

“Not the Time For Kumbaya”: An Exploratory Study of Race-Based Caucusing in the Social Work Classroom

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Abstract: *This paper describes the use of race-based caucusing in a foundation-level MSW course focused on racism and other systems of oppression at a primarily White university in the Northeast. This technique was chosen based on the desire to allow space for students to examine and dismantle their internalized racialized socialization. This strategy was used in three sections of this course across two semesters, and this paper describes the findings of focus groups conducted with students at the end of each semester to understand their experiences with caucusing and their perceptions of the drawbacks and benefits of using this strategy in the classroom context. We discovered that student experiences of caucusing centered around the separate spaces that race-based caucusing created. Specifically, we learned from students that they had varied initial reactions to the idea of race-based caucusing as well as encountering challenges and seeing benefits to the strategy. As instructors, we provide our own experiences with caucusing and, based upon our analysis of the focus group data, conclude that this strategy yielded different results for BIPOC and White students and offer some suggestions to aid other instructors considering implementation.*

Keywords: *Caucusing, race-based caucusing, racism, social work education*

Regardless of the class content or context, it is imperative to the accreditation and values of our profession to provide social work students with a comprehensive education on social and economic justice, structural power, oppression, diversity, and difference (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). While this is the goal, it is our experience that discussions of these concepts are abstract and theoretical. Further, we find that these discussions can, even if they do not intend to, reinforce white supremacy by focusing on disparities experienced by people of color (powell, 2013), resulting in the “objectification” of the communities of color and the students that belong to them. Finally, the teaching of concepts related to racism can demonstrate an assumption that all students come from a place of racial privilege, such as the need of white students to “check their privilege” and erase or make invisible the experiences of students that identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). These common components of class discussions simultaneously reinforce and normalize white supremacy to the detriment of students of color in the classroom.

This paper describes our use of race-based caucusing in a foundation-level MSW course focused on racism and other systems of oppression at a primarily white university in the Northeast. This technique was chosen based on the desire to allow space for students to examine and dismantle their internalized racialized socialization while also avoiding the

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above-described manifestations of white supremacy. At the end of each semester, students were asked to participate in focus groups to share their experiences with caucusing. In addition to the themes that arose from the focus groups, we will also share our own experiences with caucusing and offer suggestions for instructors considering implementing this strategy in their classrooms. While this paper and the strategy of race-based caucusing focuses specifically on race, the authors acknowledge that we all have multiple, intersecting identities that impact one's experience of racialization (Crenshaw, 1991). While we did not provide caucusing experiences or analyze data based on these intersectional identities, we do think an intersectional lens is vital for understanding power and oppression, and this was reflected in other readings and coursework in this course.

Literature Review

Racialization and Racism

Omi and Winant (1994) describe the historical and ongoing process of naming individuals to racial groups and ascribing certain characteristics or stereotypes to members of these groups as racialization. Racialization, as a concept, situates race not as something inherent to us, but rather, as social constructs placed upon us. It should be noted that the power to create and shape these categories belongs to those in the dominant group (Bailey, 1998) – the terms “racializer” and “racialized” used by Gans (2017) denotes this power dynamic. This hierarchical system of racialization places one group in a dominant position over another group and results in different access to opportunity and resources, which are maintained and contested by the collective interests of racial groups, and govern racial relations (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Of course, this process of racialization occurs not only among or within individuals; it is systemic (Omi & Winant, 1994). In other words, wider societal culture and institutions embody the same racial assumptions and attributions. These assumptions do change over time, but they are embedded in a way that makes the racialization of groups “normal” (Omi & Winant, 1994). While a discussion of the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other identities is outside the scope of this paper, it should be noted that many of the authors discussed here do make mention of the importance of considering the different facets of identity and the way in which these shape the experience of race (and vice versa).

Whiteness, the racialization of white people, has broad and varying definitions, but includes the racial characteristics or assumptions, as described above, that are attributed to people that are seen as white (Rasmussen et al., 2001). Whiteness, through this multifaceted conceptualization, frames white people as outside of race and serves as the unnamed standard to which other groups are measured; with that comes the privileges that go unseen and that are embedded into societal systems (Rasmussen et al., 2001). The acceptance of whiteness at the individual level can be described as internalized dominance, defined as the way in which one makes the notions of entitlement, and the myths and narratives that support this entitlement, a part of themselves (DiAngelo, 2006; Hardiman et al., 2013). According to White Racial Identity Development theory (Helms, 2008), identity development is a process and through which white individuals may move from unconsciously accepting their whiteness and the privileges and power that come along with

it, to developing a non-racist conceptualization of their white identity (Helms, 2014). While white individuals are taught to not see, and do not have to accept, the privileges that come with whiteness in order to benefit (McIntosh, 1989), Helms' (2008) theory asserts that white individuals develop schemas. These schema frame how one understands their whiteness, which can evolve to an identity that is not grounded in racism. This individual-level manifestation of whiteness mirrors a broadened definition of white supremacy as a system, "a political and socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantages and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not." (Racial Equity Tools, 2020b, para. 1).

