Self-Reflections, Teaching, and Learning in a Graduate Cultural Pluralism Course

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Using symbolic interaction as an interpretive framework, our participatory action research (PAR) project challenged students in Cultural Pluralism, a 2009 graduate level summer course, to wrestle with identity issues pertinent to teaching in a pluralistic society. Specifically, we wanted to know: What, if any, personal and cultural identity evolutions evidenced an appreciation for the "other;" types of diverse curricula emerged from group collaborations; and re-planning strategies surfaced for the course and its successor the following summer? Our *plans*, *observations, reflections, and actions* during the course revolved around monitoring fledgling relationships between various students who were having difficulties communicating with each other, working more effectively with those who had the most trouble with introspection, altering a class lecture midstream when we sensed it fell on deaf ears, supporting students whose written and oral autobiographies caused them angst, and seeking out potential for social change through a breaking down of rigid, judgemental beliefs. Our end-of-class analysis (*reflection*) indicated that to varying degrees students came to understand and appreciate that their personal soul searching was inevitably culturally entangled. They also showed a keen ability to craft culturally diverse lessons and interact thoughtfully with course curricula. Yet, the class critiques and written autobiographies indicated that a few students required more one-on-one help with self-reflection, and remained unclear concerning the symbolic interactionist framework and other identity theories. Our successes and failures led to revamping (*planning*) parts of the ensuing summer course.

Key words: personal/cultural identity, cultural pluralism in education, symbolic interactionism, self-reflection, participatory action research

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I teach in a typical higher educational building – imposing. One red-hot summer, in a first-floor hallway several metres down the hall from my first day of class, I stood head down looking through my notes for Cultural Pluralism, a graduate course that attracted student interns, veteran teachers and administrators, and higher educators. I looked up for a moment to see Dan, my doctoral student and co-instructor chatting with Rebecca just in front of the classroom door. The students had an advanced copy of the syllabus built around personal identity formation in cultural context. Having done her homework, Rebecca was vexed and shared her trepidation with Dan, whose annotated field notes later read:

> Waiting in front of room 228, Rebecca, one of our students, approached me confessing, 'I am scared about this course. When I read the syllabus it said that we had to write an autobiography. I don't have anything to say.'
>
> 'Of course you do,' I reassured her. 'When I started teaching high school and began my graduate studies I felt the same way. As a white male who grew up in a middle class environment I had never had to self-reflect much about how I came to be who I am. But when I began my teaching career I walked into classrooms full of students who were very different from me. I eventually figured out that I had to understand myself in order to help them discover themselves (Banks, 2004). Once I began to do that I learned how to see the world, to the extent that it was possible, through their eyes. As a social studies teacher, this has helped me help them find their place in history and in the world.'
>
> Looking at the ground, Rebecca sighed and said, "Will you guys help us?"
>
> 'Sure we will,' I promised.
>
> At that point I turned to look down the hall and saw Courtney (co-teacher and author) marching toward us. 'Ready?" she asked. 'Ready,' I responded. At least I hoped we were. So we walked into an ordinary education classroom with medium sized tables and a few chairs positioned at each, took a deep breath, and hoped for the extraordinary.

Introduction

The above vignette captures our problem statement: In the hustle and bustle of everyday life many future and current educators are never challenged to

exhume the historical and cultural roots of the beliefs that define them. This process involves coming to terms with "both the *cultural* values internalised from groups and the *personal* values that guide one's life choices," because they "are part of the nomological network of self; and, as such, they must be related…" (Schwartz, Zamboanga, & Weisskirch, 2008, p. 636). It is no wonder that our pedagogical task struck fear in Rebecca's heart, but with protection, encouragement, and practice, we believed that she and her classmates could engage in self-discovery and continue to mature through continuous shared exchanges in a pluralistic setting.

Moreover, if a teacher has practiced self/cultural-reflection, then she will be more capable of squiring her students through the same process, detect their abilities, learn about their experiences, and guide them through myriad curricula in meaningful ways (Palmer, 2007; Schön, 1987). We hoped that we were two such teachers. In a world marred by discrimination and cultural misunderstandings due to difference, education must strive for such goals so as to cultivate citizens who affirm differences and forge border crossings within their situations (Giroux, 1994).

Context

Let me introduce you. I am a white former social studies and English teacher, now a presidential professor, I was a college student during the Vietnam era and protested against that war. During the subsequent years I interrogated my leftist social and political views and found, and am still discovering, hypocrisy. Being an upper middle class youngster enabled me the luxury to risk civil disobedience, knowing there would always be a safety net. I had also over identified with and assumed I could speak for people less unfortunate than I (Helms, 1995; McDermott & Samson, 2005).

Young enough to be my son, Dan had taught high school for four years while working on his master's and doctoral degrees in social studies education. He had also taught an undergraduate methods course for three years. Having completed the doctorate he is now a university education professor. As a white heterosexual, English-speaking, middle class male, he did not confront his privileged position until he began graduate school where he

investigated his social responsibilities: paying it forward, as the aphorism goes (Helms, 1995; McDermott & Samson, 2005). By his own admission, he has miles to go.

Our class was modestly diverse, characteristic of our Midwestern university. The 22 students ranged in age from 21 to 45 and held a number of educational positions. Four were engaged in teaching internships or awaiting the first job. Four more were masters, and fourteen were doctoral students. Their professional areas ranged from K-12 teacher or administrator to university teaching assistant or instructor. They also fit into typical research and institutional categories, such as class, race, ethnicity, and gender. However, defying labels, we later discovered that each person was unique, yet similar to others, irrespective of the longstanding distinctions.

Within the group there existed somewhat varied religious affiliations including Muslim, a broad range of Christians, and a few agnostics and atheists. Of the nine men, two were African American, and one was mixed African American/Japanese. Another was Palestinian Arab, while the remaining five were Euro American. One of the 13 women was African American and another Russian-American. A third's father was Persian and born in Iran, while her mother was Euro American. The 10 others claimed a Euro American heritage, but one of them chose not to participate in our study (see Appendix A).

