, they pointed out that they are against slave labor today, and make an effort to use fair labor practices. Finally, they stated that if they are to pay a large settlement to African Americans, prices will go up, which will hurt consumers.

Once all groups had presented their case, we survey the class to again on their support for reparations, using the same question we asked prior to the exercise. In class we then compare the answers given before and after the racial reparations exercise. A significant number of students changed their opinion on reparations following the racial reparations exercise (see Table 1). This has the added advantage of interesting students in the excitement of a research project. The final part of the racial reparations exercise is a paper that individual students write in which they must make the case (for or against), as if they were a judge for the case filed. The paper must be based on what they have learned in discussion sections and the information they have gathered outside of class. This last part of the exercise is important because it asks students to apply what they have learned from their own information-gathering and from other students. It gives them a chance to speak from their own perspective, after having heard from different sides of the issue. The exercise gives students a better understanding of the structural basis of racial inequality and thus the need for structural solutions. Whether reparations is an appropriate solution is not the purpose of the exercise and the instructor is careful to point out that reparations is a subject about which reasonable people can disagree. The point is to see how the accumulation of racial privilege has resulted in a social structure-organized around the past and present of race relations. Students then learn that their original conception that race is a matter of individual attitude, individual success or failure, or "just the way it is" is much too simplistic a way to think about America's racial problems.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

On the last day of class we asked students to anonymously complete an evaluation asking them about the effectiveness of the two exercises we used during the semester. We asked if the exercises helped them understand different perspectives on the issues. The results are presented in Table 2. The vast majority evaluated the effectiveness of both exercises quite highly, though they thought the reparations exercise was the most effective. We think this is because the reparations exercise requires more time and investment and fosters a sense of involvement and active learning in the student. Students also appreciated the time they were given to gather their own information on the topic, rather than being expected to talk about something they may have known very little about before making final arguments.

Students provided general comments about the two exercises, such as:

"Yes, the reparations was good...It forced you to think outside of what you may normally feel-to hear all the other arguments and then make a critically sound statement of your personal position on reparations - you could see that in the changes of people's responses before and after the exercises."

"I think the exercises were very valuable, because [it] allows all students to get the chance to express their views and feelings. It gave a chance to promote communication among those who might otherwise never communicate."

"I learned greatly from both exercises. Doing the reparations one I started out with one opinion and at the end of the exercise ended up with a completely different opinion."

"I think they were helpful in developing an understanding of the different perspectives. It was good to have people play roles they may not have agreed with, despite some people's desire not to. It makes for active learning which becomes embedded in the mind much more than pure lecture or reading."

The exercises we created are effective in courses on the sociology of race for several reasons. In our case, two of the learning goals we identified in the class were the significance of racial symbols in constructing how people think about and experience race and, second, understanding the cumulative and structural bases of racial inequality. These exercises help students understand these points in ways that tap into their actual experiences in interacting with each other in the course.

Furthermore, because students enter classes on race with various fears and misunderstandings about each other, these exercises promote cross-racial understanding and communication. By forcing students to take on perspectives and roles they might not otherwise hold, the exercises help them see the diversity of opinions-including differences within racial groups. However, it is important for instructors not to let students think that any opinion is equally valid. The exercises are anchored in empirical examination of the facts about racial inequality and in the sociological analysis of the significance of symbols and the accumulation of racial privilege. The exercises bring life to these lessons, however, by linking theory to practice and encouraging critical thinking.

There is the added benefit of having students learn from peer interaction and learning to work in groups to solve problems. The subject of race lends itself to pedagogical methods by which students take the role of others to probe various perspectives on a social issue, thus engaging them more directly in their learning and making them listen to others.

Table 1
Support for Racial Reparations

Pre- Exercise		Post- Exercise	
Yes	No	Yes	No
12 (36%)	21 (64%)	27 (57%)	20 (43%)
N=33		N=47	

Table 2

Student Evaluations of Two Exercises on Race

Question: Do you think the exercise helped you to understand different perspectives on the issue of [school mascots/racial reparations]?

School Mascots:	A great deal (A)	(B)	(C)	(D)	Not very much (E)	Did not attend day of Exercise
	13 (26.5%)	25 (51%)	7 (14.2%)	2 (4.1%)	0	2 (4.1%)
Racial reparations:						
	34 (69.3%)	12 (24.4%)	3 (6.1%)	0	0	0
N=49						

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ENDNOTES

1. Although more of the students of color have working class parents, most are from college-educated, professional/middle class families, according to the university administration.

2. You could use any of several excellent readings, but we found this to be particularly effective because of its brevity, accessibility, and comprehensive content.

3. Were to do the racial reparations exercise again, we would add one group in favor of racial reparations and delete one group opposed (there were only two of them out of six).

For example, this could be a group of Holocaust survivors who see parallels in these experiences and are in favor of racial reparations. The definition of groups who oppose or support reparations can be made depending on the related lessons that faculty want students to learn.

4. Students are likely to go to the web for information and it is important for the instructor to talk with them about critically evaluating such material, knowing, for example, the political perspective of the group or person responsible for the web page. Students do this outside work in the time between the first and second day of the problem-based learning exercise.