As discussed above, the power wielded by the dominant racial group results in the oppression of BIPOC (Young, 1990). The racialization of BIPOC as subordinate stems from an explicit history (Omi & Winant, 1994). As the other side of the coin of privilege, oppression occurs at multiple levels including cultural, structural or institutional, individual or personally-mediated, and internalized (Demos et al., 2007; Dominelli, 2002; Jones, 2000). At the individual level, oppression describes the limits, inhibitions, and restrictions that are placed upon BIPOC (Frye, 1983). We see these restrictions in the lived experiences of BIPOC as they move through the world, interacting with other individuals and systems, facing discrimination, marginalization, and stereotypes. Importantly, as mentioned above, the sole focus only on these disparities can disguise the structural or systemic forces that cause the disparities (powell, 2013). Structural racism, or structural racialization, as described by powell (2013), is "when structures unevenly distribute opportunities or depress life chances along the axis of race" (p. 3). Another conception of oppression is that of the "five faces of oppression" that describe the different ways in which oppression happens (Young, 1990). Notably, this framework describes oppression experienced across multiple identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. This allows for the understanding of the connection of different oppressive experiences across groups and within groups, as is the case with BIPOC. These "faces" of oppression include: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (Young, 1990). Just as with whiteness, the oppression exerted upon BIPOC does not require conscious acceptance. Because we all "steep" in a racialized culture, we as individuals come to internalize the ideologies associated with race. BIPOC experience not only internalized racism, which can be described as the ways in which one takes in or believes negative messages about one's group (Jones, 2000); but also importantly the internalized resistance to this oppression or the internal and external actions that racialized folks take on to counter these oppressive messages (Sue, 2003). Becoming aware of these internalizations and working to counter them, as well as working to change the institutions that reinforce them, is necessary to achieve social and racial justice.

Social Work Education

As the mission of social work education is focused on pursuing social justice, ensuring the equitable access and opportunity to resources (e.g., income, wealth, education, health care, etc.), and the ability to "come as we are" for to participate in society. Put another way, the goal of social justice "is full and equitable participation of people from all social identity groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs" (Bell, 2016, p. 3).

Social justice requires that individuals not only have access to spaces, but are accepted, heard, and valued in these spaces as their full selves. Another key component to achieving social justice is focused on removing structural sources of oppression (Young, 1990). Specifically, racial justice is focused on dismantling structural racism, as the source of inequities, to allow the full participation of BIPOC. To work toward social, and specifically racial justice, social work education must be grounded in frameworks that align with social justice principles.

Anti-racism education focuses on preparing students with not only the knowledge about oppression, as described above, but also the opportunity for students to engage in their own process of self-reflection (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020) and to situate themselves within power structures. Similarly, Adams (2016) advocates for using a social justice education pedagogy (SJE) that utilizes learning strategies that align with social justice principles and engage students actively with the content (Adams, 2016). The SJE pedagogy posits that social justice is also a process that should mirror this goal (Adams, 2016). Ladhani and Sitter (2020) call for a revival of anti-racist education, both institutionally and in the classroom, to counter “hegemonic discourses” (p. 60) in academia. In the classroom, the authors advocate for the use of activities that can help students to practice critical self-reflection (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020). Similarly, SJE pedagogy makes a purposeful connection between the explicit and implicit curriculum, with social justice content and strategies that work to dismantle the ways in which power dynamics are reproduced in the traditional classroom (Adams, 2016). The use of caucusing allows the classroom process to be one that can further the “full and equitable participation” of students of color in discussions about racism (Bell, 2016, p. 3). Landhani and Sitter (2020) also propose racial identity caucusing as a strategy to confront internalized racism and dominance. Using the approach of race-based caucusing is one way that allows for experiential learning and exploration of oneself in relation to course content on power and oppression.

Race-Based Caucusing

Caucusing is a strategy that asks people with shared identities to come together to discuss a specific topic. Race-based caucusing, or sometimes called affinity groups (Abdullah & McCormack, 2008), is a strategy used in diversity, difference, and social justice education contexts (Adams, 2016). Race-based caucus groups can be useful for making separate spaces where individuals can do the different work required of white people and BIPOC (Racial Equity Tools, 2020a). These groups provide a space for individuals to explore their experiences and questions separate from those that do not share their identity (Bell et al., 2016). This strategy has been employed in multicultural training settings (Obear & Martinez, 2013), within academic institutions generally (Michael & Conger, 2009; Myers et al., 2019), and within the classroom (Hudson & Mountz, 2016; Walls et al., 2010). Caucusing is useful for participants to find affirmation and growth through their shared experiences, support, and an opportunity to practice discussing race and racism (Abdullah & McCormack, 2008). Specifically, caucus spaces allow white people to learn about their privilege and role in anti-racism work without placing the burden to teach them on people of color (Western States Center, 2003). In a classroom setting, white students are asked to discuss and critically reflect on privilege, guilt, and

bias, both implicit and explicit, in a space that does not further marginalize students of color (Hudson & Mountz, 2016). They also provide a space for people of color to find support and solidarity (Western States Center, 2003) and interrupt the patterns of whiteness and white dominance that are found in integrated spaces (Blackwell, 2018).