The course met on Friday through Sunday for two summer weekends in 2009, one early in June and the other during mid-July. Major assignments included readings, a multinational/cultural lesson plan; as earlier mentioned, an oral and written autobiography; and an end-of-the-class critique. Our intention and subsequent research question was to explore what, if any, personal and cultural identity evolutions evidenced an appreciation for the "other;" types of diverse curricula emerged from group collaborations; and re-planning strategies surfaced for the course and its successor the following summer?

Interpretive framework

Encouraged by leading researchers who applaud "identity as an analytical lens for research in education" (Gee, 2001, p. 99), Dan and I chose symbolic interactionism as a framework to guide in data generation and analysis. Mead (1934/1967), symbolic interactionism's founder, held that the human self "arises in the process of social experience and activity… [and] develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process" (p. 135). A forerunner, Cooley (1922) eloquently penned a verse capturing the process, "Each to each a looking-glass reflects the other that doth pass" (p. 184).

Our curriculum encouraged students' personal, cultural, and public self-reflection, pushing them into further symbolic interactions within a dialogical class context. For Mead (1934/1967) *voice* is a significant symbol. It carries both social and self-searching meanings that evoke responses and also alert the speaker to what s/he may or may not be thinking (Blumer & Morrione, 2004; Morris, 1952). When we speak we are "suddenly aware of ourselves in the attitude of using the words of another," writes Mead (1982, p. 67). Taking group socialisation much farther than Mead, Blumer (1986), who actually coined the term symbolic interactionism, poignantly notes that these interfaces are nested within culture: "social, economic, and political hierarchies; races, classes, and their conflicts; and, above all, power and resistance" (Lyman, 1988, p. 298). When addressed and discussed these could be building blocks, not obstacles, to foster a culturally pluralistic community.

Philosophically, our goal for the course was consistent with Mead (1934/1967) and Blumer's (1977), because we maintain a truth-oriented ontology that a principled society is one where people respect differences and negotiate disagreements. Mead holds (1908/1909, 1913) that this ethical reflection can result in an increasingly moral self, emerging through conflict between an old self and a new one, more open to connect with others on some meaningful level. Not to do so, he explains, is "To leave the field to the values represented by the old self is exactly what we term selfishness" (1913, n. p.). Yet, also consistent with Mead (1934/1967) we are epistemological

relativists, recognising students' unique ways of knowing (Blumer, 1977). Therefore, our job was not to dictate but navigate students' varying (relativist) thought processes through which students made sense of theory, practice, and themselves.

Mead (1934/1967) also provided Dan and me with a mechanism through which we could detect key identity evolutions within the students' individual, historical recollections and interactions with other classmates: We bring our conscious identity or "I" into every new situation wherein we detect "me's," the way others see us as communicated through "signs, symbols gestures and indications" (Blumer & Morrione, 2004, p. 28). We then interpret that "me", and revisit ourselves in a new light (Blumer & Morronie, 2004; Mead, 1934/1967). For instance, after perceiving that he was seen as cruel, a person might ask himself, "Am I really that mean spirited?" Depending on the answer, the result might be to become a more moral self, characterised by responsiveness rather than judgment. In conversations, observations, and students' written work we recognized how various "me's" seemed to effect metamorphosing "I's."

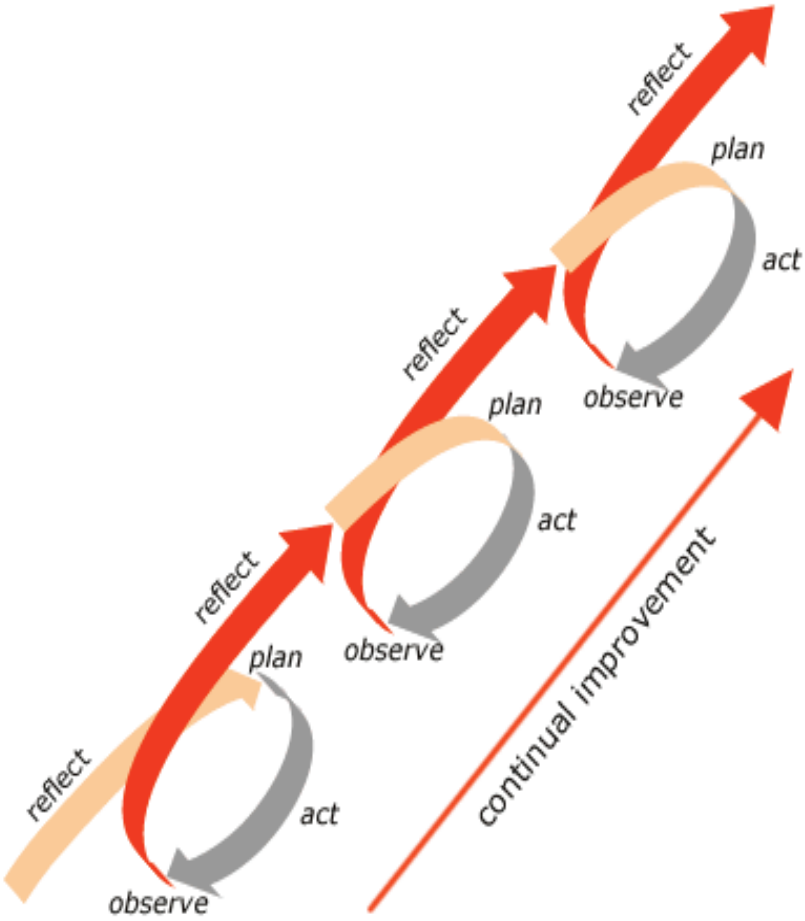
Methodology

From the beginning, the students and we committed to class goals (Parker, 2006; Parsons & Brown, 2002). Consistent with PAR, this approach involved self-disclosure and a willingness to take criticism within "the potentially political nature of analysis within the process…as a means of social change" (Waters-Adams, 2006, n. p.). This encompasses a "complex processes of interpretation, *reflection* and *action* (emphasis ours) (Marshall & Reason, 2007, p. 368; Smith, 2007).

