



7-22-2016

# Talk About Race in the Undergraduate Classroom: A Discourse Analysis

Leighnah L. Perkins

*Ursinus College*, [leperkins@ursinus.edu](mailto:leperkins@ursinus.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media\\_com\\_sum](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media_com_sum)

 Part of the [African American Studies Commons](#), [Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Commons](#)

**Click here to let us know how access to this document benefits you.**

---

## Recommended Citation

Perkins, Leighnah L., "Talk About Race in the Undergraduate Classroom: A Discourse Analysis" (2016). *Media and Communication Studies Summer Fellows*. 7.

[https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media\\_com\\_sum/7](https://digitalcommons.ursinus.edu/media_com_sum/7)

This Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. It has been accepted for inclusion in Media and Communication Studies Summer Fellows by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Ursinus College. For more information, please contact [aprock@ursinus.edu](mailto:aprock@ursinus.edu).

Talk about Race in the Undergraduate Classroom: A Discourse Analysis

Leighnah Perkins

Ursinus College

Abstract: As researchers have noted, many people are afraid to talk about race (Alexander, 2010; Miller & Harris, 2005). Given the race-related events and tragedies occurring in the U.S. today, people need to find ways to move past this fear in order to work together to solve societal problems. Harris (2003) suggested that the undergraduate classroom is a key place to engage in discussions about race. This research project examined the ways that college students talk about race and race-related problems in the classroom. The data collected for this project included observations and audio recordings of three sections of a seminar taken by all first-year students at a small liberal arts college over a two-week period when they discussed Alexander's (2010) book, *The New Jim Crow*. In total, 9 classes were examined, and the recordings were transcribed and analyzed ethnographically. Several kinds of discursive moves were identified and examined including the use of stories and metacommunication. The implications of these findings are considered. Keywords: communication, classroom, race

### Introduction

In a CIE class in which first-year students were discussing Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, a student named Perri said the following about talking about race: "Coming into one of these classes where we're like, should we ask those things? Should we say our opinions? Like, will I get yelled at will I get judged for it?" For many students and people in general, race is not an easy thing to talk about. Yet, it needs to be spoken about. With several tragic events happening in the past few years that have brought race-related concerns to the forefront, and yet, as Alexander and Bonilla-Silva and other scholars have argued, white people are afraid to talk about race. In order to address and begin to remedy problems in our society we need to communicate openly and honestly about race and try to understand each other. Colleges and

universities are in the perfect position to foster conversations about race and to help students to develop skills to engage in difficult conversations.

### **Method**

Simply put, discourse analysis is a manner in which one can analyze any written or spoken form of communication. Discourse analysis is incredibly customizable with many kinds of discourse analysis existing depending on the research topic, yet in beginning to structure this project two forms appealed to me in particular. In John Hartigan Jr's *Race in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (2015) Hartigan describes two approaches to discourse analysis, racial analysis and ethnographic perspectives. Racial analysis focuses on the idea that "race is a problem that needs to be solved" (Hartigan, 2015). According to Hartigan, racial analysis has two focuses, "the facts of racial inequality linked to power differentials, and the role of racism in reproducing inequality." Essentially these studies using racial analysis are guided by the fact that race exists and affects everything in everyday life, which whites, as they are privileged, will likely not recognize. With racial analysis, I was fascinated by the idea that when trying to find evidence of racial inequality and how these things pervade everyday life, the study almost begins to be hunting for racism or macroaggressions without focusing on how people speak about race.

On the other hand an ethnographic approach to studying discourse about race. The ethnographic approach simply includes a researcher trying to assimilate in a society in order to study it as an insider. Instead of critiquing what occurs in a society as good or bad, ethnographers instead record what happens and what is said. I felt that this form of analysis better suited my research question as I was not looking to critique the student's discussions of

race. Rather, I wanted to see how students spoke about race, including what strategies they used and how they expressed themselves in this discussion.

The sample for this project was a convenience sample. Three sections of the Common Intellectual Experience, a required first-year course at a liberal arts college on the east coast were recorded and observed during a two week period in April of 2016 when the class discussed Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010). *The New Jim Crow* contains subject matter regarding the mass incarceration of African American males in America, white privilege, and racial biases among other topics.

After gaining Institutional Review Board approval, instructors were contacted in advance for permission to record their classes. I met with each class to explain the project and answer any questions after which every student signed a consent form.

The sample size represented the individual class sizes which differed amongst the three classes. Dr. B's class had 13 students and out of the 13, 11 were white, 1 was African American, and 1 was Asian. Dr. T's class consisted of 13 students. Out of the 13, 8 were white, 2 were African American, 1 was Hispanic, 1 was Asian, and 1 was Indian. Dr. S' class consisted of 17 students. Out of the 17, 12 were white, 2 were African American, 2 were Hispanic, and 1 was Asian. 11 classes were observed and recorded during the two week period. Two of the instructors were white males and one was a white female.

During the classes, I observed not only what was being said in the discussion but also took field notes to indicate any nonverbal cues that occurred, including eye rolls or silence. With the help of my observations, I transcribed 123 pages of class recordings. From there, the transcriptions were analyzed leading to the creation of themes. I created tables of dialogue

with common strategies in order to sort out themes of ways in which students spoke about race.

