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What is This?

Telling Tales out of School Dilemmas of Race and Inclusiveness in the Liberal Academy

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Colleges and universities are gateways to upward mobility and committed in principle to candid discourse and progressive policies on diversity. In this article, the author relates a narrative of personal experience during graduate study in sociology, to reflect on the subtle texture of racial tension and interaction in a setting that most would assume to be accepting of, if not enlightened about, difference. The discussion highlights four issues that are likely to be generally relevant in the process of working toward racial diversity in graduate programs in the social sciences and humanities: (a) the significance of the composition of groups (i.e., the proportion of people of color in a graduate cohort or program); (b) conflict between individualist versus collectivist orientations; (c) pressure to reconcile multiple perspectives and grievances based on gender and class as well as racial/ethnic identities; and (d) conflicting styles of communicating and resolving racial tensions.

Keywords: *race; diversity; graduate education; case method; narrative*

The unifying theme in this collection of articles is *pedagogy, systems of oppression, and social justice*. Scholars need to specify these terms, to give them clearer meanings for the purpose at hand. Pedagogy is not confined to formal classroom instruction but also encompasses broader aspirations and power relations that drive educational processes. As such, pedagogy is both a means and an object of analysis in social research. A conscious, critical pedagogy also calls for scrutiny of the sources we use to represent (both as teachers and scholars) systems of oppression. A critical pedagogical approach invites such questions as Do those sources privilege concepts or methods that are specialized or abstract? and Do they relate to the daily worlds and routines in which systems of oppression operate and are sustained or challenged?

To what extent do particular studies help us to overcome, rather than merely reproduce, stereotypical assumptions about race and social processes? How are we

Author's Note: This is an expanded version of a lecture I delivered to undergraduates at Miami University. I appreciate their comments, as I do the invitation of Rodney Coates to prepare the lecture. Thanks as well to Lee Harrington, Ted Wagenaar, David Shulman, Doris Slesinger, and Edward Wellin for substantive and editorial suggestions.

to identify sites or systems of oppression? The university, for example, is at once a bastion of privilege and a symbol of meritocracy and candid inquiry (McClelland & Auster, 1990). Thus, critical pedagogies of race may lead us to rethink conventional beliefs about the sources and forms of oppression. Like all institutions, the university contains multiple realities, refracting the historical experiences and future aspirations of various groups. This abstract statement has personal resonance: The same experience—entering graduate school—which I (a White man then nearing age 30) entered with joyful expectation, was for Davidson (1973), a fellow sociologist, recounted as “The Furious Passage of the Black Graduate Student.”

In this article, I investigate barriers and responses to racial diversity in a particular educational niche—graduate study in the social sciences. Although my focus is on sociology, I am confident that the issues and implications I raise are generally applicable to the social sciences and to education and the humanities, which together attract the majority of African American doctoral students (Levine, Roth, & Sutter, 2001; Willie, Grady, & Hope, 1991, p. 44). Although rightly seen as privileged and elite, academic research institutions nonetheless play a role in shaping public discourse and policy about systems of oppression and social justice; thus, diversity in these institutions is especially important to achieve. Also, whereas the number of African American graduate students is greater in the social sciences than in the natural sciences or business (Willie et al., 1991, pp. 44-45), it is small as a proportion of the total student and faculty population (Bonilla-Silva & Herring, 1999; Feagin & Vera, 2001, pp. 104-105; also see Altbach, Lomotey, & Rivers, 2002). In fact, the total number and proportion of African American doctorates in the United States peaked in the mid-1970s and now account for only about 6% of the total (numbering 25 PhDs in 1996, the year before I earned my degree; see also Spalter-Roth, Lee, and Levine, 2001). The proportion of faculty members of color at doctoral-granting institutions is comparably small. Bonilla-Silva and Herring (1999), reporting on a survey of top-ranked departments of sociology, revealed that fewer than 15% had more than one African American member on the tenure track and six programs had only one African American or Latino member. It is clear, then, that public perceptions of the social sciences as somehow dominated by a liberal preoccupation with non-European Americans is at odds with reality; students of color continue to be conspicuously outnumbered in graduate programs in the social sciences.¹

Contextualizing My Topic and Approach

In this article I turn inward, toward academic life and culture, and excavate my experience of grappling with diversity and change in an academic department. The title’s “Telling Tales . . .” refers not only to my mode of analysis, centered on the heuristic value of personal stories but also connotes the normative taboo—especially strong in academic circles—against airing experiences in which one is revealed to

have been insensitive or blind to racial dynamics. As I discuss more fully below, personal stories serve to show how people are active agents in producing racial meanings and outcomes; in turn, personal accounts are invaluable for assessing the relevance of more abstract concepts or measures commonly used in research. In this spirit, my tale is neither a model nor a confessional but simply the most vivid and direct route to the issues I wish to explore.

My agenda is to deconstruct an intense personal experience, while I was a graduate student, to help convey the subtle texture of race relations in a particular setting within higher education. My focus is on graduate training, which has been subject to far less scrutiny than has race relations in undergraduate education² (exceptions include Davidson, 1973; Levine, Rodriguez, Howery, & Latoni-Rodriguez, 2002; Margolis & Romero, 1998; Shulman & Silver, 2003; Willie et al., 1991). A recurring theme in the literature on graduate school is a shift in emphasis from successful admission and performance in classes—necessary but not sufficient requirements—to informal support networks and processes of mentoring if students are to survive and launch academic careers (Levine et al., 2002). Informal networks of social support are especially crucial for graduate students because the process and outcomes of graduate study are riddled with uncertainty. The premium placed on intellectual creativity is great (especially in the most competitive programs), but so too are the risks. These pressures, or at least the perception of them (Davidson, 1973), are compounded for students of color.