Thus, we make no claims to objectivity, yet we attempted to be "reflexive about" our positionality: how we insinuate ourselves within "grids of power relations and how that influences, methods, interpretations, and knowledge production" (Allport, 1954; Milner IV, 2008; Palmer, 2007; Sultana, 2007, p. 376; Weis & Fine, 2005). To this end we abjured the "sage on the stage" metaphor, preferring group and individual work. In the name of "dialogic validity," (Anderson & Herr, 1999, p. 16), we continually expressed to

students what we perceived was happening and invited them to counter (Newton & Burgess, 2008). The result was a continuous movement of *planning*, *acting*, *observing*, and *reflecting* (Anderson & Herr, 1999; Wong, 2010; Lewin, 1951; McTaggart, 1996) (see Figure 1.).

Figure 1: Participatory Action Research Spiral



Queensland Government, DET Education (2012), 296.
http://education.qld.gov.au/students/advocacy/equity/gender-sch/action/action-cycle.html

Data and analysis throughout PAR rotations

Lewin (1951) originally described the PAR cycle as *unfreezing*, *moving*, and *refreezing*, which for more contemporary advocates evolved into a more dialectical problem solving view, in our case the unexamined life in cultural context encased within the above figure. Materials for our original *action plan* came from articles and book chapters (Banks, 2004; Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1992; Clarke, 2009; Fottland, 2004; Kroger, 2000; Palmer, 2007; Tatum, 1997); presentations on symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1996; Blumer 1986; Blumer & Morrione, 2004; Mead, 1908/1909, Mead, 1913), Erikson (1950), a noted identity development psychologist (Kroger, 2000), some of the older ethnic identity research (Cross, 1995; Helms, 1995), and the more recent interpretivist models (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007); short lectures on the history of Native and African American history of education as it related to collective identity development (e.g., Adams, 1995; Malcolm X, 1965; Tatum, 1997; Watson, 2009); and oral autobiographies. We also showed videos (Cutler & Ice Cube, 2006; Haggis, 2004; Leckie, 1989; Malcolm X, 2005; Spurlock, 2005); conducted individual and group exercises with students; and at breaks debriefed students concerning earlier conversations.

As Dan and I edged students into disequilibrium, the days swelled with angst and triumph. We faithfully *observed* events and colloquies detailed in field notes, hoping to see Levin's *movement* in the direction of growing personal and collective awareness. In meetings sandwiched between class activities in the first weekend we *reflected* on our *observations*. Yet due to the compact curriculum, much of our *re-planning* and *acting* that first weekend was manifest in split second changes following a quick *reflective* turn.

Between the two sessions we kept track of students, paying particular attention to identity formations. As the second weekend approached, Dan and I met to discuss our field notes (*observations/reflections/preplanning*). Although we unearthed areas of concern, we also could not revamp the course, because the syllabus was our contract with the students. So the second weekend we monitored fledgling relationships between various students who were

having difficulties communicating with each other, worked one-on-one with those who had the most trouble with introspection, altered a class lecture midstream when we sensed it fell on deaf ears, supported the ones whose written and oral autobiographies caused them angst, and sought out potential for social change through a breaking down of rigid, judgmental beliefs (Allport, 1954; Waters-Adams, 2006). As in the first weekend, these *actions* produced unrehearsed mini PAR cycles.

After the course ended Dan and I combed through our *observations* and *reflections* from both weekend cycles, grouping all the "I"/"me" (Mead, 1934/1967) rotations that were forged within contextual theme strands of *internationalism*, *naming*, *appearance*, *religion*, *childhood abuse, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class*, *ethnicity, and race*. As promised, herein we detected many students' personal/cultural identity awareness; people working co-operatively on group lesson plans; and classmates engaged in thoughtful interchanges about class material, especially the autobiographical presentations.

Thus, in answering the first part of our research question, many students broadened their worldviews and crossed borders of acceptance to interact with people they might never have spoken to intimately in other settings (Blumer, 1986; Giroux, 1994; Mead, 1934/1967). Second, most class members produced excellent multi-perspective educational materials, and participated thoughtfully in class activities and dialogues about them. Third, as long as the class carried on we had opportunities to address the earlier cited issues, but afterwards, upon reading the autobiographies but especially the critiques, we found additional themes of *discomfort with self-reflection* and *struggle with the interpretive theoretical framework and other theory* containing other less positive symbolic interactions. The theory matter was particularly problematic, because PAR aims to encourage participants to employ or produce scholarship to inform practice (Coghlan, 2007). The best we could do is use the information to help *re-plan* for the next time I offered the course the following summer.

Then came the writing process, which involved countless iterations. We refer to Richardson & Pierre's (2005) concept of writing as a form of analysis when creating an understandable narrative that captures the ebb and flow

of students and instructors' frustrations and insights. Wong (2010) encouraged us to employ a narrative style for writing our report, noting, "professional practice action research and reflective practitioner research [are] typically written in distinctive reflective practitioner styles, as individuals evolving as the participatory action researchers find their own voice and distinctive authorial style" (p. 2). We italicise the theme strands and some of the obvious PAR elements, by no means signifying all, because as we earlier wrote, many times a change occurred in a split second. In addition, we converse with other scholars whose works were part of the class content or, albeit unspoken, were woven into the course fabric. Although we could not include all of the poignant moments and class happenings, the following account captures our time together.