### **Analysis**

One strategy for speaking about race that many students used involved telling stories. For students, telling stories can have many functions whether it's to share a personal experience for evidence to support or not support an idea, to share their opinion in a more shielded way without having to come out and say their opinion outright, or even showing their own growth throughout their experience in class. Stories take many forms and shapes in the classroom. In the classes I observed the stories typically had one of four over-arching themes, which I will refer to as story types. These included stories about what the teller believes that people of color should do, stories that involved trying to put one's self in the shoes of others when speaking about experiences, stories of conversion, and stories that focused on overwhelming societal structures that can cause problems in society.

The first theme I will examine involves stories about what the teller believes that people of color should do. This type of story mainly serves as a way for students to state what a person of color should have done in a situation or what a white person would have done had they been in a similar situation. Sometimes these stories are used as a counterargument in a discussion about white privilege or racial profiling. At times, these stories were unsuccessful in class discussions as other students would point out that one cannot know what one would do in a situation they had never experienced. This story type took two forms.

The first form of this story type involves describing people, usually the self, doing the “right” thing, and showing that this leads to a positive outcome. In the two examples below, the “right” thing was described as automatically complying with the police in any situation. Ben, (Indian, male) shared his experiences of being profiled at the airport. He explained, saying,

I get profiled at the airport like all the time, I get patted down and they ask me “Can I pat you down?” and I’m like, I’m not gonna say no? That’s stupid...If you know what’s in your bag, just comply with police officers. (Class 2.2, pg. 4)

Ben’s story was a means of showing that he did not have a bad experience getting profiled because he complied with the airport employees. He states that if one does the “right” thing by complying with officers, nothing bad will happen. This story functioned mainly as an argument against the position taken by other people of color in the class, like Jade (African American, female) who suggested that she was not afraid to say no to officers wanting to search her. Just before Ben told his story, Jade had said,

I feel like once you have a certain description you’re more likely to be noticed by these officers so they’re most likely gonna ask to see your stuff and things like that. And you have no, if you don’t have anything, just because the way you look like I have no problem saying no. (Class 2.2, pg. 4)

Ben took the opposition and used the personal example at the airport to reinforce his view that all people, including people of color who are unfairly profiled like himself, should just say yes to avoid any trouble with authority figures.

The second form of this story type is used to describe people not doing what they should and show how this led to a very bad outcome. This form was used during a discussion, in Dr. T's class, when they were discussing the fourth amendment right to say no to searches and seizures. Abe (white, male) told a story that described the problematic actions taken by two people who happened to be in the country illegally and were pulled over by the police. He stated,

I saw this video yesterday that was like, a cop pulled these two people over cause he like, they had a tail light out, it was something small and it turns out they were in the country like not legally, like legally here, like the girl like there was a guy driving and a girl in the passenger seat and the girl thought she like could outsmart the police officer and the guy driving the car he got right out and he got handcuffed and the girl was like "I didn't have a ride" like she tried telling him that's since she's not a US citizen she doesn't have to follow US law cause she doesn't live here and then the police officer was like, "all right will you please get out of the car," and she says "No, I'm not moving" he goes, "all right, well I'll-I'm going to tow the car and you can't be in it when I tow the car." She says, "well you're violating my rights." He's like you're not a citizen of this country like you have no rights here, you have to follow our laws and she tried like to outsmart him and you can tell he was getting like aggravated so like the more you say no to a police officer the more aggravated they get so it's easier to just like comply. If you're breaking the law and you know it, why are you going to say no you can't search my bag. Oh, this guys probably breaking the law, let's search his bag. I don't see why people are so like, like if a police officer came up to me and said "hey can I search your

bookbag?" "Yeah sure, I'm not breaking any laws, here." I don't understand that aspect of it, I don't get why people get so defensive. (Class 2.2, pg. 3)

Abe's message here had to do with the idea that one should never say no to the police and that if you do, the outcome will likely be bad. He says that the woman in the story trying to outsmart the police officer only aggravated him. Yet, Abe goes on to say that simply saying no to a police officer is not a good choice either, as they'll just get "more aggravated". Instead, Abe says it's "easier" to just comply with police. This story functions as a means to suggest that aggravating the police, even though every citizen has the right to say no to searches and seizures, makes things worse for the suspicious party and if one is smart, they will just comply. Abe's story operates as the worst case scenario of what can happen to people of color if they "aggravate" a police officer by refusing a search.

Another example of the story form of people of color doing the "right" thing was expressed by Abe (white male) in Dr. T's class. Through this discussion about profiling, some members of the class were stating that profiling happens unfairly. Abe (white, male) told a story about an experience he had with police that was negative to show what he thinks people of color should do in a similar situation.