I present my experience as an instructive case, to help assess and generate insights about race in this context; that is, I summarize—and inevitably simplify—a chain of events to show how efforts to advance racial inclusiveness and dialogue in this setting were complicated, and nearly thwarted, by features of the social and organizational context that many of those involved (Whites especially) saw as incidental to race. Race is not a dichotomous or isolated status but rather is a fluid one that has different connotations and levels of intensity across different settings; furthermore, to borrow statistical parlance, race is also a variable that is intertwined and confounded with others that are context specific. Racial interactions, tensions, and identities in academe are distinctly different, for example, than are those in corporate careers (Collins, 1997) or among soldiers during wartime (Terry, 1984). Even within the realm of schooling, racial dynamics are different in primary grades, in connection with adolescent development and peer groups (Tatum, 1997), than in collegiate residence halls (e.g., Moffatt, 1989). Further defining our conceptual challenge, Hurtado (1992) noted that social interaction in schools takes place in

multiple environments [that] can be ordered along a continuum according to proximity to the individual. Demographic and structural attributes . . . are considered distal, whereas the perceived environment is considered the most proximal and is of immediate significance to the actor. (pp. 546-547)

Given the sociocultural embeddedness of race, it is a daunting problem to capture or analyze racial dynamics empirically. One solution lies in stories, narrative accounts,

which are among the approaches to the sociology of everyday life. Central to these approaches is a commitment to understanding subjective meanings, contextual features of social action, and accounts of how social interaction sustains ongoing institutions (Adler, Adler, & Fontana, 1987). Connecting this approach to the study of race, Lewis (2003) wrote that “to understand the contemporary production and reproduction of racial ideology and racial structures, we must look to the day-to-day events and arenas where ideologies and structures are lived out” (p. 284). I believe that sustained reflection on what Lewis calls “everyday race-making,” in situations in which one has both contextual knowledge and a personal stake, is a potentially powerful source of insights and of strategies toward racial inclusiveness. Another benefit of this experiential approach is that it implicates all of us—writer and readers alike—as active agents in producing and challenging systems of social control (Coates, 2003). This helps to bridge the distance between structure and agency that is too often imposed on discussions of race, by theoretical abstraction or by fear of conflict or judgment. My intention, then, is not to confirm or debunk any particular theoretical perspective on race in higher education. Rather, it is to provoke reflection and informed speculation among readers, and to identify barriers that are likely to arise in other graduate programs facing similar circumstances. Through such reflection, we can hope to move beyond what Lasch-Quinn (2001, pp. 1-39) termed “racial choreography” (which she described as ritualized and inauthentic) and toward a greater understanding of the dance that takes place around race in academic life.

My mode of analysis is to describe events that I experienced firsthand, to create a narrative case. As in the case method, most commonly used in business and professional training programs, the utility of the narrative is heuristic rather than realistic (e.g., Boehrer & Linsky, 1990). In telling the story, I neither assume nor claim that the story/case is true, except to my own perception and firsthand experience. Indeed, the point of sharing it is precisely to show how limited was my understanding of what was occurring around me. In the spirit of the classic Kurosawa film *Rashomon*, the narrative/case helps reveal how very different people’s attributions and perceptions can be, even in response to shared events. I freely acknowledge that in telling the story, I make inferences about other people’s actions and intentions; these are based on my and others’ impressions, none of which are authoritative. As Katz (1999, pp. 316-323) argued, this problem of intersubjective consensus of meaning is pervasive; fragile and elusive, it is nonetheless an essential basis for maintaining social interaction. Ultimately, my claim is that the potential value of telling and reflecting on the story—in broad strokes—is worth the risk (if not certainty) of misreading others.

Another virtue of narrative accounts, as compared with more detached genres of research, is that they leave room for the expression of emotion. Although not central to the meaning of a narrative, the emotional tone of the events and the telling bear importantly on the honesty and the moral the story holds for an audience. As will become clear, I look back on these events with feelings of sharp disappointment.

Although, strictly speaking, there were no “casualties” of this episode (all the students completed their degrees and pursued their careers), many people with whom I spoke to then and since share this emotion: a sense that the initial spirit of racial unity and candor in the department was lost amid cascading events that cast all concerned into roles that were by turns contentious, strident, and defensive. The entry of such a diverse and dynamic cohort was a catalyst not only for expanding the department’s range of critical approaches but also for pressing what were becoming widespread challenges to conventional courses, literatures, and career models in sociology.³

It is important to make clear that my intention is not to psychologize or to reduce the tensions described to misunderstanding or miscommunication. Wellman (1993) is among those who argue persuasively that the study of race relations in the United States has long been too preoccupied with psychological and attitudinal bases of conflict, to the detriment of our understanding of material conflicts over ideas, resources, and institutions (see also Lasch-Quinn, 2001). The attitudinal approach, which from Allport’s (1954/1979) work onward has been of enormous value, has nonetheless been limited in addressing structural social arrangements. Wellman (1993) concluded

Taken together, the assumptions used by sociologists reflect a distinctly middle-class, liberal view of race relations. Racism is not a structural characteristic, it exists mainly in the minds of people; it is the exception, not the rule; it is a problem that can be solved without basic institutional alteration of society—people’s thinking can be changed, their consciousness “raised,” or we can benignly neglect the problem. (pp. 49-50)

In a similar vein, Bell (2003) found a similar “color-blind ideology” pervades the stories told by White informants in a sample of college-educated adults whom she interviewed about experiences of racism. Such background assumptions about race are important to uncover not only in their own right but because they shape ongoing interactions and ways in which, as Blauner (2001) shows, Blacks and Whites often “talk past one another” (pp. 193-206).