The Narrative

The First Weekend

Friday

Silence greeted us when we entered the room. It was Friday evening and we had approximately four hours to begin building a trusting and open environment. Before launching into the material we asked each person to introduce another student whom s/he did not know. These starters were short and sweet, and afterwards the class was still and *still* waiting for us. I mistakenly began with abstract material, basically saying,

> Symbolic interactionists (Blumer, 1986; Blumer & Morrione, 2004), about whom you have read, maintain that to a large extent we are socially constructed. In other words, we often see ourselves, as we estimate others do. For example, one of the white middle class identity models (*socioeconomic class*, *race*, and *ethnicity*) you have read about explains that many Euro-Americans grow up in cultural isolation, and they have only seen validating 'me's' – we are all white and right. Those who eventually leave and live in more multicultural environments are often overwhelmed with guilt when coming face to face with different peoples' reflections of them (Cooley, 1922). They shimmer with the *racism* or *classism* of which they are carriers. This can lead to confusion and guilt as suggested in Helms' contact status (1995, p. 185).

> "Do any of you have any similar experiences?" I then asked the class – silence.
>
> "I've got to do something to get this cycle going (quick *observation*, *reflection*, *plan*, and *act*)," I thought. I am a storyteller, so I re-enacted a scenario involving a symbolic interactionist moment from my youth (Mead, 1934/1967) when guilt caused me to pick up a hitchhiker (*socio-economic class*). I realised I might be in danger after my guest began talking about killing people and I booted him from the car, thus catapulting me out of my over identification stage. What I was doing to assuage my guilt was self-centred and dangerous. Don't get me wrong, I was not completely healed, but I did begin to wonder, 'who am I?"

Dan recorded in his field notes, "Her tale was filled with body language and by its end we were all laughing. The mood felt more comfortable. We were up and running."

With the students more relaxed, the Palmer (2007) readings challenged educators to self-reflect, drawing out a few comments. As the evening passed, we gradually eked out discourse and confessions about some students' feelings of inadequacy during their student internships or first years of teaching. Two assigned articles "Memories of a Fledgling Teacher," (Fottland, 2004) and "The Ethico-Politics of Teacher Identity" (Clarke, 2009) yielded provocative comments. As if Rebecca was beginning to see why she was writing an autobiography, she read a quote from Fottland (2004) to the class:

> 'Retrospectively reflecting on my memory pictures, I certainly became aware that teaching and learning are continuous processes of reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938). Autobiographical writing has enabled me to build a feeling of continuity in my own practice. Student teachers and…fledgling teachers should be encouraged to work in ways that give them the opportunity to develop their personal feeling of continuity' (p. 657).

Then Melanie pointed to the Clarke (2009) article in praise of self-searching as a crucial part of teaching, saying, "This personal identity searching stuff is really intimidating. I can't deal with that yet. Clarke (2009) gives me an education way to see myself as a teacher."

Tracy then chimed in, "I never thought of using philosophy to understand myself."

Tracy was beginning to grasp an important educational PAR goal that participants learn how theory and practice intersect (Coghlan, 2007)

"Ok, let's give Mead (1934/1967) another try (*act*)," I thought and asked them to give examples from their lives when they thought someone had made a complimentary or judgemental remark to them (a "me"), and they had reacted accordingly, altering their self-perception ("I") for better or worse (Mead, 1934/1967).

Two or three people spoke. Dan and I were a bit disappointed. But for now, the hour was growing late, so we dismissed the class (*observation*).

Saturday

Saturday morning rolled around fast, but sugar and coffee helped us recharge. We began the day with a guest lecturer on Martin's (2002) philosophical work, which was an extension of the ontological truisms mentioned in the interpretive framework. "Martin addresses cultural book-keeping, taking stock of ones values, attitudes, and beliefs, in inventories of his/her assets and liabilities, for example hatred, bigotry, or violence," she explained. This process calls on one to address the problem of generations, where an overt or tacit belief is passed on, sometimes unnoticed. We hoped Martin would help students realise "the [necessity and] possibility of thinking through the indeterminate character of the economy, knowledge, culture, and identity" (Giroux, 1994, n. p.) and, in so doing, strive to become Mead's (1908/1909, 1913) socially moral beings conversant within a pluralistic society (Banks, 2008).

After the presentation, one white student offered, "I guess if I told a racist joke, and no one laughed at 'me' I would be embarrassed. From there I might ask myself, 'Where did I learn that this was funny? And then I would realise I grew up hearing my parents blurt out and laugh at such things. Then I might think, 'I don't like myself for that, because I don't want to see 'me' as racist *(ethnicity and race*) (McDermott & Samson, 2005; Mead, 1934/1967).

"Good example," Dan said. "Your next task would be to internalise that new 'I,' so that you just wouldn't want people to *think* you are a racist; you actually don't want to *be* a racist."

Following our student's example, after a break we lectured on personal and cultural identity theorists and researchers beginning with Erikson's (1950) landmark social/psychological staged identity schema from birth to death. We explained to them that these developments could occur in concert with various cultural identity frameworks that track one's maturity away from cultural insularity to cosmopolitanism. But we did point out that selected identity scholars had criticised all staged topologies as too positivistic and simplistic, leading racial identity researchers such as Helms (1995) (*race*) to reshape her stages of white development into statuses. Regardless, we added that some studies critiqued various assumptions embedded within both the staged or status concepts. For example, Negy, Shreve, Jensen and Uddin (2003) held that whites and Hispanics who cling only to their own ethnic group and never venture out remain highly ethnocentric, but African American's strong, perhaps singular, identification with race correlates with high self-esteem.

> "Thanks a lot," Lyndon said, "Does any of this theory agree?'
>
> "Yes, it can," Dan responded, "and that's why you need to be a critical reader. Decide what resonates with you and your educational settings and what doesn't."

We then introduced a more interpretivist view of identity research dealing with multiple portrayals of self. In Jones and McEwen's (2000) "A Conceptual Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity," the authors propose a "core sense of self" with contextually significant "intersecting circles of secondary, tertiary, etc. dimensions surrounding" (p. 405). Each interacts with the other and the core as a person moves through life. Abes, Jones, & McEwen's (2007) later paper, "Reconceptualising the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: The Role of Meaning-Making Capacity in the Construction of Multiple Identities," even if hierarchical, adds another dimension to the earlier model, a meaning making filter through which identity forming occurrences pass (Also see: Bowleg, 2008).