Me and my three brothers, all obviously white, were driving to the grocery store to go get ice. My oldest brother just got back from his freshman year of college, he was 19 years old my other brother's in the front seat and me and my little brother are in the backseat. We're driving to go get ice, cut through the parking lot of a liquor store. Cutting through private property is against the law. Cop pulls us over, sees a bunch of young kids, they cut through a parking lot of a liquor store, one in the front seat looks

like he just got out of college and might have a fake ID to buy alcohol for these underage kids. Cops go to the window, says are you trying to buy alcohol for these underage kids? He goes no, I'm going to get ice he says well you know, I saw you cut through the parking lot of this liquor store. He says, I'm sorry I just wanted to you know, avoid the light. That's against the law, he broke the law, so the cop is doing his job. He gave us shit for it, a half hour goes on, he's asking all of us questions he goes if you're really his brother what's his birthday? What's your address? Half hour later he goes, alright you're good to go, don't cut through a private property like that ever again. Since then, we have not done it. He did his job, he did his job, and since then we have not cut through that parking lot again cause it is against the law and he profiled us. We're all white, we were profiled. (Class 2.2, pg 9)

He and his brothers did something illegal and because of the negative outcome, he said, "...We have not cut through that parking lot again." This suggests that Abe thinks that profiling is easily avoidable if one doesn't do anything illegal. Although this was an attempt to relate to Jade and Marc, two African American students in the class, who explained that they were afraid of law enforcement after bad experiences, Abe's point was that profiling happens to everyone, it's bad, but if you learn not to do anything wrong then it won't happen. Two of his peers responded, arguing that Abe's story did not make sense because he was not profiled for his race, he was pulled over for doing something illegal. Sara (Latina, female) said "You did something wrong, if you were just in the car and a police officer says hey, are you from here interrupting your evening and it happens all the time, you're gonna get really frustrated after a while." Marcus (African American, male) echoed her point saying,

Wasting 30 minutes of your evening, of your day, not because you cut through a whatever, not because you parked in the wrong place, not because you seem like you have drugs on you, but because the color of your skin. So that's not something where you can be like oh, we never cut through the thing again. You can't be like, oh well I got pulled over previously for being black so I'm just not gonna be black again, that's not how it works.

Both Sara and Marcus' responses showed that they do not believe Abe's story to have been an example of profiling and how to avoid it. It was instead just an example of doing something illegal and being pulled over for it.

The second story type was designed to put the listener in the shoes of people of color. These were used at times as a way to refute the first story type that puts forward the teller's view of how people of color "should" act. They serve to humanize the actions of people of color and push listeners to be empathetic as each of these stories was told with an emotional appeal. The idea of "How would you feel if this happened to you?" is prevalent throughout. The overall goal is typically to create understanding. This story takes 2 forms.

The first form of put yourself in the shoes of people of color involves the use of personal experiences. These stories reference the experiences of the self, friends, family, or acquaintances. Typically, an inclusion of some form of injustice or inconvenience is added to the story to appeal emotionally to the listener in the hopes of getting them to understand. One instance of a personal put yourself in their shoes story was in Dr. T's class where Sara (Latina, female) told a story about her neighbor's experiences, saying,

I recently moved into like a, recently new neighborhood and my neighbors are black and in the neighborhood they have like a thing to put your bag on so they can scan it and they're young but they actually live in a predominantly white neighborhood and they always get stopped, like all the time by police officers who think they don't live there so they'll be sitting in the car listening to music or something and a police officer will come over just because it looks suspicious so like the thing is if you live here why can't you just be here in peace? Like, that would be annoying. (Class 2.2, pg. 4)

She used this to show why profiling can be a negative experience and to justify why people of color will say no to being searched by the police. People of color are not even free to just relax on their own property and Sara appeals to the class emotionally, saying "that would be annoying" Her point being, that no one wants to be bothered on their own property, in their own home, especially over something like sitting in a car listening to music. Being disturbed repeatedly on one's own property would surely get irritating as Sara points out. In telling this story, Sara emphasizes that being stopped where one lives over and over for no real reason is invasive and would be emotionally draining had it happened all of the time or in one's own home.

A second example of a put yourself in their shoes personal story about a friend was told by Don (white, male) a student in Dr. T's class shared a similar experience when he talked about how his black friend was profiled by police multiple times for simply sitting in his car waiting for his friends to show up. The argument from Ben (Indian, male) and Abe (white, male) was that profiling can be avoided simply by not doing anything illegal and just complying

with police is the proper way to respond. Don countered this point with his story about his friend in order to get his peers to understand a person of color's perspective:

As a white male, I have never been pulled over and just been like, the police officer has never been like can I just search your car, you seem suspicious? I've never been waiting for someone-police officers pull over to my car and say you look suspicious. Like I've done that, I've just sat there waiting for someone however my friend who's black has had that happen many times. He lives in the town over from me and there the police officers are known to bother black people a lot and happens to recall a certain time. So you cannot say that, "Oh yeah I would just do that", if it happens to you every day you're going to get annoyed. You're going to get aggravated by it and you're gonna realize, oh they're discriminating against me because I'm black so you can't say that you would just do that because you don't know how annoying it gets. (Class 2.2, pg. 4)

Through this personal story about the difference between his own experience and that of his black friend, Don makes the point that those who are not profiled and have never experienced such a thing, cannot say what they would or would not do thus refuting Ben and Abe's point. Don's story functioned as a real life example to show that profiling would get irritating through his language that stated how irritating such repeated profiling would be and that as a result it is not just something to comply with.