Current Study: Race-Based Caucusing

For this study, students participated in a race-based caucusing experience as part of a course focused on racism and other systems of oppression. Students in each class participated in either the group of white students or students of color. Students who self-identified as white participated in the white student caucus, and the students that self-identified as BIPOC participated in the students of color caucus. A week before the first caucus, students were introduced to the concept of caucusing, along with a reading (Western States Center, 2003, pp. 73-75) describing the caucusing process. The concept was also introduced within the classroom as an opportunity for all students to engage in dialogue with the understanding that each group has different, albeit important, work to do to address their own racialized socialization.

During the first session, students were asked to develop their own guidelines or rules for their subsequent caucusing sessions. In addition, the instructor provided general tasks or purposes for the group, upon which the groups were invited to expand or edit. For example, the students of color group was asked to focus on sharing their experiences of racism and their different experiences between and within different racial/ethnic groups and support one another while identifying their strengths. White students were asked to focus on identifying and recognizing their own participation in systems of racial domination and their internalized dominance. Each group's purpose was designed to encourage group members to focus on the intended work and goals of race-based caucusing (Western States Center, 2003). To also focus the caucus discussions, each group was given a handout with different discussion questions designed to help them to explore course readings through the lens of their caucusing group. Caucusing groups met between four to six times during the semester for approximately 30-60 minutes. Students met with their caucus groups in separate rooms, with one group of students leaving the primary classroom and the other group staying. Due to space constraints, the smaller group in both classes during one semester was asked to leave the classroom, as a small conference room was the only available space. For the class in a subsequent semester, a larger second classroom was secured, and the groups took turns leaving the main classroom. Students in the initial two sessions facilitated themselves using guided questions prepared by the instructor (Buehler) who moved back and forth between the two rooms for observational purposes. During the third semester, students in each group still took turns facilitating; however, both the instructor and a doctoral student (Rogerson), conducting a teaching assistantship in the course, were able to be present in both rooms consistently. The instructor stayed with the students of color group, and the teaching assistant stayed with the white students, and both instructors were available at all times for clarifying or interjecting. In all classes, a focus group was conducted at the end of the semester to learn about students' experiences with caucusing and their perceptions about the strategy's benefits and drawbacks.

Method

To better understand and identify the lived experiences of students involved in race-based caucusing within the social work classroom, a phenomenological approach was used to gather qualitative data. Both the how and what people view as part of this shared experience were examined to determine the essence of race-based caucusing in the social work classroom (Creswell, 2013). The main purpose of this exploratory study was to examine students' experiences and the perceived benefits and drawbacks of using identity-based caucusing groups. All procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Sample

Race-based caucusing occurred as part of the curriculum in a class focused on racism and other systems of oppression. All students enrolled in Dr. Buehler's sections of the course during two semesters (three sections total) participated in race-based caucusing activities throughout the duration of the course. For the study, informants were limited to students who were enrolled in the course and volunteered to participate in a focus group at the end of the semester.

Data Collection

Students in each class were informed by the instructor two weeks prior that focus groups would be conducted during the regularly scheduled class time and that their participation would be completely voluntary. Students were provided with written informed consent information sheets, and verbal consent was obtained (a waiver for documentation of consent was granted). Dr. Gushwa, serving as facilitator of the focus groups, provided students that did not want to participate in the focus group an opportunity to leave the classroom before the start of the focus groups but after the instructor(s) left the classroom. This technique prevented the instructor(s) from knowing the identity of students that chose to participate in the group. The focus groups were conducted within each class, with both caucus groups together. The focus group engaged informants in a dialogue about their experiences. The questions posed to students included: 1) "What were your initial reactions to the idea of using race-based caucusing in this course?" 2) "Did your feelings about the caucus groups change over the semester? If so, in what ways?" 3) "What were the benefits of using caucusing groups in this course?" 4) "What were the drawbacks of using caucusing groups in this course?" 5) "What overall feedback do you have on the process and implementation of caucusing groups in this course?" A total of thirty-six students were enrolled across all three sections of the course, and thirty-five students chose to participate in the focus groups. The racial identity, or any other potentially identifying information, was not collected in order to minimize the risk to confidentiality, as the class sizes were small. As a point of reference, at the time of the study, 27% of all students enrolled in the MSW program (both full- and part-time programs) at this institution identified as African/African-American, Latinx, Asian or Native American. Additionally,

81% identified as female, 15% as male, and four percent of the students did not answer this question.

Data Analysis Procedures

A hermeneutic phenomenological lens was used in data analysis to interpret and explore meaning as to how students experienced race-based caucusing in the social work classroom (van Manen, 1990). The methodology first focused on what the students experienced during race-based caucusing. Focus group transcripts were analyzed and coded by two researchers to explore general themes and shared experiences. The researchers met to discuss initial codes, explore meaning, and condense the experiences shared into the essence of race-based caucusing, as shared by the participants (van Manen, 1990). Thematic analysis was used to isolate themes and build a description of the experience (van Manen, 1990). This approach allowed the researchers to utilize their experiences related to their own racial affiliations while acknowledging the difficulty in separating bias from student experiences (van Manen, 1990).