The research literature on race relations has tended, in my reading, to oscillate between attention to egregious and overt forms of racism on one hand and the more benign attitudinal model on the other. This tendency has left us with a shortage of everyday narratives of racial tension and resolution. The cost of this shortage, first, is that an excessive weight falls on individuals—versus institutional arrangements or material conflicts—as sources of the problem. To the extent that people (especially members of dominant groups) are either unaware of or condemn overt racism, they tend to disengage from the process of reform. Second, to this extent, we fail to investigate the subtle, institutional ways in which factors that are not explicitly racial may contribute systematically to discrimination or oppression. A third problem in the literature has too often been an ahistorical framing of the problem. In the context of higher education, it is helpful to note a shift in emphasis from earlier studies of

access (addressing formal and informal barriers to entry for students of color) in the decades following the civil rights movement of the 1960s, toward greater attention after the impact of affirmative action policies to issues of campus racial climate (Levine et al., 2002).⁴ Sharpening this point, Brown (2002) argued that the goal in educational institutions should not be mere statistical diversity but a genuine environment for diversity “as an opportunity for institutional advancement, a condition to be prized and nurtured . . . [in which] differences in personal and cultural experience would not just be tolerated but . . . celebrated as a source of excellence” (pp. 1081-1082). Achieving this goal, even in the presence of an active institutional commitment, requires a transitional process involving candid debate and compromise (e.g., over such issues as control of symbolic resources in the form of courses or curricular change, if not over authority positions and material resources). Shedding light on challenges and barriers in this transition is the focus of the narrative and interpretation below. Whereas particular narratives of racial tension admittedly lack general applicability, they expose subtle interactional, institutional, and historical nuances that complement macro-level approaches.

The Case Method and Sociological Reflection

An important objective and ethos of sociology is, in Mills’s (1959) familiar term, to connect biography and history. For Mills and his followers, the promise of the social research is to contextualize and illuminate our personal worlds. One might expect this ethos to be especially strong among academics, in examining their workaday routines. Yet with such notable exceptions as feminist writers (e.g., Orlans & Wallace, 1994) who declared the personal is political, it is rare to find firsthand accounts of “backstage” perceptions and conflicts in academic life. This may be especially true of issues surrounding race. This tendency to privatize racial experiences leaves us with a limited stock of knowledge of regarding the actual flow—for good or ill—of racial contacts.

Perhaps the most vivid and complex form for capturing experience is through stories or *narratives*. The latter term has been adopted widely and has diverse uses and connotations in the social sciences and humanities.⁵ Richardson (1990) wrote the following about defining features of narrative (relevant for sociological interpretation):

Narrative displays the goals and intentions of human actors; it makes individuals, cultures, societies, and historical epochs comprehensible as wholes; it humanizes time; and allows us to contemplate the effects of our actions, and to alter the direction of our lives. (p. 117)

Narratives can be likened to stories but have distinctive features and (for my purpose) virtues. A narrative requires a narrator—a protagonist from whose point of view the story is told and whose position (relative to others) and moral stance are

clear and central to the telling. Narratives, then, are neither neutral nor detached; they may be suffused with emotion and with the recognition of one's vulnerability and limited ability to control events.⁶ Finally, here, narratives allow for contradiction, ambiguity, unintended consequences and fateful conjunctions of disparate events. Conventional standards of methodological rigor in social research leave little room for personal stories. Duster (1989) wrote in this connection that among social researchers, it is dismissive to say that an account is anecdotal. Such an account, it is implied, is singular and idiosyncratic and thus has no larger value or meaning. But he argued for the value of what he termed the "structural anecdote," an account that, even if singular, is no less revealing of status rankings.⁷

The case method of teaching follows a similar logic to that of narrative analysis. In it, the narrative (which can, but need not, be factual) is presented to provide "grist for inductive learning; students engage in the intellectual and emotional exercise of facing complex problems and making critical decisions within the constraints imposed by reality, e.g., limited time and information, and pervasive uncertainty" (Boehrer & Linsky, 1990, cited on the Web site of the Harvard Business School, <http://www.hbs.edu/case/>). In sum, the case method joins the interpretive virtues of narrative analysis with an explicit pedagogical strategy.⁸

A Narrative Case: "Fumbling Toward Diversity"

Substantively, the case and the discussion that follow deal with responses to racial diversity and institutional change in what most would regard as a liberal, if not enlightened, setting—a sociology department in a research university in the United States (referred to below as Central University). The events I describe followed the entry of a cohort of graduate students, a cohort in which both the number and proportion of African American students were relatively greater than in earlier years. Constituting more than one-third of the entering cohort, students of color were more likely to be perceived, and to perceive themselves, as a collectivity. In turn, I believe those students felt a stronger sense of power and obligation within the department to assert their influence in a historically White institution.⁹

This spirit of critique, which takes various forms, is consistent with the discipline of sociology (along with the arts and humanities) and with the particular rite of passage that cohorts of graduate students negotiate. The early years of graduate school—before students are committed to the specialization of dissertation work or the pressures of finding jobs—are especially stimulating and accepting of such challenges; this is when required courses in theory and methods become forums for intergenerational debates, between students and faculty, about the status and future of disciplines. Closer to home, the period I write about was a most exciting and hopeful time in a department that had a strong history of commitment to research on race and had long been home to distinguished African American scholars.¹⁰

Central University is a respected private institution with approximately 8,000 undergraduates and several thousand graduate students. It is located in a large metropolitan area. In addition to its strength in the social sciences, the university is home to programs in African, African American, and ethnic studies. The topics of race and inequality have been prominent in the department's history and were becoming increasingly central nationally with the publication of *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Wilson, 1987) and other works.

It is important to point out that among the undergraduate student body at Central, African Americans made up little more than 5% of the total. This suggests a more general pattern, noted by Willie et al. (1991, p. 42), for African American doctoral students to have attended predominantly White colleges. Thus, by the time they enter graduate school, Black students typically have already had extensive experience, and understandably formed resentments, in historically White institutions. These feelings can only be sharpened when, in their campus experience and roles as teaching assistants, they again confront the condition of being outnumbered, as White students have not.