Fatigue is part of a compressed format, but the students perked up considerably when we followed PAR edicts (Coghlan, 2007) and asked each student to begin searching online for theoretical links to his or her own autobiographical work, particularly if none of the ones we had discussed or posted were useful. Dan and I walked from student to student, answering questions about the material already examined or helping them find new resources. Various students, unaccustomed to self-searching, needed some type of ordered, structural topologies to frame their autobiographies, but others appreciated multiple perspectives (*observation*).

During this time Cindy, one of our middle-class white students, sought me out privately. We sat at a desk in the back of the room. She began by telling me that she did not have an identity (*race* and *ethnicity*). It did not occur without some pain, but my field notes recorded a poignant breakthrough with her, pointing out how we were spiraling up the PAR cycle:

> During one of the breaks Cindy approached me. I motioned her to a table and two chairs in the back of the classroom. We began to talk, and she confided she had no idea how to write her autobiography. She was a teacher married to a man who works at our university in a helping profession. Her dad works in an insurance agency, and her mother is a teacher. I began to talk with her to help her investigate her life. She was the only girl in AP math classes but never thought a thing about that (*gender*). She had mononucleosis in middle school, and had to work at home. Her father had helped her. The next year 'math just clicked,' and she understood it, but more than that she could explain it to her peers. 'I should be a teacher,' she had thought. 'But that isn't much of an autobiography,' she said.
>
> Then I asked her about her parents.
>
> They were great, and she had no problems there. In fact, they were the opposite of their parents in some ways. Her father's father had been an alcoholic (*childhood abuse*); her mother's father died when she was a young teenager, and she had pulled the family together and worked to take care of them. Tears welled in Cindy's eyes as she talked to me, and soon they began to roll down her cheeks. She had no idea that so much pain and gratitude was inside her. She tried to explain it away but just kept crying.
>
> "What's wrong with me," she asked?

"You might have survivor's guilt (Dekel & Goldblatt, 2008; O'Connor, Berry, Weiss, & Gilbert, 2002). That could be a theoretical framework for you," I said. "You realized how your parents could have turned out, but as you told me, they vowed to be good parents, and they were. You feel like you owe it to them, to the universe, whatever, to give some of your great gift back to students or someone else in the world. That's a good thing (*observe/reflect/plan/act*)."

Representing nascent insight, she slowly smiled as her eyes broadened. It was an "I" to "me" moment (Mead, 1934/1967). She rarely said anything in class, so I felt privileged to have shared an intimate space with her. While Dan helped many of the other students, I talked with her for some time, until she seemed content, happy to have revealed herself and survived with gratitude, not sadness.

After this session we turned to one of the class readings, Banks' (2004) stages of cultural identity topology that we believed contained elements of personal and cultural identity development: first, "cultural psychological captivity" (living in cultural confinement); second, cultural encapsulation that can lead to "cultural encapsulation as cultural ethnocentrism" or "new discovery of cultural identity" (standing pat or moving forward); third, "cultural identity clarification" (reflecting on the possible single-mindedness brought on by cultural captivity); forth, "biculturalism" (propagating an open society); fifth, "multiculturalism and reflective nationalism" (promoting universal equality); and, sixth, "globalism and global competency" (functioning in and appreciating a global cross cultural world) (Banks, 2004, p. 296). We asked the class if anyone could identify her/himself in any of the material. A few students admitted they were still culturally confined, looking only to those like them to reflect "me's" that already reflected themselves (Mead, 1934/1964). But this insight was a good beginning, we thought, because the politically correct thing would be to have said, "Oh, I'm in 'biculturalism' or 'globalism and global competency'. I don't discriminate against anyone."

The long day filled with intellectual and emotional investment had come to an end. Looking back to the class I told the students, "Let's go home."

Sunday

Anticipating the personal exposure that was beginning to surface for all of them, we had asked students to read Bohm, Factor, and Garrett (1991) and brought in an expert to lead a dialogical session. Dialogue can help participants shed intolerance and build compassion for others. This ideal communication mode is a way of exploring the roots of the many crises that face humanity today. "It enables inquiry into and understanding of the sorts of processes that fragment and interfere with real communication between individuals, nations and even different parts of the same organization" (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991, n. p.). Dissimilar to discussion or debate, participants do not form mental arguments while other people talk. Rather, listening and being comfortable with silence is dialogue's hallmark. This can lead to unstructured communication within a safe place (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991) and intercultural maturity (King & Magolda, 2005). The topic was "images of respect." As we conferred after class, Dan and I agreed that some students came away from this exercise with a new appreciation for active listening. We were continuing with the second cycle of action research (*observation*/*reflection*).

Hoping this would characterise the way students participated in other sessions, Dan and I dug into the educational histories of groups that have been historically marginalised. He gave brief presentations on the history of African American and Native education (e. g. Adams, 1995; Malcolm X, 1965; Tatum, 1997; Watson, 2009). After showing *Malcolm X: Make It Plain* (2005) one student stated that the Malcolm portrayed in this film embodied Banks' (2004) cultural identity structure and also displayed personal growth. The resulting comments and queries evidenced our *race* and *ethnicity* threads, as white students, in particular, admitted being afraid of Black people (*race*). The verbal autobiographies would tease out much of that complexity.