Findings

Analysis of data generated from the focus groups is presented based upon the answers that students provided to focus group questions, specifically their initial reactions to caucusing, their experiences within their separate caucus spaces, and the benefits and challenges to caucusing. For direct quotes reported below, we indicated from which focus group (class) the comments came. Since both caucus groups in each class participated in one focus group and we did not collect student's racial identity, we were only able to draw conclusions about experiences for students in different caucus groups if they mentioned the caucus group in which they participated. After reporting student reactions to each topic, the authors will offer their own experiences with caucusing. These findings will be further interpreted in the discussion, and the authors will offer recommendations for instructors that may decide to utilize this approach in their classrooms.

Initial Reactions

Students were initially asked how they felt about the idea of race-based caucusing when it was introduced at the beginning of the semester. Student conceptions around the topic varied significantly, with some students feeling confused and apprehensive, others feeling threatened and discriminated against, and some excited. The confusion that some students expressed came from not understanding the purpose of caucusing or what caucusing even was.

It felt weird, at least for me, trying to figure out the purpose of the group and how it would be integrated into the classroom. (Focus Group #1)

I thought it was kind of odd but I trusted Anjali and I thought, well, if she's asking for it, there is some point to it. (Focus Group #3)

Initially I didn't really understand what the goal was at first, just preliminarily.
(Focus Group #2)

I didn't even know what caucusing was. I wanted to know more, but I was curious.
(Focus Group #1)

I would second that of just being intrigued— how is this going to go? I don't know?
(Focus Group #1)

Some students echoed this confusion along with the addition of some apprehension, making more specific mention of the utility of white students and students of color working separately. For these students, it was unclear how discussing race and racism without people of different races would be productive.

...but at first I thought how will we make progress if we aren't talking together.
(Focus Group #2)

A little nervous— it was the first time it kind of feels counter-intuitive to what we usually try to do. (Focus Group #1)

Some students also experienced discomfort because the prospect of separate caucus spaces brought to light racial differences, especially illuminating a lack of diversity in the classroom. In all sections included in this study, the number of students of color was smaller than that of white students. Additionally, the feelings of discomfort, particularly for students of color, were expressed by feeling discriminated against or segregated. Due to space constraints during one semester, the smaller group often was asked to move to another (smaller) space during the caucusing exercise, and some students noted this as a negative experience:

At first it felt uncomfortable just the size of the group, the students of color caucusing was very tiny, kind of felt segregated. (Focus Group #1)

I felt, at first I really didn't like it, wasn't open to it, kind of discriminated against, like we weren't good enough to be with the white group, she sent the minorities to the small room and I kind of took it like sending the black people to the back of the bus. (Focus Group #2)

I remember thinking, who are they going to make leave the class? (Focus Group #3)

I texted my husband and said, I told you they are going to make the black people, the people of color leave first. (Focus Group #3)

The questions about separate spaces and sentiments of apprehension were also present when students shared their curiosity and concern about what would be happening in the other group.

I felt like what is the other group going to say about us? Is it negative? There was some apprehension. (Focus Group # 3)

I think it gave everyone, most of us, the element of "what's going on in the other room?" (Focus Group #3)

I remember in the first couple of ones, a big part of me was wondering what the other group was saying, I wanted to be a fly on the wall. (Focus Group #2)

In contrast to the reactions of discomfort, apprehension, and confusion expressed above, other students shared their excitement for the opportunity to be in separate spaces. For these students, there was an opportunity that race-based caucusing would allow. The students that were excited seemed to have previously heard about caucusing.

I had heard about caucusing and affinity groups before and what I heard, they can be pretty effective and I was pretty excited for it. (Focus Group #3)

I was super excited because I've been trying to start race-based caucusing as part of my day job. (Focus Group #1)

I was excited. It felt, like good, it was a relief. (Focus Group #3)

In response to the above comment, a student shared, *I can agree with that, it was an immediate sense of solidarity and talking about things since we started. (Focus Group #3)*

I would second that too—I was excited because it seemed like the best space to be going in because the instructor was really great, and this was a good environment and it seemed like it would be fostered really well. (Focus Group #3)

Both students of color and white students expressed openness and concern in their initial reactions to the experience of caucusing. The initial reactions of students were varied and based upon both their prior experiences and the introduction of the topic. We found that there was also a range of reactions in their descriptions of their experiences in their separate caucus spaces.

Separate Space Experiences

Students had varying experiences within the separate spaces they occupied for their caucuses. By design, these separate spaces were intended as a place for reflective thinking using guided questions to challenge their personal and professional socially constructed identities and infrastructures of power and oppression. Experiences within the separate spaces ranged from feelings of solidarity and connection to disappointment and missed growth opportunities.

Challenges

Student perceptions of the challenges of race-based caucusing included having differing expectations of how the caucus groups would interact with one another and missed opportunities for growth. There were different expectations among students about if and how they should come together after separate caucuses. Some white students felt allowing white students to be in a group without a person of color did not create a space that holds people accountable for their biases. For other students, there was a desire to share more space together in order to hear about the process or experiences of other students rather than from a standpoint of accountability. However, not all students, particularly

students of color, shared this perspective of wanting to always have more shared space. The other challenge was experienced specifically by individuals in the white student caucus. They expressed disappointment that opportunities were missed, at times, to challenge structures of oppression. Some white students expressed frustration with their experience in the white student caucus because it was superficial and fell short in challenging the members on their privilege and complicity in the system, potentially wanting a facilitator to challenge beliefs, statements, and biases.