Whereas graduate cohorts at Central had generally been small—roughly 10 to 12 students per year—the sociology department admitted a larger than usual cohort in the year following my arrival. This was partly because of a then-new fellowship program on race and urban inequality, which had followed the renewed visibility of these issues on the national research agenda. The combination of this timely topical interest and expanded funding opportunities led to a larger than usual graduate cohort. In a cohort of 22, six African American students were admitted. Thus, not only the number but the proportion of African American students (out of a total of 60 or so in the program overall, of which 10% to 15% were Black) was higher than in earlier cohorts, in which students of color had usually constituted only a small percentage of incoming students.¹¹

Early weeks of the semester were absorbed by orientation, classes, visiting lectures, and the weekly pro-seminar, in which faculty members spoke informally about their careers and research interests. These talks revealed sharp differences in the orientations of various faculty members. Most were committed to mainstream research, aiming to publish in the most prestigious journals and university presses, and were strong advocates of upward mobility in national prestige rankings. Several faculty members, however, were openly critical of such conventional criteria of success. An African American professor, recounting his academic biography, told of having felt embattled as a graduate student, when he sought to challenge then-dominant approaches to research in collective action. Another was critical of the fellowship program on race and urban affairs, arguing that the assumptions and goals of the funding source would undermine truly critical examination of the issues. Progressive students thus found allies among faculty in challenging the content of and overall approach to scholarship in the department.

Tensions also arose over a statement that was leaked from a faculty meeting, regarding the changing composition of the department. A senior faculty member, it was reported, had described the incoming cohort as a kind of “experiment.” The speaker later explained that this statement was meant simply to acknowledge that a more diverse cohort would require adaptation and flexibility among all concerned. However, many students—Black and White—and some faculty members took offense at the remark, believing it placed undue scrutiny and pressure on students who were already facing the intense transition to graduate school. In the monthly meeting of all graduate students, the faculty member’s statement was attacked, and a student petition was drafted to the effect that the department should avoid any appearance of differential treatment of or invidious comparison between student cohorts. If anything, this episode cemented cross-racial connections among students, who shared common bonds concerning class origins, methodological approaches, and ambivalence about career prospects.

Soon after, classroom discourse was another site of tension. This was especially evident both in the required theory course and in a seminar on social inequality (both of which had roughly 15 students, most in their first semester). Apparently, some White students were uncomfortable with what they saw as overly pointed, confrontational, and at times “personal” styles of discussion in class. Another contested issue concerned the amount of time and attention that should be given to classical, versus more contemporary, texts in social theory, a discussion that echoed then-pointed debates about the place of “the canon” in liberal education (see Berman, 1992, pp. 153-211).

Several approached me to vent their feelings, in part because of my role as student representative of the department’s Graduate Affairs Committee. Although it was intended to address a range of student issues and grievances, the committee certainly did not seem to me the place for students to vent their concerns about classroom discourse. Styles and norms of classroom discourse vary, depending on the course and the teacher, and I could only acknowledge the strong positions and emotions, particularly from several female students, that they felt at times overruled or even personally “threatened” by what they described as strident challenges to their classroom comments (most of which I gleaned were in response to assigned readings). In the days that followed, tensions surrounding classroom discourse were stoked by individual contacts between various students and faculty, leading to alliances, hearsay, and an increasing sense of polarization.

It is important to say that these sides were not racially exclusive; some Black students maintained low-key distance from this evolving debate in class and in graduate student meetings (a forum where I was able to witness tensions firsthand). In turn, some White students aligned themselves with the more critical position that coalesced around issues of race, queer theories, and the inadequacy of conventional sociology. In any case, several White students reported to me feeling publicly

challenged to acknowledge their vested interests, not only in conventional sociological work but also in the system of racial privilege itself.

In the absence of any direct discussion of these tensions among students, the affected students (which did not include all graduate students but rather the third or so who were still involved in course work and personally invested in the departmental climate) came to see the classroom and informal department gatherings as emotionally charged. Several weeks into the semester, a group of students—mostly White women—sought me out and again registered complaints about what they perceived as an “aggressive, in-your-face” behavior toward them in required classes. Some expressed fear at expressing opinions in public, for fear of being personally accused of racial blindness; others felt that the “intellectual integrity” of the courses was being compromised at a time when students are typically anxious about their ability and feel both the pressure and excitement of faculty attention. Worse, the students who sought me out felt personally hurt, prejudged, and affronted about a feature of their identities that was especially salient to them.

Seeing these mounting tensions, I informally raised the issue before a meeting of the Graduate Affairs Committee. There was no consensus about the basis of the tension, or what if anything should be done to address it. One faculty member on the committee, however, suggested that I relate what I knew to the department chair. After doing so, the chair asked that I write a memo describing in detail some of the particular issues and grievances involved. The chair explained that the memo would be helpful as background in raising the issue for discussion in a full faculty meeting—never implying that the memo was anything but confidential. After the earlier disclosure of the remark about the “experimental” nature of the incoming cohort, the chair expressed a sense of mounting pressure to show concern and action in addressing the department’s racial climate. The memo described encounters I had seen involving racial tension in class and elsewhere and examples of accounts I had heard from others, with no claim that they were either correct or balanced. It presented grievances that had been voiced by both White and Black students and identified some students by name. Soon after, to my horror, the memo I wrote was shared (read aloud I understand) at a full faculty meeting. This was seen by some faculty and students of color as an attempt to “police” the situation, to suppress their voices and activities within the department. I received a late-night phone call from an angry and indignant student whom I had named in my memo. On hearing his voice, I felt the blood drain from my face. Why, he demanded, had none of the White students had the courage or respect to talk directly with their fellow students? Why had they instead spoken to me, and what right had I to presume to represent the situation to the faculty? What could my purpose have been, if not to sanction and silence students who had simply voiced their strong positions regarding matters of race and sociology? How fragile many Whites had proven to be, he said, in the face of any challenge to their comfortable liberal conception of

intellectual debate. What responsibility did I now have for having pointed an accusing finger at students who, as newcomers to the department, felt especially vulnerable? While I assured him that I had never intended for the memo to be made public, I readily admitted that sharing it with the chair was a naïve, even reckless, thing to do. My only course of action was to discredit the memo and make clear to the entire department that the memo, whatever its origin, had been distorted and injurious to the students who were named. I disavowed the memo, resigned from the committee, and considered leaving the program. Some faculty members came to my defense, arguing that my mistake, however serious, was partly the result of failed communication among students as a group.

