The Savage and the Slave:
Critical Race Theory, Racial Stereotyping, and the Teaching of American History
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Abstract
The teaching of American history is not neutral; teachers and textbooks often define what is important and what is not. It is through this historical subjectivity that stereotypes and biases emerge and ultimately persist. With relevance to African Americans and American Indians, such stereotypes can be culturally, politically and economically crippling. By promoting Critical Race Theory, which seeks to reduce marginalization through the recognition and promotion of historically disenfranchised peoples, American history teachers can redress stereotyping and enhance plurality in their classrooms. This descriptive article discusses the roots of historical stereotyping and offers ways in which such perceptions can be changed.

The issue of bias continues to haunt the school history curriculum. It stalks both teacher and pupil, leaving them confused and frustrated (DeMarco, 1995, p.6).

American Indians and other cultural groups are frequently either stereotyped, distorted or forgotten altogether (McCluskey, 1997, p.3).

Introduction
If history has taught us anything, it is that America continues to struggle with race and racial stereotyping. From the macroaggressions of verbal and physical violence to the microaggressions of the unsaid comment or the unstated perception, race in America is used to legitimize the powerful and marginalize the powerless.

To understand racism and racial stereotyping in America, one needs only to examine the African American and American Indian historical experience. Slavery and the Trail of Tears speak for themselves. Yet history plays a vital role in presenting and understanding both slavery and the Trail of Tears. For history is a delicate amalgam of fact and fiction tempered by personal and pedagogical perception. Though the premise of history is rooted in empiricism, the teaching of history is not so objective. History classrooms are not neutral; they are contested arenas where legitimacy and hegemony battle for historical supremacy. And in these arenas, it is often the teacher and the textbook that ultimately decides what is historically important and what is not. The representation of African Americans and American Indians within history classrooms is dependent upon the willingness of individual teachers to present material that accentuates contributions, challenges historical givens, empowers the marginalized and, above all, raises awareness of and reflection upon race and racial stereotyping and the impact they have on the historical interpretations of American history. One way in which racial stereotyping can be reduced in American history classrooms is through a philosophical and pedagogical framework premised on critical race theory.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory draws from and extends the parameters of a broad theoretical construct known as critical theory. Solorzano (1997) defines critical race theory as

A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and
A framework or set of basic perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of society that maintain the subordination and marginalization of People of Color (p. 6).

Specifically, critical race theory focuses on challenging the dominant discourse(s) on race and racism with reference to the study and practice of law and how the legal system facilitates and perpetuates the discrimination and subordination of certain ethnic groups (Delgado, 1996; Bell, 1995). Though critical race theory originated within the field of law, its theoretical and practical tenets can be transferred to other disciplines, most notably education (see Lynn, et al., 2002; Solorzano, 1997; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995).

Critical race theory has four major themes. First, that race and racism are timeless, endemic and permanently entwined in the American social (including educational) fabric. Second, critical race theory seeks to challenge constructed ideologies of objectivity and racial sensitivity and argues that such constructs are shelters for hegemonic practices by dominant groups in America. Third, critical race theory is committed to social justice and the eradication of racial subjugation. And lastly, critical race theory seeks to promote the experiential knowledge of Women and People of Color as legitimate and central to the understanding of subjugated peoples (Solorzano, 1997).

Defining Racial Stereotyping

In 1903, W. E. B. DuBois stated that “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line” (p. 29). With immigration and welfare reform, crime, and the future of affirmative action dominating conversations on race, DuBois’ statement is as true today as it was 100 years ago. Twenty-first century America is extremely conscious of this “color-line” and alternatively feels comforted by its existence or fearful of its demise. Banks (1995) believes that the racial “color-line” is a socially constructed ideal used to separate, partition, accommodate or alienate. Carrying the argument one step further, Marable (1992) defines racism as “a system of ignorance, exploitation, and power used to oppress African Americans ... [and] American Indians on the basis of ethnicity, culture, manerisms, and color” (p. 5).

Premised on Allport’s (1979) model, Figure 1 shows how racial stereotypes can be evidenced in three broad categories: 1) intellectual and educational stereotypes; 2) personality or character stereotypes; and 3) physical appearance stereotypes. Though this analysis deals exclusively with African Americans and American Indians, one can easily insert Hispanics into the model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Ascribed To</th>
<th>Resulting In</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual/Educational Stereotypes</td>
<td>“stupid” ⇒ African Americans ⇒ segregated schools</td>
<td>“slow” ⇒ American Indians ⇒ menial jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality of Character Stereotypes</td>
<td>“violent” ⇒ African Americans ⇒ segregated communities</td>
<td>“savage” ⇒ American Indians ⇒ reservations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Appearance Stereotypes</td>
<td>“unclean” ⇒ African Americans ⇒ segregated public facilities</td>
<td>“scary” ⇒ American Indians ⇒ segregated housing</td>
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Arguably, the most prevalent peddler of minority racial stereotypes is the popular media (Yosso, 2002; Cortes, 1995; Gassaway, 1993; Coleman, 1992). Through this medium, African Americans are portrayed as “stupid,” “lazy,” “dangerous,” or “dirty” (Cross, 1996; Abron, 1990; Bourne, 1990). And if addressed at all, American Indians are perceived as “simple,” “primitive,” “submissive,” or “wild” (Stutzman, 1993; Vrasidas, 1997; Axtell, 1987). These descriptors can and are used by non-minorities to rationalize and hence justify their racial privilege in society.