Jade (African American, female) brings up a similar experience through the put yourself in their shoes form using a personal experience of the self. She speaks about how she and her father faced profiling while driving in their own vehicle to her high school.

Like I was on my way to school in the morning when I was going to high school, me and my dad used to get pulled over all the time for frequent lane changing or whatever they call it...and he drives like a nice car so like it's they just pulled us over just because to see if it was our car or because we were black but like frequent lane changing? Like- (Class 2.2, pg 5)

She emphasized that this was something that happens "all the time" over a contrived reason, "frequent lane changing" which people are not typically pulled over for. Again, sharing this dehumanizing experience was used in the hopes to promote understanding from Jade's classmates. Jade is operating from the point of view that no one would enjoy being bothered doing every day, mundane things like driving to school. Instead, those instances are not just a matter of avoiding doing something illegal or bad.

Jane (African American, female), a student in Dr. S' class, brings up a similar story in the put yourself in their shoes through personal experiences of the self. She explains what her experiences have been in her neighborhood, speaking about how the men and boys in her city feel hopeless due to such systematic oppression.

I know it's bad for the black community, like I'm from Philadelphia and I know all the boys think well it doesn't matter what I do, I'm just gonna be in jail like my older brother and my dad, so it's really it's very depressing in the black community that there is no upper class, middle class, and people feel like there's no hope. And even people who like um when immigrants started coming over and everything it was like poor people being segregated like the disparity. It's even like uh, affecting like marriage rates in the black community, because everyone's like black women are unlovable but it's really

because most of our men are in jail, don't have a college degree, some barely have high school, and some are dead so there's not a lot of opportunity. (Class 1.2, pg 14)

Through her experiences, Jane shows that profiling is not simply a one time act. That over time, these acts wear down communities and individual people to affect lives negatively. She shows through her example that for people of color it isn't a question of comply or don't every so often; profiling has a community deep impact that people who aren't people of color do not experience.

Dylan (African American, male) brings up a similar story of put yourself in their shoes through an experience of the self in Dr. S' class. He agrees with Jane and brings up that these messages of hopelessness run deep enough to even affect who people will reproduce with in the hopes of having lighter skinned children in the hopes that those children will not be as oppressed as those who are darker.

That's like a lot of people down south, they say if you, you better um get like with someone lighter because they don't want their children to be darker because they'll have less privilege than a kid that's lighter. That's why, I asked my mom like are you light skin or dark skin she'd say, like she'd never answer about her complexion because all, all my family down south are like light and she was just like a thing to her. So, they, it's like this thing that you have to be lighter to be better. (Class 1.2, pg 14)

Again, Dylan echoes Jane's claims that things like profiling run deeper than just a temporary event, that it affects entire communities to the point that people wish to plan who they have children with in the hopes that their children will not face such discrimination.

The second form of this story type involves using an analogy to put the listener in the shoes of a person of color. In discussions of race some students used analogy to foster understanding in their peers. For example, Sara from Dr. T's class attempted to use analogy to illustrate the fear people of color have for law enforcement. Sara said, "I think it's like asking why a woman, if a woman is walking down the street and sees a large group of guys are they sexist if they're afraid of them?" A few members of the class answered, "no," and she said "I feel like there's reasons", meaning reasons for why marginalized groups avoid certain people. Marc, an African American male went on to echo her point and say, "Why would you say no to that example and that it is, cause it's the same thing. Because of the terrible things that have happened that would naturally make you afraid." Abe (white, male) went on to ask "What if the woman is physically intimidating to a group of frail men?" which shut down the conversation showing that perhaps the analogy had not worked. While the analogy hit home with some of her peers, it seems others seemed to miss Sara's point.

Each form of the Put Yourself in Their Shoes narrative is attempting to understanding of marginalized people in these discussions and have others hear the perspective of people of color in an effort to get them to see things from another point of view.

The third story type is a conversion story. These stories demonstrate a transformation of the self. This can be seen in the use of stories in which students describe how they used to think about an issue, how they changed, and why they did so. This can involve students admitting to not understanding why people of color did certain things or acted in certain ways, yet after experiencing the class discussions or other experiences they discovered why such things occurred and changed their opinions. These stories can be used to show that a student

might not be an expert at these discussions or to give other students who might be unsure of such situations hope for understanding. One example of a conversion story occurred in Dr. B's class. Louis (white, male) spoke about how he used to judge the rioters in Baltimore for their actions but through his own efforts to think about things, he changed his view. He said,

I'd be like, I can't believe these animals, creatures, are just doing this and destroying their own homes and destroying their own cities. Then I started to sit back and think and the key word for me is to understand. And I try to understand where they're coming from and why they're doing this and that it's more than just this destruction, it's a lot of frustration.

Louis realized after attempting to understand the cause of the riots that he was misjudging the destruction and he instead came to the conclusion of what the riots stood for. (Class 3.1, pg. 6)

Here, Louis makes it clear he was no expert on discussions of race but that he began to understand such issues after trying to understand the people they were affecting.