To mix things up a bit, Dan introduced three other videos in the course, *Crash* (Haggis, 2004), an episode of the show *Black.White.* (Cutler & Ice Cube, 2006), and "Muslims and America" from the show *30 Days* (Spurlock, 2005). Each of these videos portrayed personal and cultural identities and differences in complex ways that provided students an opportunity to wrestle

with privilege, discrimination, and the ambiguities of pluralistic living. The more poignant comments came from tête-à-têtes with various students at breaks. After watching an episode of *Black.Wbite.* that dealt head on with black-white race relations, Kesha told the class that she wondered, if she was not similar to a black person on the show who mistakenly saw ("me's") active *racism* in the comments and actions of whites when that was not their intention (*reflection*). Perhaps, a part of her, she mused, was still in cultural encapsulation (Banks, 2004). After watching the "Muslims and America" episode T.C. pulled Dan aside and said, "Thank you so very much for highlighting something else beside the worn out black/white thing (*race*). I get so sick of hearing it in every class." These complex renderings seemed to unhinge students who then peered deeper into the looking-glass.

We reconvened for a bit and then dispersed until the next weekend.

The Second Weekend

Friday

Many students seemed genuinely glad to see each other as the second weekend convened. As Dan and I riffled through our notes at a side table many prattled away. They had worked in teams to create lesson plans that aspired to nudge their students and our class up Bank's (2004) cultural identity ladder. The class served as an audience for groups of math, social studies, English, and elementary teachers and K-12 administrators. One presentation from two music teachers illustrated our *international* thread. To humanise "the enemy" in any war, they played a well-known production of Bukvich's Sympathy # 1 while showing pictures from the 1945 allied bombing of Dresden, Germany during World War Two that killed 140,000 people.

Saturday

On Saturday we walked into class again to find the room filled with chatter and laughter. Dan eventually initiated a consciousness-raising activity called "Four Square." The students drew horizontal and vertical lines across a blank sheet of paper and labeled the four boxes: perpetrator, bystander, victim, and rescuer. Dan is not shy, but, by his own account, he is not personally forth-

coming either. I was proud when he began by showing his own vulnerability (indicating he, too, was part of the second cycle) (*reflection*), confessing that one time he heard a group of white people shout the n-word as a black man entered the restaurant where some friends and Dan were eating.

"As far as that African American man knew, I approved of the comment, because I said nothing to defend him or challenge the perpetrators" he said (*racism*).

Dan later wrote, "As an educator, this personal example of my role as bystander was probably the closest I had ever come to revealing a moral weakness to my students, something that seemed to come easily and extemporaneously to my co-author."

Before we began the autobiography presentations on Saturday afternoon, Avery approached me at a break and said, "I can't give my autobiography without breaking out in tears."

I assured her that she did not have to present, if she was not comfortable doing so and provided copious feedback on her written autobiography. We made a point that no one was required to do this, but the other students, albeit with some trepidation, wanted to move forward.

The autobiographies

Now it was time for the students to do their most powerful work (*act*), while we guided or they took the initiative to engage in fruitful dialogues. We had told them that they only had 10 minutes: just summarise how they became who they were, and then highlight two or three of their life shaping themes with examples. This may not seem like enough time, and, in fact some people took 15 or 20 minutes, but the colloquy that followed was profound.

Touching on Banks' (2004, p. 296) "globalism and global competency," three students, Oxana, Abdula, and Sabrina, disrupted the "American" outlook in the class, bringing our *international* concept to the fore. Born and reared in Soviet Russia, Oxana talked about many aspects of her identity, and how they arose in the context of her roots. As I had encountered years ago, she perceived many American male and female feminists as rejecting "feminine" dress (*appearance* and *gender*) (Latorre & Tzu-Chun Wu, 2013). Oxana loved to wear high heels, makeup, and tight clothing. It was the norm

in Russia, especially for younger women who could afford it, and many others pinched pennies to adorn themselves. After travelling to the United States to earn a doctorate, she had struggled with her perceived belief that other academic women did not take her seriously, because she was fashion conscious. She wondered why they could not accept her as intellectually equal to them. After all, she spoke four languages and was using sources for her dissertation written in German. The following dialogue spotlighted a few other female students who had been afraid to admit what Oxana had said, and were relieved that there existed *feminist* "me" alternatives (Latorre & Tzu-Chun Wu, 2013; Mead, 1934/1967).

In sharp contrast to Oxana, as a six-year-old boy, Abdula and his family were refugees living on the Gaza Strip (Efrat, 2006; Peteet, 2005). Abdula eventually moved to the United States to attend a university and pursue a doctorate in mathematics education, but his family stayed behind. He and Oxana had an interesting talk. Pointing to the diversity rather than heterogeneity among American Muslims, Abdula claimed he had relished his new-found freedom (Özdil, 2007; Phinney, Horenezk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001) Oxana, then explained:

> I can understand that, but I am conflicted about my allegiance to Communism and democracy. When my American husband and I departed from the plane that brought us to the U.S., we rented a car and drove to our destination. I noticed acres and acres of land, but when I asked to stop so I could walk around he told me it was private property. Whether it was in a forest or anywhere else, a Russian was free to roam.

Abdula then said, "When I heard the word "Russian," I automatically associated it with totalitarianism. I now see another perspective."

He finished this thought more dramatically in his written autobiography, "I will go with all hope that [the] day will come that all people will understand that they all [are] humans" (Banks, 2004, 2008).

The room was filled with other people who, we thought, were ruminating over what they had heard. Dan silently mused, "Our course's not-so-hidden-agenda promoted *our* idea of democracy, while Oxana may have countered it" (*observation/reflection*).

Ensuing talks further delved into more popular "feminine" stereotypes in the larger culture. Sabrina inherited her father's Persian features, including what she thought to be a large nose that, as an adult, she had cosmetically altered (*appearance, gender*, *race,* and *ethnicity*). Rebecca seemed to emotionally support her friend Sabrina's revelations by detailing her bout with anorexia, a classic study in symbolic interactionism (Furnham, Badmin, & Sneade, 2002; Mead, 1934/1967). When I first met Rebecca, my view ("me") of her was that of a comely bright young woman, full of confidence. I was shocked to hear of her personal battles and feelings of inadequacy. Sabrina, Rebecca, and Oxana's stories reminded all of us how *appearance* might cause women to gaze into a looking glass ("*me*"), see rejection, and change accordingly (Cooley, 1922; Hyeyong, 2008).