**Teachers and the Teaching of American History**

If popular media is the dominant means by which society receives its racial messages, teachers are a conduit for the interpretation and perpetuation of racial stereotyping in schools. Lawrence (1997) believes that, cognizant or not, white teachers inherently obtain and thus profess a set of social, economic and political privileges that often manifest into biases or stereotypes in the classroom. Cochran-Smith (2000) contends that teachers need to initially identify the origin of these biases – personal perceptions, textbook presentation, and media portrayal – and seek to redress them. Such personal awareness is key. “Examination of the biases of one’s own attitudes and beliefs is not only an interesting exercise, but an ethical action that teachers can take to ensure that [they] are not teaching [their] personal prejudices” (Gewinner, et al., 2000, p.113). Teaching history does involve perspective, perception, and interpretation from both teacher and student. History is, to a large degree, taught from the personal perceptions of history teachers. In this light, Zevin and Corbin (1998) feel that social studies teachers must be doubly aware of the stereotypes and biases that can influence student learning. And, again, awareness is critical. Once teachers are aware of the biases that shape their classrooms, they become amenable to constructing a pedagogical philosophy and curriculum that is both empowering and inclusive.

But how do stereotypes impact the way teachers represent African Americans and American Indians? Haukoos and Beauvais (1996/1997) contend that inaccurate historical representations “depict American Indians as frozen in time; that is, wearing costumes . . . war paint, with bow and arrow” (p.78). These stereotypical images are static, timeless, and ultimately damaging to students. It is vital that teachers represent American Indians in more contemporary, dynamic, participatory perspectives. This will reduce the degree to which ageless stereotypes become dogma in America history classrooms.

The same is true for African Americans. Cross (1996) asserts that stereotypical images of African Americans are embedded in schools which perpetuate the alleged “inferior abilities of African Americans” (p.110). Foster (1995) agrees by stating that history presents African American males as either ignorant and helpless or duplicitous and shiftless. And these “historical” images serve to reinforce the stereotypes that many students and teachers already possess. Teachers need to approach the historical experiences of African Americans and American Indians from a pedagogical model that accentuates their contributions and positions their role as central to the understanding of American history. This is the premise behind critical race theory.

**Textbooks and the Perpetuation of Racial Stereotypes**

Romanowski (1996) states that, “Textbooks define and determine what is important in American history” (p.170). Textbooks, in essence, dictate what is to be taught. Fitzgerald (1979) contends that much of what students know about cultural difference comes from what they read in school. And with textbooks being the dominant instructional tool used in social
studies classrooms, it becomes a powerful vehicle for introducing and perpetuating racial stereotypes.

Just as teachers are shaped by their own personal biases and perceptions, so, too, are textbook authors. In presenting historical knowledge, authors prescribe positive and negative interpretations to historical figures and events and, thus, assert a distinct set of values (Romanowski, 1996). These values can either validate or challenge student beliefs. White students may feel empowered through repeated reminders of triumph and progress, while African American and American Indian students may feel marginalized through historical representations of subjugation and hardship.

When African Americans and American Indians are represented in history textbooks, it is often through an Anglo-American lens that perpetuates racial stereotypes of inferiority and historical insignificance. To assure that history is presented in a more inclusive and empowering way, Gewinner, et al. (2000) believes that textbooks should be carefully reviewed with “attention to what is said, what is not said, and what is implied” in an effort to check the subtext which may lead to the reinforcement of racial stereotypes (p.112). In this fashion, Epstein (1994) states that

In selecting history textbooks, parents, teachers, and school and state committees interested in providing more positive and powerful images of marginalized groups need to consider not just the amount of information included on [African Americans and American Indians], but the perspective from which the information is presented (p.126).

Just as teachers play a dominant role in the presentation and perpetuation of debilitating racial stereotypes, so too does the ubiquitous (and often racially biased) textbook.

The Role of Critical Race Theory

Given this, what role can critical race theory play in the American history classroom? A fundamental premise of critical race theory is to both accentuate and empower the powerless. It serves to contextualize peripheral lives. Epstein (1994) believes that a critical approach to history will enable students to respect the lives of the marginalized by showing the contributions they made and how these contributions impacted historical change. Critical race theory shifts the lens of historical perception from the visible to the invisible, from the powerful to the powerless. Wolf (1992) contends that African American and American Indian histories should be reported as their history, and should be seen from their perspective, not the Anglo-centric filter most commonly found in history classrooms (emphasis original). If history is presented from a single, omnipotent perspective, the inherent misinformation and misconceptions may not be the real issue. What may be the greatest injustice are the lost opportunities; the lost opportunities to provide a history rich in difference, enlightening and empowering and, above all, recognizing that American history is in fact the history of us all.

Conclusion

The sweeping goal of critical race theory within the teaching of American history is to first sensitize present and future teachers to their own conscious or subconscious constructs of race and racism, and how these perceptions may influence the philosophical and pedagogical presentation of American history. Secondly, teachers must choose material that is free from blatant biases, particularly biases that perpetuate racial stereotyping. In this way, textbooks and other supplemental materials serve to give voice to maligned or neglected peoples, places, or events in history. By choosing textbooks wisely and recognizing (and changing) personal perceptions
concerning race, American history teachers are redefining the intersection between racial identity and historical significance, with students and society being the ultimate winners.

Biographical Sketch

Timothy Lintner is an Assistant Professor in the School of Education at the University of South Carolina Aiken. His current research focuses on the perceptual and practical importance placed upon social studies in South Carolina.

References


