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Introduction

Multicultural education is a progressive approach for transforming education not only for the youth, but for the institution and society as a whole (Gorski, 2010). As multicultural educators we must be able to self-reflect on our own social perspective and subjectivity to better serve the individuals within our classroom (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017). Higher Learning (1995) illustrates how subjectivity and upbringing play a role in how racism is perceived among individuals and it also demonstrates how oppression can be institutionalized within the university setting.

Subjectivity plays a role in racism

“We like to believe that our selfhood is the essence of our unique individuality” (Nealon & Giroux, 2003) and that our “unique individuality” is not based upon “the circumstances under which we were born and raised” (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Unfortunately, “the subject is defined by its place among various social positions” (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Our views on race are based on our family backgrounds, how we were raised and where we were raised. “The things that make us who we are are found in the context of where we live” (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Although our subjective nature is based on past experiences it can be changed based on the experiences we continue to engage in throughout our lives.

In “Higher Learning” (1995) Kristin, a white female from Orange County, starts out her journey in an elevator with Malik, a black male. Her first instinct in seeing him is to pull her purse a little closer to her body. While the movie doesn’t go into her upbringing, it is clear she is

uncomfortable in the setting and has a preconceived notion of black males as thieves. Kristin's character changes significantly in the movie. Her story progresses through stages of rape, friendship with a black female (Monet) and a group of black males coming to her defense. Kristin, her new friend Monet and the African American males Monet recruited, come to the fraternity party to straighten out the sexual assault predator. The cops are then called. Once the cops arrive one fraternity member yells to police to help "get the gang members" out of there. The wording showcases that 'humans use sociocultural frameworks to make sense of the world's meanings' (Nealon & Giroux, 2003). Thus showing us that our ideas are "never singular, individual or simply subjective, but have shared intersubjective meaning within a cultural nexus of power and knowledge" (Ferber, 2002). Kristin was able to understand the struggle of power through her ability to break down barriers and gain more knowledge. This allowed her to form new ideas on race that weren't based solely on her subjective upbringing.

Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) use the analogy of a rock to explain subjectivity. "What you believe about a rock is and where it should be, what you have been taught about rocks" is dependent on human subjectivity. In *Higher Learning* (1995) Kristin started her journey assuming that a black male would steal her purse. At the end Kristin was able to form friendships across race and fight against systemic injustices.

Oppression is institutionalized

"Oppression occurs at the group or macro level and goes well beyond individuals" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). The educational system is a good example of an institution that can exude oppression on the individuals within the system. For most educators it may be hard to recognize oppression because "we have been socialized into a limited view focusing on single

situations” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). Those single situations may inhibit our ability to understand how oppression can be institutionalized, within our educational organization, because they only happen as one time occurrences. Another issue that arises within the oppressive institution of education, is the idea of dominant culture being apparent everywhere within the institution. The US Department of Education (2016) reports that 82 percent of educators are part of the dominant culture, white. “Dominant groups have the most narrow or limited view of society because they do not have to understand the experiences of the minoritized group to survive, because they control the institutions” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). If an individual controls the institution they are even more unlikely to see and understand the issues of oppression within their organization believing that “if I can do anything in life than anyone can”.

In “Higher Learning” (1995) oppression exists across race, gender and socioeconomic status. We first come in contact with institutional oppression when the cops are called to break up the party at Fudge’s apartment. He calls out the cops saying “You don’t hear them down the hall, it’s because they are playing that hillbilly s***”. The cop looks back at him and says “no because I dig rock and roll”. While the shutting down of a party may not resonate as institutional oppression it occurs again when a group of African American students comes to the rescue of Monet and Kristin. When the cops get there they immediately ask for the IDs of the African American men, assuming that they aren’t students at the university. That assumption correlates with this idea that even when the dominant group is caught in a violent act (such as the rape of Kristin by the fraternity member) society renders their acts acceptable and looks down at the subordinate group (Harro, 2010). Many other examples throughout the movie showcase the idea of institutional racism, not just within the police form, but within the university setting.

Specifically, Malik becomes angered by the idea of not having paid his bills for college. The professor states that he should “appeal to the athletic office” implying that he could only be there because of being an athlete. The idea of his athletic nature comes up again when Fudge asks him about his athletic scholarship stating that “if you don’t run you don’t get no scholarship”. Malik rubs it off stating “that’s just how the system works” (Higher Learning, 1995)

The idea of institutional oppression is evident in everything from K-12 education into higher learning. Regardless if multicultural education is present within the educational system we are still fighting against a “strong set of rules, roles and assumptions that cannot help but shape our sense of ourselves and the world” (Harro, 2010). In that regard oppression is not just institutionalized but structural (Young, 2010). “It’s causes are embedded in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following the rules” (Young, 2010).

Conclusion

“We are inundated with unquestioned and stereotypical messages that shape how we think and what we believe about ourselves and others” (Harro, 2010). Those ideas are embedded within our “historical, social and institution” systems (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). They are also subjective in nature. Where we grow up, what rules and policies were in place and what our families believe shape how we decide to perceive others. Multicultural education can be the catalyst for change. While it may not always break through institutional power, it can be a driving force for transformation. If subjectivity plays a role in how one perceives another individual, the more we can inundate individuals with the cultures of others around them, the more they can understand the connections they have. “People of color are confronted with the

reality of inequality and oppression on a daily basis” while people with privilege are often “unaware of it and do not see its impact” (Ferber, 2012). The more oppression is showcased and voices are heard through multicultural education, the more subjectivity and institutions will change. (#1245)

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