Differing Expectations. Students expressed varying expectations regarding what should happen after caucusing. Some students felt the experience of students of color should be the focal learning point to help white students understand. Others felt white students should report back or come back together as a larger group as a way to be accountable to others and themselves.

I was hoping that the white caucus would report to the people of color caucus so there would be some accountability to what we discussed— that's how I've seen it before— so we could report actions out of it. (Focus Group #1)

But the accountability piece, it felt there wasn't a lot of accountability in the room, and a lot of power in the room, we could talk about what was comfortable because we didn't report out-- it felt like it perpetuated some power dynamics for me. (Focus Group #1)

I think on top of being uncomfortable and like not coming together at the end with a group discussion, I think that it was kind of difficult because the questions were so... like we weren't really able to learn from the other perspective, in my case I would have wanted to know how people who don't identify as white experience similar situations and we never got to do that as a group. (Focus Group #2)

I agree. When you think about it, what really was the purpose of it? I think one of the reasons why we are here is to learn and grow and when we are separate we aren't really doing that. (Focus Group #3)

For other students, the desire to come back together was more about wanting to hear about the process or topics discussed in the other group, perhaps from a place of curiosity or closure rather than accountability.

We were wondering if others were having the same conversations, but if we come back to class, and then sit awkwardly-- we were waiting for a day of caucusing so that we can talk together and see, I really appreciated our second to last caucus where we came together because it felt like a complete session instead of waiting around and not being a follow up to it. (Focus Group #1)

It kind of felt like I wanted more, like I didn't get the closure for us. I was hoping we would talk about what we had discussed, what our experiences were like all together. (Focus Group #2)

I also think it could have been really helpful to, in the same day, have caucuses and then come together rather than do it on a separate day because that would force us to have a brave space, because the day we did check ourselves on whether

we were actually doing the work was when people were becoming vulnerable. (Focus Group #3)

I really appreciated that we did come back as a group at our last caucus to share together, but I do think that it was beneficial that we did a few individual caucuses without that at first, personally if only kind of sort of feeling left out because you want to think that you can provide the same safe environment as a white person as you care, and maybe that's not true, having a few sessions were we didn't come back, it helped me to learn. (Focus Group #1)

This previous comment, from a white student, echoed comments shared by students of color who did not feel the need to share space because the separate spaces were more comfortable and needed. These students felt the separate spaces provided an opportunity for safe conversations in a manner that was different from everyday interactions in a primarily white institution.

People of color need that space among white people because we go through things differently, that space and time is effective and I don't think it should always be a time to come back together, to pretend to be kumbaya. (Focus Group #3)

I felt more comfortable sharing things with the minorities than I would have with the dominant group. (Focus Group #2)

I don't know if it was our group was so tiny, I found that we kind spoke about the question without even reading the questions ahead of time...we had answered them, it felt natural (Focus Group #1)

I don't know-- I don't know if I would have been as open with a white instructor [observing the student of color caucus]. (Focus Group #3)

Missed Opportunities. Another challenge that mainly white students expressed was that they felt the experience was a missed opportunity for further growth. These students saw their discussions as superficial and wanted to see more in-depth discussions that dissected and addressed racism and oppression to move towards core systemic change. Students attributed these missed opportunities to a lack of facilitation and peer challenges without an outside faculty facilitator.

I liked it less as the semester went on because I don't think we did as good as a job of facilitating ourselves. The white group— I wish there was someone there to challenge us more, it was just kind of an echo chamber of being white— maybe if there were two faculty members. (Focus Group #1)

Just to give you some diversity, I had a different experience, I was initially really excited and ended up feeling pretty disappointed, I didn't feel like we were as pushed as I was hoping we would be. I wanted more discomfort, in other words. (Focus Group #2)

I think and when we did the white caucus we kind of discussed in the first couple of caucuses as well, we were coming to the class kind of tentative anyway, knowing we were going to learn about ourselves, being white and whiteness, we were

willing to learn, but we learned early on that white people should have a voice in the racism conversation and debate, but maybe that we didn't have the tools to do that effectively on our own. (Focus Group #2)

I personally thought it could have been more beneficial to have a little more facilitation in our caucus because it felt disorganized or that we were rushing through things a lot- there were significant tensions and issues that arose in our caucus at times, to be able to have some kind of structure could have been helpful. (Focus Group #3)

Benefits

Students also shared the benefits they found in their experiences with race-based caucusing. Some experienced solidarity; others stated the separate spaces allowed for different work to be done, as well as an increased appreciation of others and the ability to have conversations that might not have been possible in the larger group.

Growth. Students shared experiences that represented growth that resulted from their participation in caucusing. This growth was related to learning from one another and about one another. These learning experiences allowed students to recognize the differences they shared with one another even though they were in the same caucusing groups, as well as their similarities.