Several students approached the speakers at a break, which indicated that they were percolating with new possibilities for how they might interpret "me" (*appearance*) (*reflection*) (Mead, 1934/1964). Such voluntary mingling was common during our breaks, providing Dan and me hope that these educators might find ways to confront such issues in their own educational situations (*reflect*/*plan*).

At the end of the day Dan and I scooted two chairs together in the corner to debrief (*reflection*), out of the corner of my eye (*observation*), I saw several students chatting. I was smiling inside as I nattered with my coauthor.

Sunday

I found it fascinating that the first speaker on Sunday, Mary-Vaughn, seemed to redirect Rebecca and Sabrina's dilemma not to obsess over an attractive "me" likenesses (*appearance, gender*, *race*, and *ethnicity*). Still a type of sign (Mead, 1934/1964), Mary-Vaughn and Bethany claimed that their *names* were key to describing who they were. Mary-Vaughn explained:

> My father gave me a male and female name, insisting people call me both. He also taught me to think and be like a man, assertive, ambitious, etc. But he did not want me to stray from heterosexuality and seemed content when I married a man (*gender* and *sexual orientation*) (Schwartz & Montgomery, 2002; Worthington & Mohr, 2002)…. I ditched his sexism and proudly wear my name.

Having taught this class in several different countries and countless times at home, I expected what came next. Those who wait until the last hours usually foretell one thing: We were digging deeper and deeper into the human heart. For instance, coming to terms with *religion* can be hard, and Billy, Sheryl, and Avery's testimonies were living proof (Harris, 2002). They had chafed under their church's focus on guilt and judgment. After growing up in a very religious family, Billy bent under the strain of attempting to be perfect, and began using drugs. Then she had to deal with her religion's "immoral" "me," holding her head down much of her adolescence so as not to see herself from her church's viewpoint. At the time of our class she was clean. Married and a mother, she had returned to a different, less foreboding church (Harris, 2002). In Billy's mind she was no longer perfect but a sinner who was striving for forgiveness and self-love. I could only pray she was right.

Cheryl's encounter with *childhood abuse* was tragic. As tears streamed from her eyes, she told us her uncle (a supposed devout Pentecostal man) molested two of her cousins, her sister, and her. She kept it a secret for years, as did the other girls. As Cooley (1922) might have predicted, shame took root in all of them. One Sunday, hoping to shed this yoke, Cheryl walked down the aisle when the pastor called parishioners to rededicate their lives to Christ (*religion*). Unfortunately, the invitation only forced Cheryl to re-experience her abuse, recalling, "groups of screaming sweaty men, smelling of Old Spice, rushed to the altar and put their hands all over me." If her abuser was not one of them he might as well have been (McLaughlin, 2007; Saradjian & Nobus, 2003; Sullivan & Beech, 1994). After years of turmoil Cheryl now viewed herself as a "reasonable" Christian, part of another denomination and associating with atheists, Jews, Christians, etc. (Harris, 2002; Renn, 2005).

We took a break, and I talked with Cheryl and a few other students who had gathered around her, sharing some of my own similar stories of sexual abuse. As we talked, some of the sadness washed over Cheryl's face, and the other students' body language softened (*observe*/*reflect*/*plan*/*act*).

"There by the grace of God (*religion* and *spirituality*) go I," one of them said.

Socioeconomic status was another vulnerable area. Sally was from a working class family but spent most of her time at a high society horse barn where her grandmother was a trainer. Sally felt that her grandmother spent too much of her time with those "poor little rich kids whose parents just dumped them at the stables for hours at a time. Once, one of these kids asked me for a leg up (to get on a horse) after she had purposely stepped in manure just a few minutes before. So I thought, 'who am I, chopped liver?'"

But Sally's grandmother was paying attention.

Sally told me later, "I know now that she loved me, because she wanted me to escape my working-class shame by going to college. I am thinking of being a (horse) trainer after I get my doctorate. My grandmother is dead, but if she were here she would kill me!" (Twenge & Campbell, 2002; Wentworth, 2001).

"There's another "me" I told her – powerful stuff" (Mead, 1934/1967).

Turning to another class theme, Melanie's autobiography centered on *racial* and her *ethnic* matters that plague the United States well into the 21st century. She did an excellent job, like many of her classmates, blending theory with story, centering her paper on white, ethnic identity models, to which I had referred the first day of class. It begins with ethnic encapsulation and tacit or overt racism (Banks, 2004; Helms, 1995). College catapulted her into a more multicultural milieu, where Melanie proved any Euro-American could transcend racism, even amid the most devastating circumstances (*race* and *ethnicity*) (Banks, 2004). Melanie told us,

> One night in my college apartment a black man broke in and raped me. I told my story over and over to the police and others, until I got sick of it. It was then that I realised that I was a racist. I was afraid of every black man I saw. I'd grown up in a secluded environment and never had the opportunity to act prejudiced. But with the help of excellent counsellors, I came out into a later stage of intercultural understanding (Banks, 2004; Helms, 1995).

Just as Melanie began to tell us about her rape, out the corner of my eye, I noticed Joseph, a large 45-year-old black doctoral student who had played football in college and spent 20 years in the military (*race* and *ethnicity*). He had suffered from segregation, abuse during the integration of his schools in

the 1970s, and the stereotype that white men had to protect "their" women from over-sexed black males (Cooper, 2005; Leiter, 2010). Crushed that this image might be reinforced, as Melanie spoke, he slowly lowered his head into his large, strong hands. When we took a break after Melanie finished we saw Joseph and her conversing with looks of mutual respect (*observation*).

"Thank God almighty," I later wrote.