A second example of a conversion story was found in Dr. T's class. Ben's (Indian, male) story suggested that getting to know diverse people and learning about them changed him, I agree with him 100% because like, I came here and I did stereotype. But after I got to like, knowing people and I started like learning stuff, now when I think about it diversity does help with education, in the aspect of like your mentality but I still have friends at home who are straight up racist things and I-I think if they were exposed to that then they would change their mentality so it definitely has, it definitely helps things.

Here, Ben says that diversity in his education allowed him a chance to change and learn about other people. He even mentions his friends from home who could benefit from such an

experience, which shows he's somewhat separating himself from them due to what he has learned while at college. These kinds of stories about being ignorant at one point serve the purpose of almost making others in the class who might not be speaking feel comfortable to be uncertain as through these stories they see everyone was at some point.

Another example of a conversion story showing a change in students occurred in Dr. S's class. Jenni (white female) talked about her experiences in the class when speaking about race saying,

I just wanted to say I agree with Stella, I just think, I mean for me in this class I admitted this before. **The people in this class have helped me with what I think.** I think in general we have a little bit more of like a diverse class, like backgrounds, than other classes and I think that that adds to it. (class 1.3, pg 5)

Jenni says that the class and its diversity have helped her open her mind and she has learned from the others in class. While she did not outline her thoughts prior to the class, she does state that the class "helped" her with what she thinks.

The story form of conversion stories in which students changed their thinking after learning continued in Dr. S' class with a story told by Perri (white female) who also cites family experiences as influencing her change in thinking,

Um, I think, I just had like an a-ha moment that the fact that like, I'm so-I love this course, I have recently began to love this course. I think, most of these people in it I've had so many discussion, but like this course, I'm going to go out of it thinking differently than when I went in and I think that's how we can foster like being good parents. We, eventually most of us are probably going to be parents in this room

whether you want to be right now or not, but like we are that generation that's going to be parents next, it's like scary to think about that but like this discussion is, like one way or another. I think it took a long time for some parents, like my dad never learned, but like my mom is a religious studies minor so like she within the last couple years of my life she was very much like "Oh you should try to learn everything about every culture, religion, ethnicity, anything like you can get your hands on. Learn it." So I went and took a world history course and we read so many things and I talked to so many more people I think we need to have more classes like this and that's one way that we can foster the next generation of kids because like, we are scary as it is, we are the next generation that are gonna have kids. (Class 1.3, pg 17)

Here, Perri states that the class and its discussions have given her a chance to learn and grow as a person combined with her mother's influence.

The last story theme has to do with complaints about the structure of our world, or what's wrong with society. This type of story comes in many forms; from complaining about the government, to parenting, to police, this is used to express displeasure with an overarching system in society that could potentially seem too large or overwhelming to repair. Typically, this form is used by students to bond with each other considering they each live in the same society.

The first story form of describing what's wrong with society is about the police being problematic as an institution and their role in racial tensions. Students generally discussed police intensifying problems of race. For example, in Dr. S' class, Dylan (African American male) talked about a documentary he once watched about racial profiling.

Um what I wanted to say about stop and frisk was um, I saw this documentary and they actually in this documentary, and they actually interviewed cops on what they think about stop and frisk and there they actually have to sort of fill a quota each day of how many people they stop, they have to stop the usual suspects as they call them, and even if they don't want to-they still have to fill that quota of um how many people they need to stop each day, they're doing their job basically. (Class 1.2, pg 2)

Here Dylan points out that it is not individual officers to blame, but instead a system of quotas that need to be filled. In no way does Dylan blame individual officers but instead points out the problems as a system. By saying, "...even if they don't want to..." Dylan takes away that personal aspect of being a police officer to focus instead on a problem, system wide.

Another such example of the what's wrong with society theme focusing on the form of the police institution was described by Ally (white female) in Dr. S' class. Ally described her neighbor's experiences in training as a SWAT team member, saying,

Um, I-if I remember correctly, I think another problem with the situation is also just how police are trained in general because I know like my neighbor was a SWAT team member and he was talking about this case and he told me, he said that when he was trained like they were told if you feel threatened you can just empty your gun... And that is disturbing. But then, there's that gray area of like, should he have, based on the situation I don't-I don't see how he should have felt so threatened like obligated to go that. But you're allowed to do that, you mean in that situation is different, but when it's physical you are allowed to do that. (Class 1.2, pg 6)

Here, Ally points out that to her, police training itself is a problem. Again, this shifts the focus off of individual cops and instead focuses on the institution that controls the individuals. She states that what's wrong is the specific training police get for any situations.

The police are also included as a problem in the story form "only white cops are free to misuse authority" under the theme of what's wrong with society. Jerry, (Asian male) in Dr. S' class describes a story in which an Asian police officer got in trouble for brutality while many white officers in the media for similar cases do not face punishment,

Like if the cop is like doesn't like blacks and people like they, they receive cover for it, and he is white he got like nothing. **But because he is Asian cop, he didn't like the black men but no one covered him and that's why he ended up like sent to jail.** (Class 1.2, pg 7)

Jerry points out that even in police brutality cases there are racial lines drawn. Jerry points out that although white police officers have gotten away with brutality, an Asian officer did not. Not only does race come into play with police versus civilians but even in the entire police institution in which Jerry points out only white officers are "covered".