I thought it was interesting that we were talking about privilege, in a way this was an example of dismantling oppression in the sense that because we are all unified by being the same race, it doesn't mean we agree to the same norms. Like because we are all white, we have the same perspectives, but that's not true— we have different perspectives on race and racism, so I think there was growth in that area. (Focus Group #3)

I think that having the focus on a dedicated opportunity to discuss the topic was something that I feel like I don't get enough of in my life, even though I put my spaces and communities to find that, so to have that space that was carved out and devoted to that— I felt that it should be everywhere. (Focus Group #2)

Actually doing it pushed me out of my comfort zone because there's only so much you can learn in the classroom. Anjali said it would challenge us, and it did-- that was beneficial. (Focus Group #1)

The people of color group, we came from very different backgrounds, so it was interesting to hear everyone's point of view and how there was commonalities of experiences of oppression and the differences as well. (Focus Group #2)

I thought that it was very beneficial just because we were a caucus of people of color but not from the same ethnicity but not with the same experiences. (Focus Group #1)

Connection. Another benefit shared, particularly by students of color, was the bonds and connections they formed with the other students in their caucusing group. Solidarity

was developed through shared experiences and exploring their differences. The experiences of being able to develop friendships came from being able to have a space to share and be able to be themselves, particularly in a primarily white institution.

I can say that in the people of color caucus group, we definitely developed a nice little bond, I feel like when we broke out into groups, we had fun, it was positive, we attributed it to the caucus group positivity because we got together, had fun, and worked and made friendships. (Focus Group #2)

I agree, in addition we did develop a bond where we were comfortable in expressing how we felt, we all mattered, but we came from different places, but we had differences. (Focus Group #2)

I feel like it strengthened relationships that probably wouldn't have been fostered had we not separated. I feel like we've gotten stronger collectively. (Focus Group #3)

It was a benefit—it was a little freedom, it was freedom, it was showing what [name of institution] could be if it would lighten up and let in some diversity. (Focus Group #3)

I felt like I was able to connect more with my peers in our [student of color] caucus group. We were able to be open and honest. (Focus Group #1)

Student experiences of caucusing were varied and provided insight into both the successes and shortcomings of this strategy to dismantle white supremacy in the classroom. As instructors, we had our own processes, perceptions, and feelings about using race-based caucusing in the classroom. Below we share these experiences to illuminate not only the product of race-based caucusing but also the process.

Instructor Perspectives

The course instructor, a bi-racial woman of color, led the first two courses, and in the third section, a white doctoral student joined the class as a teaching assistant. With this addition, each caucusing group had an observer/facilitator. The authors believe both the instructor and teaching assistant experiences of race-based caucusing provide additional context for the study. Their experiences are as follows:

Course Instructor

My initial decision to start incorporating caucusing came after teaching this course for several semesters and recognizing patterns in my attempts to facilitate a discussion with the whole class around racialized socialization and participation in systems of power and oppression. It was clear that white students “tip-toed” around discussing their whiteness in a way that signaled their participation in the system. Assigned readings were focused on power and white supremacy, but class discussions often turned abstract, with students citing “they” or “the system.” Students also discussed the consequences of racial oppression, with many white students talking about people of color as an abstract “other.”

It felt like these conversations occurred to the detriment of students of color, and some shared that it felt like a class meant for white people, not them. I sought to provide a space where students would have more critical and hands-on experiences discussing race and racism and their own internalized racialization. It felt a bit controversial to introduce the concept of race-based caucusing to students. Students reacted with shock and confusion to the idea, and my nervousness about employing a new technique added to my apprehension. In the first semester, when I was the only instructor, I would move back and forth between the rooms to listen to both caucuses, and at first, it was definitely awkward for students. As the semester went on, students seemed to adapt to both the concept and the routine of caucusing, as well as my presence in the room. Like my co-author, I noticed that white students focused on feeling “bad” or “guilty” about the oppression that people of color experience. I worked to develop discussion questions that would push white students to talk about whiteness and their complicity in white supremacy; however, there certainly was room for more critical discussion. I also was able to witness the positive impact that the experience had on students of color. As was demonstrated in their quotes above, it was a space that enriched their experience in the class and the institution. In both the first semester on my own and in the semester with a co-instructor, I observed positive experiences and heard from students that it was valuable. There were certainly some unanticipated considerations, successes, and challenges, all discussed below.

Teaching Assistant

As a white person who facilitated one semester of the race-based caucusing with white students, I noticed apprehension during the initial stages of meetings. It felt as if the group was “playing nice,” so to speak, by gauging what they were saying when responding to the questions, almost providing the “social work” answer, instead of acknowledging personal biases. I felt that at times students believed acknowledgement of bias or difference to be “bad,” so they avoided acknowledging bias or difference in any way. Everyone has biases. I was hoping the group would get to a place where they could acknowledge these biases and have an open dialogue, getting to where, I felt, the real work lived. Several sessions into the caucusing, one student did share a personal belief/bias with which students visibly struggled. It was upsetting to some, and the conversation became difficult. I allowed the conversation to continue, wondering if someone might dig a little deeper. Instead, the group became divided, using their visible anger and sadness about what was said to judge. In future opportunities, I hope to be able to facilitate this conversation differently by exploring bias and creating a space for this discussion to occur, acknowledging the emotional response it may elicit.