In retrospect, I realize that from the vantage point of the “accused” students, the use of the Graduate Affairs Committee and subsequent action by the faculty exemplified, in microcosm, the Weberian process of social closure by which privileged groups seek to maintain their dominance. To quote Parkin (1982), closure is

the process by which social collectivities seek to maximize rewards by restricting access to resources and opportunities to a limited circle of eligibles. . . . [In turn], collective efforts to resist a pattern of dominance governed by exclusionary principles can properly be regarded as the other half of the social closure equation. (pp. 175-176)

Framing the conflict in these terms sheds light on both the nature and the depth of the reactions, especially by Black students, and the limitations of a narrowly interpersonal view.

What was the aftermath of this chain of events? No students left the program, and because the department provided funding for nearly all students, either as research or teaching fellows, no one’s formal status was harmed. Still, many on both sides felt personally wounded, and the social awkwardness was sharp for many in the remainder of that year. In talks with others, I detected a collective sense of failure for having allowed so promising an opportunity in the department to devolve into painful rituals of insensitivity and division. We had survived this foray into diversity but reproduced behavior that left all concerned feeling Othered and prejudged.

Social psychologists use the term *altercasting* to capture the process by which a person or group, seeking to project a valued or advantageous identity, imposes on others (consciously or not) situated motives and selves that complement their agenda (see Michener, DeLamater, & Schwartz, 1986, pp. 274-275). This concept may help to explain why, despite the good faith and complex perceptions among all involved, the collective dynamic within the department seemed to devolve into stereotypically racial attributions and defenses.¹² Despite crossing paths over the years with several of my former student colleagues, I have seldom discussed these events nor regained any comfortable rapport with them. The imprint on me, however, of those weeks has obviously remained strong.

Reflections: Lessons Derived From the Narrative

As with any personal narrative, this one allows multiple interpretations and implications. Furthermore, I have sketched only some of the important historical and contextual factors that are relevant for tracing the passions and responses of those involved. For example, the early 1990s marked the end of a decade-long retreat, under Republican administrations, from progressive social welfare policies toward economic and social equality for people of color. In higher education, there had been a reversal during the Reagan years of the federal commitment to student loans and affirmative action policies. The results of these shifts were clearly visible in shrinking enrollments of minority students in universities such as Central (see Willie et al., 1991) and in a backlash against greater inclusion in the society at large (Altbach et al., 2002, pp. 35-37). Against this backdrop, the renewed interest in race and inequality among funding sources such as the National Science Foundation and other private funders was met with guarded skepticism by many critical students and scholars. This suspicion was, as noted earlier, held and voiced by some faculty members. The excitement surrounding the arrival of a diverse cohort was tempered by these larger forces; of course, one can only speculate about how those forces shaped the drama of that semester. Reflecting on these events, in conjunction with my reading and experience in the years since, I next develop four interrelated themes that I see as important in creating the environment for diversity that Brown (2002) celebrates: (a) the significance of the composition of groups (i.e., the proportion of people of color in graduate cohort or program), (b) conflict between individualist versus collectivist orientations both toward graduate education and academic careers, (c) efforts to reconcile multiple perspectives and grievances based on gender and class as well as racial/ethnic identities, and (d) differences in styles of verbal communication associated with race.

Significance of Majority/Minority Composition in Groups

In her landmark study of gender inequality in the corporate world, Kanter (1977, pp. 206-242) advanced the argument that group dynamics are shaped not only by the number but also by the proportion of minority members present. She concluded that both the attributions of those in the majority and the perceived salience/identity of minority group membership are shaped by this contextual factor. She furthermore developed a typology of group composition, distinguishing skewed groups (with a ratio roughly 85:15) from tilted groups (approximately 65:35). In Central University's department at large, African Americans found themselves in a skewed group, whereas the composition of the particular cohort described was more characteristic of a tilted one. It is instructive to reflect on the different dynamics in the two cases, particularly with respect to the power minority group members perceive themselves to have in each case. In skewed groups, Kanter wrote, "The few . . . can

appropriately be called 'tokens,' for . . . they are often treated as representatives of their category, as symbols rather than individuals. . . . It is difficult for them to generate an alliance that can become powerful in the group" (pp. 208-209). On the other hand, about tilted groups, she concluded, "Minority members have potential allies among each other, can form coalitions, and can affect the culture of the group. They begin to become individuals differentiated from each other, as well as a type differentiated from the majority" (p. 209).

Over time, many distinguished African American sociologists trained at Central, and I do not presume to speak for them. However, I learned from Black colleagues during my tenure that some had felt conspicuous and burdened by the prior absence of more racial balance in the department. This was manifested, for example, by a perception that other students and faculty "read" one's in-class comments or topical interests through a set of racially based assumptions.

For the cohort described here, however, greater racial parity posed a dilemma. As Kanter (1977) suggested, more race-peers relieved students from some of the pressure of tokenism, but the higher proportion of African American students also may have strengthened their sense of obligation to make an impact on the intellectual environment of the department, a goal that earlier students, being more outnumbered, had not seen as attainable. Moreover, there were strong intellectual and political commitments that were shared by many of the African American students and their faculty mentors. Greater numbers strengthened their ability to articulate a bolder vision of sociology, both in classes and in the social life of the department, which tended to reinforce the collective identity among students of color in the cohort and in the university at large. Caught between the conflicting pressures—as White students seldom are—to create and display intellectual alliances and yet be perceived as distinctive individuals, Black students were subject to one form of what Hughes (1984, pp. 141-150) noted are dilemmas and contradictions of status.

Individualistic Versus Collective Orientations

The dilemma of individualism versus collective identity unfolds in what Coates (2004), echoing the important earlier statement of McIntosh (1989), called "white space." Coates wrote,

While most European-Americans exist in white space, they are largely oblivious to reality—as fish would be to the water that surrounds them. Historically, the price paid by the racialized other for acceptance, legitimacy, and existence . . . has been that of cultural estrangement.