The next story type under the theme of what's wrong with society has to deal with white people who commit crimes being treated differently than people of color who commit crimes. A few students told stories in which a white person would commit a crime and they would either get out of the punishment or others would discuss how sad it was that that crime had happened. For example, Abe (white male) in Dr. T's class brings up the "Affleunza" case in which a white male killed someone while driving under the influence, got arrested, and pleaded that he didn't know right from wrong because he was raised with such wealth.

Um, I was watching the news um and there was like this kid from Texas, this one kid who grew up in a mansion house and was like spoiled and an only child and his parents bought him like a house so he could have parties for his friends and he got caught drunk driving and I don't know if he killed someone or seriously injured someone but he got in a car accident and he's making a case in court that he's like, he was raised so wealthy that he doesn't know right from wrong. So that is just like, white privilege clearly exists, obviously that's the most intriguing example of white privilege I've ever heard in my entire life but the fact that there are people out there like are taking that as like a serious case is like kinda ridiculous like when he says I don't know right from wrong, I was raised too wealthy that should be about respect more than anything, that's the issue but I think there's a lot of people not only white, who think that way and that's why that generation is kinda screwed? Like people weren't disciplined or spanked.

(Class 2.3, pg 18)

Abe points out that this story is an example of white privilege where a white male was allowed to blame his upbringing for a crime he committed. Abe implies that it is white privilege that allows such an event to occur. This story was also told for a similar reason in Dr. B's class by Sydney (white female).

Um, the last part where she talks about the high school kid who gets behind the wheel even if he's drunk reminded me of this one case that I think happened like two years ago where this high school kid got behind the wheel when he was drunk and he ended up killing like a girl or 2 or 3 people, I'm not sure how many. But then he like, his punishment was that he had to go to rehab and it was at this really nice resort place and

like, in like Mexico or CA or something like that. It was a really nice area and like **if that was anyone else of any other race it would have been like a completely different story than that.** It's just like so angering, because like didn't he call it affluent or like Affluenza or something. (Class 3.1, pg 11)

Here, Sydney clearly states that this case would be handled differently had the male in question been someone who was not white. Through this example, both students aimed to show that being white is a considerable factor to having crimes not be taken as seriously.

Another example of the story form white people who commit crimes being treated differently than people of color who commit crimes was told by Cali (white female) in Dr. B's class. Cali tells the story of a white male who went to her high school who was caught drunk driving,

Um, when I saw this quote I was kinda thinking about a situation that I've witnessed firsthand and I think a lot of times, for whatever reason, people say if it's you know a **more affluent child from a white family from a suburban neighborhood they're like, he made a mistake. Whereas if it's someone else it's like, well clearly he, this kid in a gang clearly, he has terrible intentions.** I see it all the time, **I remember there was this kid from my high school who got a DUI and everyone was like oh that's so sad, oh he's gonna lose all his opportunities,** and that in the-um TNJC it talks about all the opportunities that people who are criminals or people who are put in jail lose you know from committing crimes and a lot of people make the distinction like oh, **if it's a mistake it's no big deal versus this kid won't be called a criminal but the black kid is called a criminal and the white kid it's just a normal kid who committed a crime. And I think that**

a lot of people don't understand that it's the same thing, like they think because of different circumstances that it's different and should require different punishment.

(class 3.1, pg 12)

Cali points out the hypocrisy in these situations, saying that for white criminals the crime is sometimes labelled a mistake while criminals of color face different and typically harsher punishments.

This same story form, white criminals being treated differently than criminals of color, also continued in Dr. B's class with Amy's story from one of her professors.

One of my professors was telling this story yesterday about how these two kids were somehow involved in this drug bust because they were the only white kids in the group and um when they went to court they had very related charges, something like that, when they went to court every person of color involved was given some form of a sentence like even, if it was just probation um and the two white kids the judge was like oh well, you seem like you're generally good kids like you go to college, like you're majoring in um these things, you're gonna do some good, go on and have a nice life and just remember don't get messed up in this again and everyone else got sentenced which is like...blatant... (class 3.1, pg 12)

Amy points out how even when criminals of different races are faced with the exact same crimes, there is still leniency given to those that are white. These stories are told mainly to show how far reaching things like white privilege are.

Meta-communication, or talking about talk, served several functions in the classes as they discussed race and race-related issues. First, it was used by students to regulate

and monitor how they speak and how their peers are speaking. It also served as a way to express hesitation to participate in these conversations due to their background, or as a way of recognizing personal growth. In each of the classes I analyzed metacommunication was utilized in the discussions about race.

Some of the occurrences of meta-communication served a regulatory function. This means that the metacommunication was used by students to monitor their classmates' talk and to "call out" other students for possible violations of rules related to turn taking, attitude, or volume of speech.