Discussion

Overall, we found that the themes outlined above reflected that, in some ways, the caucus groups were successful in progressing toward their intended purpose, but there were also some shortcomings. In addition to discussing these outcomes, we offer some suggestions for other instructors who may want to implement caucusing to address white supremacy in their classrooms.

Outcomes

Race-based caucusing was implemented in the classroom context as a method to de-center the experience of whiteness in learning about racism and other systems of oppression. The caucus groups were tasked to approach the course material through the lens or purpose of their individual caucus groups. The white students were asked to focus on identifying and recognizing their participation in systems of racial domination and their internalized dominance. Students of color were encouraged to share their own experiences of racism and their different experiences between and within different racial/ethnic groups and support one another while identifying their strengths. Based on our reading of what students shared in the focus groups and our own experiences in the classroom, we did not feel that both of these desired outcomes were fully realized. While the students of color seemed to find many strengths in the experiences within their caucus space, we see from the white students' feedback that further facilitation and challenge were needed for their caucus.

It was primarily white students that reported that the group missed the mark. Specifically, some white students felt that they were not pushed enough to challenge their own or their colleagues' privilege. As a result, the conversations were cautious and approached gingerly by students, and we do not feel that the aspirations of the white student caucus group were fully met. One factor to which we attribute not reaching the desired outcomes is white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). DiAngelo (2011) defines white fragility as

a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (p. 57)

As students from the white student caucus reported, classmates were "tentative," and their groups were an "echo-chamber." The discussion questions provided by the instructor were intended to dissect their own participation in white supremacy and the implications of their privilege, which could have provoked white fragility and stifled the conversation. Despite students saying that they wanted to be "challenged" and "pushed," DiAngelo (2011) describes the process of avoiding this racial stress as unconscious and motivated by the desire to "restore equilibrium" (p. 58) of racial privilege.

Students themselves did not attribute the lack of challenge to white fragility but rather to not having a facilitator at all times. While facilitators are generally used in caucusing (Abdullah & McCormack, 2008; Walls et al., 2010), in the initial iterations of the caucuses, practically speaking, one instructor could not be in two places at once. As mentioned above, across all semesters, students were asked to choose a facilitator for the session and guide the discussion based upon the questions provided by the instructor. For white students, these questions were designed to frame readings and course material in a way that would allow them to challenge their own conceptions and experiences with whiteness. In the semester when there was a second instructor, we made a conscious decision to have students still to facilitate themselves, as we were concerned that the pattern of saying "the right" thing would persist if an instructor were an active part of the discussion. Student

remarks in the one focus group supported this: “my concern is that would heighten the effect of trying to say the right thing as progressive social workers vs. being honest and going deeper” (Focus Group #1). We further address the topic of facilitation below.

The students of color caucus focused on sharing their experiences of oppression and learning from one another about their different experiences between and within different racial/ethnic groups. Their discussion questions were framed around identifying these experiences, supporting one another, and identifying their strengths. Based on the findings outlined above, we feel that students of color were indeed able to build connections with one another and find solidarity in shared experiences. They also identified within-group differences that were an opportunity for their growth and development. These outcomes for students of color were especially meaningful within a primarily white academic institution. As Blackwell (2018) notes,

People of color need their own spaces. Black people need their own spaces. We need places in which we can gather and be free from the mainstream stereotypes and marginalization that permeate every other societal space we occupy. We need spaces where we can be our authentic selves without white people’s judgment and insecurity muzzling that expression. We need spaces where we can simply be—where we can get off the treadmill of making white people comfortable and finally realize just how tired we are. (para. 3)

Our intended outcome was to create a space for students of color within our primarily white institution to have space where they could connect, be themselves, and have their experiences validated (Obear & martinez, 2013). Similar to the BSW students that do not belong to dominant groups that participated in a variety of affinity groups (Myers, et al., 2019), our students expressed relief and found connection in the face of an environment that can feel isolated.

Unanticipated Outcomes

One theme or topic we had not anticipated was the desire of some students to come back together at the end of each session. The inclusion of a reporting or processing component was not included in the structure of caucusing. Coming together to report on accountability and shared goals over long periods of time is typical in some contexts, such as ongoing caucusing in an organization (Blitz & Kohl, 2012) or training sessions (Obear & martinez, 2013), and is recommended by Bell et al. (2016); however, we chose not to do this for several reasons. First and foremost, the design of caucusing in this context was to de-center whiteness and remove the responsibility often placed on students of color to “teach” white students. The idea of coming together and reporting out felt as if it would still place a burden on students of color. As noted in the findings, some white students expressed a desire to be “accountable” to the students of color. The expression of this desire to be accountable appears as an extension of this expectation of white students to be taught by or that they can only learn from students of color. When conversations of coming together came up after caucusing, the instructor (Buehler) did reframe for students the purpose of the groups was not to be accountable to one another, but rather to engage in the work of recognizing and working through their own racialization. Further, while Bell and colleagues (2016) do suggest reporting out in an anonymous way what the caucus groups

discussed, the students of color caucus groups were very small, and it seemed that anonymous reporting out would risk the confidentiality of group members. Accountability was not the reason that all students wanted to come together. For others, it seemed a desire to know what was happening in the other group or a desire to come together to work toward a common goal. In response to this desire, in the first semester, the instructor did have both groups come together at the very end of the semester to talk about what they felt would be their goals to continue dismantling racism as social workers. In the third section, both caucus groups did not come together at the end of the semester due to time constraints associated with a shortened summer semester.