In this vein, the work of Signithia Fordham (1988) is foundational. Drawing on ethnographic research with high school students, she called attention to a collective identification among students of color based on their awareness of being "exceptional"

in historical terms; this identification is bound up with an oppositional consciousness and cultural frame of reference.¹³ Fordham wrote that increasingly, members of Black communities

are raised in the collective view of success, an ethos that is concerned with the Black community as a whole. But since an individualistic rather than a collective ethos is sanctioned in the school context, Black [students] enter school having to unlearn or, at least, to modify their own culturally sanctioned interactional and behavioral styles and adopt those styles rewarded in the school context if they wish to achieve academic success. (p. 55).

Fordham argued that the alternative to this collective orientation is racelessness—in effect, a denial not only of the consciousness of race but also of “fictive kinship,” which many students feel toward the larger community.

One need not accept this argument wholesale to see its relevance for the case at issue. For many people of color in sociology, race consciousness is not only a personal issue but also a driving force behind one’s research and teaching. And as Shulman and Silver (2003) argue, the hidden curriculum in graduate school (especially in research-oriented programs such as Central’s) contains an implicit set of demands that one be entrepreneurial about research and teaching interests. In effect, this intensifies the individualism that generally defines formal schooling. Knowing the “business” of sociology, Shulman and Silver wrote,

means much more than feeling comfortable discussing a given theorist or vigorously trying to change the world. It means familiarizing oneself with the outlets that exist for disseminating research—conferences, books, journals, and edited volumes . . . [and] a more specific understanding of . . . how colleagues network, the prestige hierarchy among journals, tradeoffs of going up and down the [prestige] ladder in where to submit work, . . . and how colleagues and mentors can help circumvent the review process. (p. 59)

This “business approach” best describes the later years of graduate school, as students anticipate graduation. In turn, the collective orientation is especially strong among entering cohorts, who (even if they have mastered entrepreneurial strategies in college) draw strength in solidarity and who are, like it or not, perceived as a group by faculty members. My point is that the conflict between these two orientations—to school as well as to careers in academic social science—was compounded by substantive differences among students, which emerged in class and through informal student culture.

The same tension rippled through the department’s informal culture in relation to friendship among students. White students typically tended, consciously or not, to adopt the raceless perspective, which Fordham (1988) showed to be especially problematic for Black students. In a study of college life and race at Rutgers, Moffatt (1989) reported that liberal White students

honestly wanted to believe that race made no difference; people were the same under the skin, or ought to be. . . . They often wanted to be real friends with their Black peers, and tended to be upset when, for any reason, inter-racial friendships did not work out for them. (p. 162)

White students at Central were sensitive on this point. Having chosen a field that is critical of social inequality and typically having led lives that embrace cross-cultural contacts and experiences, they sought and expected social acceptance from Blacks.¹⁴ There may be an unspoken sense, for liberal Whites, of having one's racial bona fides in order. However warm or well intentioned, this attitude can easily be taken as smug or arrogant by people of color. All concerned shared a desire for friendship. But in retrospect, I believe that White students tended to assume friendship was an entitlement—and unrelated to the intellectual debate swirling around that semester—whereas Black students were more likely to see true friendship as something that could emerge only after the debates, and the department's response, had been fully aired. My sense was that for students of color, friendship was properly more a result of rather than a basis for open dialogue about race. In fact, the White students and faculty who identified themselves most strongly and personally with sensitivity about racial issues seemed to me often to be most directly challenged by peers of color. Perhaps one is most likely to challenge others whom one regards as committed and receptive to dialogue. In any case, the resulting tension was painful for White students and led many African American students to see White students as thin-skinned and unwilling to do the work necessary for true camaraderie to emerge.

So White students and faculty did not fully understand or acknowledge the historical and collective orientation shared by many African Americans. This is a sharp dilemma, however, because the same collective perspective, if/when imposed by an authority group member (such as the faculty member who spoke of the department's "experiment" in diversity), can easily be taken as prejudicial. Students of color wanted and deserved, as do all students, the choice of whether/when to invoke collective interests and when to be treated as independent, individual members of the department. (Because the events took place early in the year, there was little personal knowledge or trust to support this freedom.)

White faculty members were implicated, and sometimes bruised, by the events of that year. They, too, tended to be uncomfortable with collective discourse and challenges to their classroom authority by students of color. In a brilliant essay, Blauner (1973) wrote that faculty members' responses are rooted in institutional accommodations to academic independence and in good faith efforts to bestow the benefits of their position on students:

The scientific and professional fields within the academic world are much like traditional guilds; the faculty is jealous of its craft autonomy, its authority over the standards

of entry into its discipline. . . . [And] the professor is oriented toward molding the student in his own image, and is likely to feel that the only satisfactory training is the kind of education he himself received in graduate school. (p. 320)

Debates, then current, about political correctness may have hardened this tendency.

Reconciling Racial and Gender Critiques

Although many students were caught up in the tensions I described, an important precipitant of the overt conflict was the objection that several female students made to what they saw as aggressive/dominant behavior by mostly male students in class. Crosscutting (racial and gender) critiques arose because of the tension between the insistence of some students on candid, challenging racial debate and power dynamics that others (especially women) viewed through a gender lens. Among feminists, no less than people of color, the personal is political; they were in the process of their own movement to challenge the curriculum and establish an institutional presence of feminist work in the department and beyond.