*Racia*l topics were also integral to the identity challenges for several of Melanie and Joseph's classmates. For example, Robert viewed himself as involved in school-based racial politics. After the barrage of class material, he may have feared criticism, because as he recounted his experiences we still perceived him as being stuck in Helm's (1995) "pseudoindependence," where one has an "intellectualised commitment to one's own socioracial group and deceptive tolerance of other groups" (p. 185). Robert was a white middle school band director vying with another man, a black band director, for a high school position. The black woman principal had awarded Robert's competitor the job. The principal told him that the high school African American students needed to see a role model (Davis, 2003; Jeff, 1994).

When Robert claimed he was the victim of reverse discrimination the class was fearfully still. At that point we decided to adjourn but kept a watchful eye (*act/observe*). "Our goal was to help students have the tools to work with each other and leave us behind," I later jotted down. Robert sat alone for a while and then Joseph and T. C. approached him and began to explain the principal's point of view. It appeared to be serious but without conflict, and they parted with nods of recognition. "That's a start," I thought (*reflection*).

I soon called the class to order, pulled up a chair in front of them, and sat down. "I have taught this course a number of times, and you and your predecessors have never let me down. In these two weekends you have fashioned a prism through which I see shining a budding community of respect for yourselves and others. Please don't forget to take that feeling outside this classroom and into your own."

Observation – reflection – plan

When Dan and I read the student critiques and autobiographies after class we made several discoveries. Although we received many student praise, particularly about the oral autobiographies' power, it was also apparent that the autobiographical work was tough. Most worked through the rough spots and appreciated having done so (*discomfort with self-reflection)*. However, in a graduate course that attracts doctoral and masters students and also student interns, the issue of age range and experience is ever present. For example, the older people's testimonies overwhelmed some of the younger students. But in the confusion lurked promise. For example, 20-year-old Rick wrote, "I don't care to sit around and listen to educated, fairly well to do adults [complain] (*socioeconomic status*)." But shortly thereafter he continued, "once people can realise you really cannot judge a person by what they look like we will be a better place…." Basically, he just "needed a lot more guidance from the professor" to cope with the class.

The following summer I spent extra time, with no one around, independently conversing to two or three students who I thought were floundering (*plan/act)*. I tried to remember that active listening requires a type of soul surrender: no judgements and interruptions (Bohm, Factor, & Garrett, 1991; Parker, 2006). For the most part, these students talked their way into a thesis statement that described who they were at that moment, and how they had arrived. The evaluations on this identity work were quite good. Yet, I must say that the class composition was widely different than the year before. The second Cultural Pluralism course was thronged with older educators who from a constructivist perspective had more experiences, which helped appreciate how theory related to practice and themselves (Coghlan, 2007).

As already stated, Dan and I were disquieted that another theme strand surfaced: *Struggle with the class framework and other theories.* Six students were unclear about symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1986; Mead, 1934/1967) and a few others needed clarity about the different approaches to identity frameworks. Preparing for the next class I found a video clip online that students from another university had made about "I" and "me" (Primm,

2009) (*plan/act*). Questions specifically centered on the internal dialogue that takes place when individuals consider their reactions to others' perceptions ("me's"). I also created and showed a PowerPoint that synthesised symbolic interactionism. Finally, I required a class skit in which groups of students wrote a script that involved "I" to "me" interactions. This exercise made the material accessible, applicable, and enjoyable. I also spent increased time explaining post-positivist personal and cultural identity research, and how it resulted in either/or options such as trusting or untrusting (e.g., Erikson, 1950). Then I more fully detailed the emergence of the interpretivistic paradigm that rejected one size fits all suggestions.

What changed me: The summer of 2009

Every time I hear someone speak from the heart about her/himself I again marvel at the uniqueness and sameness of us all. The autobiographical discourses allowed students opportunities for dialogue, not debate, about sensitive topics. To some extent, we all share a kind of brokenness. Ironically, that was the strongest link that created enough empathy to enable some miraculous connections. It was the willingness to be raw that led to civil, if not healing conversations. This encourages us to believe that in at least a mildly diverse venue, individuals can affirm difference and even see parts of themselves in others, if each person is willing to take a chance. I trust that together, the ones who had suffered and learned would, as Hemingway (2012) wrote, become "strong at the broken places" (p. 317) and, as educators, take on a wounded healer role (Dunne, 2000). Here they could explore the unspoken with the diverse students in their schools and classrooms who might engender communities of affirmation and care not discrimination and discord. In a closely connected world packed with violence and indifference, we need educators who can beget a kinder global vision.

Of course, we will never be able to validate everyone through positive "me's" and, morally, we should not (Mead, 1934/1967), because from our ontological perspective, the core of each person's identity should contain some kind of compass that does not sanction violence and bigotry, liabilities that Martin (2002) disdains. Reconciling all of the potential choices any

educator, and for that matter any person, makes on a daily basis is contextual and complicated, but we were honored to be a part of the personal and cultural *reflections* that shone a light through the fog.

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Appendix A

Table 1: Participants

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Ethnicity and Gender	Educator Role
Billy	30	White/F	Teacher
T.C.	35	Black/M	Elementary Principal
Sabrina	30	White/F	Teacher
Robert	35	White/M	Teacher (Middle School Band)
Mark	35	White/M	College Administrator
Cindy	35	White/F	Math Teacher
Sheryl	40	White/F	Math Teacher
Kesha	40	Black/F	Teacher
Tracy	30	White/F	Teacher
Lyndon	22	White/M	Student Intern
Bethany	27	White/F	Student Intern
Avery	23	White/F	Student
Mary-Vaughn	35	White/F	Music Teacher
Rick	22	White/M	Student
Melanie	30	White/F	Math Teacher
Abdula	40	Palestinian/M	College Math
Oxana	32	White (Russian)/F	Grad Assistant
Joseph	45	Black/M	College Instructor
Rebecca	26	White/F	Elementary Teacher
Sally	45	White/F	Curriculum Grant Writer (Science Teacher)
Mathew	37	Black/Japanese/M	College Instructor