This form of meta-communication used to regulate discussions occurred in Dr. T's class during a discussion of profiling and POC being afraid of the police. While both Jade (African American female) and Marcus (African American male) say they're afraid of the police, Abe, a white male, says that being afraid of white police is racial profiling.

A (WM): Um, I got a little reverse racism. If you're black and you're afraid of a white cop then that's racist and you're racial profiling. If you're black and you're afraid of a white cop, isn't that racial profiling?

M (AAM): Um, what?! No!

J (AAF): Ohmygod no.

A (WM): If you are, and you are afraid of a white cop because he's white-

M (AAM): No.

J (AAF): That's not at all what people are afraid of.

Dr. T: If you're afraid of a bear because you have seen bears maul other humans does mean that you're racist against the bear?

A (WM): I'm asking! (Class 2.2, pg 22)

Following multiple students telling him that is not the case, Jade steps in and asks Abe "Are you listening?" as Abe began loudly speaking over other students. It seems that Jade wanted to get Abe to stop speaking over other students in order to get him to listen.

J (AAF): Are you listening?

A (WM): Kinda.

J (AAF): I don't think you can be racist against the police.

B (AM): What?!

A (WM): Are you kidding?!

Dr. T: That's not exactly the reaction we want in our class. You can say, "I disagree with you." but you don't need to say "Are you shitting me?"

A (WM): I respectfully disagree!

Dr. R: Let her finish. And then you can respond.

J (AAF): \*Silence\* (Class 2.2, pg. 22)

In this case, a student did not use a strategy but the professor did. Dr. T intervened in the conversation to ensure that students were being treated respectfully and listened to. It is clear that since Jade asked Abe if he was paying attention that she felt he was not listening. Talk is not regulated in this way under normal circumstance because it is assumed the other person is listening. As soon as Jade said her point, Abe and Ben interrupted her and did not let her finish. Dr. T sets a boundary regarding what is and is not acceptable in the class, considering the phrase Abe used was very casual and contained a swear word. Dr. T's meta-communication let his students know that such actions are not part of a proper disagreement.

Students also used metacommunication to regulate one another's behavior when there were turn-taking violations such as interruptions. In Dr. T's class, John (white male) and Ben (Indian male) were having an argument about colleges and specifically what their college funds

with the money from tuition. After several minutes going back and forth with Ben interrupting and cutting off John, Sara (Latina female) cut in and said to Ben, "Okay, stop talking over him." (Class 2.3, pg 14) Again, this was due to Ben breaking the turn-taking rules by speaking loudly over John, while John was trying to express an idea. Here, it seems that to Sara, norms of a traditional classroom environment apply in which one person speaks at a time in order to express their idea and their peers are expected to listen exist in the class discussions. Through her action and choice of words, "Stop talking over him", it appears that Sara sees the discussion as a place in which everyone in the class can contribute and listen. No one responded to what she said and the argument continued, so perhaps this was a failed attempt at regulation.

At times, students' metacommunicative efforts to regulate the turn-taking was disputed as was the case in Dr. T's class, Abe (white male) and Bill (white male) were discussing racial profiling and whether or not it was justified for police to do so when Abe challenged Bill for interrupting him, and Bill took issue with Abe's tone and approach in doing so.

A (WM): He's [the police] doing his job!

B (WM): That doesn't justify it.

A (WM): If I wasn't doing anything

B (WM): If you're white they wouldn't approach you for no reason-

\*A (WM): Alright if I'm walking down the road- are you going to interrupt me again?

\*B (WM): Um, you need to calm down.

\*A (WM): I'm calm, I'm calm dude, I'm trying to make a point here... (Class 2.2, pg. 5)

Although both Bill and Abe interrupted each other, Abe attempted to monitor the talk in an aggressive tone, saying "Are you going to interrupt me again?" In turn, Bill attempted to

regulate the conversation further due to Abe's aggressive tone, saying "...you need to calm down." Abe expressed annoyance at the turn-taking violation from Bill's interruption, specifically since he called attention to it by saying "Are you going to interrupt me again?" as if it was a repeated offense. The response from Bill is a criticism of Abe's more aggressive tone, suggesting that Abe was getting worked up. Bill took a superior position by telling Abe how he should respond according to classroom norms of turn taking and proper tone.

Meta-communication can also be used to engage in self-reflection. Students took the time to either reflect on the somewhat strange aspect of talking about race openly when they had not had the opportunity to do so before. Students also used metacommunication in this way to present themselves as being socially aware or being anti-racist. This use of metacommunication occurred in every class.

One main reason to utilize metacommunication to engage in self-reflection explicitly in the class was that students were unsure of what they were contributing to the discussions on race. For example, in Dr. S' class, Perri, (white female) spoke about how she was unsure of what she contributed to class generally because she could not relate to experiencing racial profiling. She said,

I think it's, for me, it was really eye opening because I'm a white girl who's middle class, it's hard for me to relate and if I say something that is, like racist, if I say something else I don't know what I'm talking about because I can't relate... (Class 1.2, pg 15)

Here, Perri demonstrates a lack of experience in discussions of race but a willingness to be open and learn. Perri later brings up a similar point that having conversations about race seems like something one should be hesitant to discuss due to the sometimes taboo nature of such a

subject. In reflecting on her experiences within her family about taboo conversations, Perri reveals how conversations of this kind are different and new to her.