This conflict took both conceptual and interactional forms. Conceptually, it involved a struggle for space, if not primacy, in relation to conventional traditions of theory and empirical research in sociology. The presence of feminist scholars in the department and an interdisciplinary program on women had become firmly established at Central by the late 1980s. Yet this project was more recent and more tenuous by far than was the study of race on campus. Also, female graduate students then doing work on gender had less intellectual and professional network support than was true for those studying race and inequality.¹⁵

The interactional form of this tension played out in the realm of language. Discursive styles that for Black students signaled authentic and lively debate were easily read by women as stereotypical male dominance. A large body of research attests to the association of gender and power in a wide range of contexts: verbal interruptions, the volume of utterances and length of turns, control over topical changes—all have been studied in detail and found to be linked to gender and to status in multiple contexts. Tannen (1990, pp. 188-215) reviewed and summarized major themes in this research and concluded that

interruption is particularly painful in close relationships, where interrupting carries a load of metessages—that a partner doesn't care enough, doesn't listen, isn't interested. These complaints strike at the core of such a relationship, since that is where most of us seek, above all, to be valued and to be heard. (p. 189)

Graduate students' classroom exchanges may not contain the sort of closeness or intimacy Tannen (1990) associated with romantic relationships. But they are nonetheless defined by speakers' strong intellectual and emotional investment. Moreover,

they are linked to one's emerging professional identity and (given the faculty audience), potentially, to valuable "goods" such as mentorship and research opportunities. For these reasons, along with the desire for social acceptance noted earlier, I believe that the White students who took exception to what they saw as aggressive styles of discourse among Black peers felt compelled to address the situation. They did this in part by alerting me to the situation with an awareness of my role in the departmental committee. But for them, this was not a denial of political struggle but rather an expression of it through what seemed to them a legitimate channel.

Ultimately, it is futile to try to reconcile, or rank the significance of, different bases or forms of social inequality; studying the relationship between racial and gender dynamics reveals the multidimensional nature of each. And attempting to divine which poses more basic or compelling problems is equally insoluble, inasmuch as people's positions are rooted in what Gouldner (1970) termed "domain assumptions," experiences and sentiments that unconsciously create the "infrastructure" of social theory (pp. 36-49).

Different Styles of Classroom Discussion

The theme with which I conclude extends the prior one about gender and has to do with variations between groups in the rhetorical and expressive dimensions of language. Classroom discussion is central here, as it was in catalyzing the racial tensions that occurred at Central. In addition to the gender dynamic were others that, in effect, transformed classroom debate from a forum for resolution to one of misunderstanding and conflict. In the book *Black and White Styles in Conflict*, Kochman (1981, pp. 16-42) provided a penetrating analysis of this process.

Kochman (1981) drew on more than a decade of teaching and ethnographic research into race and language in context; his work reveals patterns that are essential to an understanding of the conflicts among my graduate colleagues. (Obviously, the patterns are only that; it is dangerous and distorting to overstate their generality or to essentialize racial differences in communication.) Above, I reported that a flashpoint of tension between students was a perception among some White students of a "disruptive" or "threatening" mode of argumentation practiced by some African American students. The subgroup of White students who were troubled in this way were operating with an unexamined code regarding styles of critique, deference to authority (both disciplinary and classroom authority), and the scope of what they believed to be legitimate talk about a course topic or reading. When the styles of discussion among some critical students challenged the conventional code, White students took this to mean a lack of respect—for them as people and for the project of academic sociology. Kochman wrote,

Black and White concepts of intransigence derive from opposite views of the relevance of struggle in the persuasive process. Whites attempt to minimize dynamic opposition

within the persuasive process because such confrontation, or struggle, is seen as divisive. Blacks, however, see such struggle as unifying or operating within, not outside, the persuasive process. It signifies caring enough about something to want to struggle for it. At the same time, Blacks regard intransigence as a refusal to contend, as a rejection of the struggle through which opposing ideas are tested and reconciliations are effected. It can mean, as [a student of mine] said, "You stay your way, I'll stay mine." (p. 20)

Kochman (1981) noted similar racial differences with respect to the meaning and etiquette of silence and the appropriate role of emotional displays in intellectual debate. He proposes a pattern in which, for African Americans, silence signals agreement with the speaker; however, Blacks are likely to perceive silence in the face of a provocative argument (a frequent response of Whites who are inhibited about openly debating racial issues) as a lack of good faith—as the partner's refusal to engage in authentic, constructive argument (p. 29). Finally here, Kochman noted differing racial styles regarding one's control over emotions within debate.

He argued that for Whites, intense and emotional debate is seen as antithetical to argument; instead, it represents a "loss of control," which is both threatening and divorced from the "legitimate" exchange of views. "But Blacks neither conceive of nor practice self-control as repression. Rather, consistent with the cultural value they place upon assertive/aggressive behavior," they are apt to see a partner's self-control as a refusal to divulge or test authentic views in the crucible of debate (Kochman, 1981, p. 31).

Not for the first time in this account, irony abounds: Kochman (1981) suggested that the very styles of discussion that White students often regard as personally threatening or as violations of good faith are, for Blacks, welcomed as authentic and constructive forms of exchange. If so, the content of students' ideas, and their (potentially common) syntheses, are obscured. To the extent that White students shy away from or discredit such styles of debate, we miss an opportunity to reach rapport and understandings for which there are no shortcuts. In turn, if people who feel vulnerable in an institutional space compensate for this with language that is overly strident or accusatory, they are likely to alienate potential allies.

Conclusions

In this article, I have followed Lewis's (2003) lead in attempting to grapple with everyday race making. My strategy has been to recount and reflect on a personal experience of racial tension during my graduate student career to investigate how racial agendas and identities were interlaced with the ongoing social and academic life of the department. Careful scrutiny of any particular instance in which race becomes salient in our experience—whether positively or as a source of tension or difficulty—will reveal the interplay of historical, organizational, and interactional

dynamics. Some of these dynamics, such as the timetable and demands of graduate training, may seem idiosyncratic. But having identified them, we come closer to finding organizational mechanisms in support of what Brown (2002) called an “environment for diversity.”

A virtue of case studies in the study of race relations is that one brings to them minimal assumptions—based in theory or experience—about conditions or outcomes. Vicariously reliving or reflecting on cases allows one, in effect, to freeze the social process to replay, reveal, and challenge responses that undermine the capacity to move past barriers to authentic communication. Social researchers have built a large body of theoretical and empirical knowledge of these barriers, much of which is squandered because of a lack of political and organizational commitment to equity. However, even in settings such as academe, which would appear to be most receptive and enlightened about racial difference, progress comes hard. I have argued that part of the difficulty inheres in overall patterns of diversity (i.e., equity of access and of representation), which in graduate programs are simply inadequate to create needed institutional momentum. Another source of difficulty, as revealed by this case, is the unconscious tendency for those in historically privileged institutions to suppress forms of discourse such that necessary intellectual and emotional catharsis is foreclosed.