Suggestions

The use of race-based caucusing at a primarily white university in the Northeast was chosen as a technique to allow space for students to examine and dismantle internalized social constructs while challenging white supremacy and fragility. While our findings show that this technique allows students opportunities for safe or brave spaces (Arao & Clemens, 2013), connection, growth, and reflection, there are changes that could be made in the future to amplify the benefits of race-based caucusing. Race-based caucusing groups utilized two different separate spaces to engage in their work during the determined times. For this study, one group remained in the classroom, while the other group left the room to utilize another space. The group that left the room varied between cohorts, sometimes it was the students of color, and other times it was the white students. Logistically, one group had to remain in the classroom because of space constraints; however, in the future, it is recommended to have two separate spaces (other than the classroom) for the caucusing to occur. This allows for a differentiation between the purpose of the shared classroom and the purpose of the separate caucus spaces. While self-reflection and critical thinking should occur in both the shared class and caucus groups, the distinction between the spaces may serve as a marker or reminder to students of the purpose of engaging in race-based caucusing. Additionally, the optics and experiences of students of color who were asked to leave the room are acknowledged and validated. The impact of the decision made by the instructor (Buehler) is owned, and she would recommend that it is essential for both groups to leave the classroom space. Furthermore, the need for different spaces will allow the groups to return to the shared classroom once their group concludes and not require them to wait for the other group to finish. While it was not practical based on the racial breakdown of the classes in the context of this study, we also would recommend offering a “third space” (Hudson & Mountz, 2016) for students that identify as biracial or multiracial.

The instructor prepared students for the experience by explaining race-based caucusing and providing a reading that described its purpose. Additionally, students were equipped with guidelines for dialogue (Arao & Clemens, 2013), which they developed during the first class and in the individual caucuses. Further, expectations were discussed before separating for the caucusing. Despite this preparation, student feedback indicates that students were seeking more clarity regarding expectations and the purpose of the caucusing. Suggestions for improvement would be to provide a written structure before each session to be utilized during the caucus. This could provide supplementary guidance

that the students were seeking. Additionally, engaging students in a more in-depth and ongoing discussion about the purpose of caucusing, including a clear conversation about the idea of accountability and the burden placed on people of color to educate white people would further clarify the activity. An additional recommendation would be to have each group select a student facilitator and a student note-taker for their time together. These roles should differ and rotate between different students for each session and could provide additional structure as suggested by students. Students also indicated a desire for more time allotted to caucusing and that the time/days for caucusing be standardized throughout the term, so they are both expected, but also allow for ample discussion time. Certainly, this is a limitation to using this strategy as part of the structure of the class; however, it is also a benefit as students can consistently meet throughout the semester, integrating the course content.

Finally, one of the strongest recommendations from this experience is the ability to provide facilitation or support for both groups with facilitators that share the racial identity of the group (instructor of color and white instructor). We recognize the reality of the limits on faculty time, but based on our experience, a teaching assistant, doctoral student, or even a former student would be beneficial to bolster the success of this strategy in the classroom. Students of color and white students had different perceptions of the need for more direct or hands-on facilitation. As we discussed above, this is likely due to the nature of the work expected of the white students. While students may be inclined to say the “right” thing in front of an instructor, it is suggested that the facilitator be aware of this tendency and use the opportunity to challenge students in these teachable moments. We recommend facilitators provide support and guidance as requested by students, as well as based on the opinions and experience of the facilitator with the students. We offer the recommendation that facilitators can invite and challenge students to self-reflect and challenge themselves.

Implications for Social Work

Providing social work students with ongoing educational opportunities that address structural power and oppression is imperative to their responsibility to demonstrate the core value of social justice as future practitioners. Engaging difference and diversity in practice is both a central tenant to social work education (CSWE, 2015) and the profession (NASW, 2017). Race-based caucusing “is one strategy we use to confront the effects of internalized racist oppression and internalized racist superiority” (Crossroads, n.d., p. 1). This strategy allows students to actively work to dismantle internalized socially constructed beliefs while being afforded the opportunity to do so in separate spaces, allowing for different work to become the focus. Social workers should confront the structure and effects of racism. Race-based caucusing provides a step towards this. It allows students an opportunity to engage in an experiential learning activity that focuses on dismantling their own internalized power and oppression. It also provides students concrete strategies that they can then utilize in the field to address systemic racism in organizations in which they work and within broader society.

Conclusion

The use of race-based caucusing in an MSW classroom setting for the purposes of providing students the experience of examining and questioning their internalized racialization and de-centering the focus on whiteness in the classroom proved to be a beneficial strategy with unique challenges. Based on the experiences shared by students, there was strength in the connections forged, particularly for students of color, and the growth it fostered across groups. With the suggestions outlined above, we believe that the challenges experienced by students can be overcome. Race-based caucusing is one strategy that can be implemented in the social work classroom to work toward social justice and dismantle white supremacy.

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