I remember asking my step mom...what she made at work and she was like we can't discuss that, like you're not supposed to ask a person that, like stuff like that. And coming into these classes where we're like should we ask those things? Should we say our opinions? Like, will I get yelled at, will I get judged? (Class 1.2, pg 16)

Perri wants to make it clear that she isn't used to these kinds of conversations and that this is a learning experience for her, mainly due to the idea she has learned that it is taboo to participate in conversations about race. In both cases, Perri uses metacommunication to not only defend herself from appearing racist or ignorant, she also wants to make clear that these conversations are a new experience for her.

Another example of meta-communication used as a form of self-reflection, occurred in Dr. T's class when Ben (Indian, male) spoke about how he felt unsafe around both African Americans and Muslim people. He stated,

I'll admit it like I'm afraid of some people like some AA walking through the street and stuff like that looking at where their hands are and stuff like that and you realize stuff like I don't like, this might seem racist, but I don't like the idea of people wearing these full, like in the Muslim religion, full gowns. I don't like that I want to see what is on your body. It might seem racist... (Class 2.2, pg. 16)

At first, Ben appears to monitor his own talk after speaking, ending his speech by saying "It might seem racist". Ben's stating his opinion and follows it up with an almost hesitant spin in a face saving move to defend himself. Ben monitors and reflects on his own talk from the point

of view of wondering if saying such a thing is classroom appropriate. Marcus (African American, male) goes on to respond and monitor Ben's speech, saying "People wear baggy clothing and you don't think they have bombs. Clothes can be tight and you can have bombs on them. That's racist." (pg. 17). Marcus makes it clear that Ben's defensive move did not work and Marcus moves to regulate Ben's speech by calling what Ben said "racist". Marcus reflects on Ben's actions and makes it clear that to him, what Ben said was not classroom appropriate.

Metacommunication was also used to demonstrate how socially aware one is or to re-emphasize that being racist in these discussions was seen as being the worst possible thing. One of Dr. S' classes featured a few students, including Kayla (white female) and Stella (Latina female) who felt that showing themselves to be racially conscious was important in such conversations. After Dr. S brought up another other class in which some students felt as though racially profiling was acceptable as a means to ignite discussion from students who might feel the same and were not contributing, Stella said,

I think that's disgusting, I feel like about our class a lot of people in our class are more aware of the social issues and that's why not a lot of people are like in here like about certain things so I don't know if it's bad or if it's like- (Class 1.3, pg 5)

Kayla cuts her off to say "We're just more woke-" Both of these conversations suggest that Stella and Kayla feel that their class is more socially aware than the other class mentioned, thus they're "better". Stella goes even calls their views "disgusting" and although she includes "I don't know if it's bad or if it's like..." it's clear she meant for her classmates to fill in the blank that their class is better. Kayla then supports this view, saying that the class is more "woke", a term once used by black activists to mean socially aware. Dr. S brings up the idea that perhaps

people in their class feel the same as the other class, but just don't bring it up out of fear. Lilly (white female) dismissed the idea and said, "Maybe we should have a combined class, we could have a good influence on them." This emphasizes the idea that being "woke" or knowledgeable about conversations about race as being the ultimate goal for the conscious students and that not being socially aware is something to fix or be influenced by. Kayla, Stella, and Lilly all used metacommunication to reflect on their own social awareness and to condemn those who are not.

### **Areas of Future Study, Weaknesses, and Implications**

As far as any means of future study I think having more time and recording more classes speaking would be helpful. In just a microcosm of classes I was able to find so many strategies that a variety of students would use, so I think it would be interesting to broaden that even more to see what other strategies are used and why. Through having a bigger group it's possible to get a greater idea of the specific strategies used when people speak about race.

The idea of wanting more time and a larger sample pairs with one of the weaknesses of my analysis. Due to this being a convenience sample I cannot generalize certain types or forms of talk that are used as being exactly what every and any student would use in the classroom. The idea of not being able to generalize reinforces why I think broadening this study would be helpful in getting a more holistic picture of what multiple students think and the strategies that they use while discussing race.

The importance of this research lies in the fact that these conversations about race are difficult to have. No one enjoys feeling uncertain and very few people would want to contribute to a conversation about race and feel as though other people might think of them as racist. On

a smaller scale, this study could help first time instructors of classes that contain discussions of race see what kinds of communicative moves students make, how to structure a discussion like the ones featured in this study, and what worked for other instructors throughout the discussions. I think this study is a small part of a movement to helping people feel more comfortable speaking about race. The more these projects are funded and encouraged and people decide to be unafraid of speaking honestly about race, positive change will happen. With comfortability and sharing of stories and experiences people learn and begin to understand others which can only bring about positive change in our sometimes disheartening society.

### References

Alexander, M. (2010). *The New Jim Crow*.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2003). *Racism without Racists*.

Hartigan, J., Jr. (2015). *Race in the 21st Century*.