Reflecting on the case throws into relief a set of painful questions: Despite persistent calls that we face up to and engage tensions surrounding race in our academic lives, how and when are we to broach these issues? Who is seen to have a legitimate voice in dialogues about race, and to what extent should the legitimacy of speech be grounded in academic versus experiential validity? How are White students, however committed to principles of equity, to speak candidly when—by virtue of experiential and scholarly knowledge—they feel silenced in the presence of people of color? S. DeLue (personal communication, September 12, 2005), a political scientist, extended these questions in relation to this account:

How does one maintain the trust necessary for discourses designed to resolve conflicts that may threaten group solidarity. Does this situation require that one become raceless? If so, isn't this one more step in the wrong direction, away from a full commitment to respecting difference? Finally, how does the kind of accommodating and . . . inclusive discourse arise? Especially how does it arise in a postmodern setting where power is seen [by historical outsiders] as the main intent of those who advocate abstract but practically grounded concepts of justice? Can there be a discourse about justice in the context where you have . . . postmodern fears of justice discourses, where you have race issues compounded by ambition, and where the old system of patronage seems to remain in place as ever?

These are among the deeper questions that remain.

I conclude on a constructive and practical note. Sociology is among the fields making strides in addressing diversity institutionally, for example, through the Minority

Opportunities through School Transformation (MOST) Program (Levine et al., 2002). This program, which has been implemented in nearly a dozen academic departments for more than a decade, has led to some findings that dovetail with my account. For example, this program makes the academic department “the central mechanism of systemic, institutional change” (Levine et al., 2002, p. 1). The MOST curriculum has focused on such goals as enhancing the access to and rigor of student research, developing mentoring relationships and professional networks, and increasing the number of scholars of color in the “pipeline” for a range of academic and research roles in the discipline (Spalter-Roth et al., 2001). A final focus of this program is to enhance departmental climate such that it is more “sensitive to issues of diversity and multiculturalism and [contributes] to the growth of all students” (Levine et al., 2002, pp. 2, 25-27). This multidimensional approach to the issue is likely to have a far deeper impact than did earlier efforts at “diversity training” that were in vogue and since questioned in academic and occupational settings (Hemphill & Haines, 1997). The American Sociological Association, which sponsors MOST, is well aware that these various efforts will falter if rates of attrition among students of color, once entering graduate programs, are high. Specific initiatives to address departmental climate include the development of stronger ties with surrounding communities, efforts to foster social interaction among graduate students, and faculty/student retreats to discuss issues bearing on the achievement of a more diverse environment. These efforts are all reasonable and needed. However, they will not necessarily address the causes or the texture of graduate student tension I have portrayed here. My hope is that the account and interpretation will complement initiatives, such as that of the American Sociological Association, and provide readers insights into everyday race making in their daily milieux.

Notes

1. In contrast, women now slightly outnumber men.
2. For a valuable review of conceptual and empirical understanding of diversity initiatives among undergraduates, see Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, and Nora (2001).
3. Many graduate students in the social sciences are driven by social reform agendas as much as by theoretical or substantive interests. However, the former tend to be suppressed by faculty and student culture in graduate school in favor of striving for success in academic research careers. For a valuable discussion of the implicit rules and career strategies students face, see Shulman and Silver (2003).
4. One must be careful not to exaggerate this shift, inasmuch as African American student enrollment declined substantially between 1980 and the early 1990s in many well-known institutions (“Racial Unrest,” 1994, p. 30). More recent (2001/2002) reports in the same publication (*Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*) argue, in contrast, that Black enrollment in graduate school has trended upward since the mid-1980s, outpacing White enrollment in percentage terms. The discrepancy may be explained by how comprehensive the surveys have been, that is, whether business and professional programs are included.
5. For a concise review, see Wellin (2005).
6. Richardson (1990) argued, as others have, that these qualities of narrative are directly opposed to conventions of social science writing. In that genre, detachment is a proxy for objectivity, and arguments are constructed defensively to insulate the author from criticism on conceptual or methodological grounds.

7. One example Duster (1989) provided is of a performance overseas, during the Second World War, by the singer Lena Horne. It is reported that German prisoners of war were given preferential seating over Black American soldiers during times when the armed forces were still rigidly segregated.

8. See Campoy (2005) for examples of how case study analysis is being applied to a range of problems in elementary and secondary education.

9. As Levine, Rodriguez, Lowery, and Latoni-Rodriguez (2002), Blauner (1973), and Davidson (1973) argued, the academic department is perhaps the most appropriate social unit of academic life for examining and addressing issues of diversity: It is the department in which students and faculty negotiate the process of graduate education—both formally, through courses and degree requirements, and informally, through joint committees and advising relationships. And it is the department where, culturally and institutionally, academic disciplines are lodged and contested.

10. It is neither appropriate nor necessary for my purpose here to name the institution. Rather, it is important that I characterize relevant features of the social, educational, and institutional context that have a bearing on the case at hand and that have been found to be important in the literature on race relations in higher education.

11. In my cohort of 12, there had been 1 African American student.

12. A fellow graduate student who reviewed this article reports that the incoming/diverse cohort of students met and aired—and largely resolved—conflicts among themselves. This was not known by, and had little impact on, the racial sensitivity that came to affect members of the department at large.

13. Willis (1977) has applied a similar argument, with equal power, to Whites and class reproduction in Britain.

14. This is true in my own case; having attended a progressive and racially balanced “lab” school in the early grades and pursued a career as a rock/R&B guitarist, my life was filled from an early age with Black friends, coworkers, and cultural styles and forms. Such a background did not immunize me from blind spots regarding race in my immediate milieu.

15. Also, major journals such as *Signs* and *Gender & Society*, being interdisciplinary, were not as readily accepted or valued by faculty members then as were major journals in sociology. This was a source of great concern both for graduate students and for junior faculty members in gender studies.

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