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ABSTRACT

The literature suggests that the U.S. system of higher education has developed and maintained conservative norms that govern behavior in the classroom and discourage open dialog by dictating what is and is not appropriate to discuss in academic settings. The question is raised of the appropriateness of these norms. Classroom dialog was analyzed to test the hypothesis that in a college course where students frequently discuss ways to improve education for disadvantaged and minority children, the number of times students discussed their personal experiences as teachers would be significantly higher than the number of times they discussed personal experiences as disadvantaged or minority students. Participants in the study were 41 education students of whom 86 percent were teachers, 69 percent claimed to have come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 77 percent claimed to be minorities. Results supported the hypothesis; also the students seemed uncomfortable talking about their experiences as disadvantaged or minority students. Additional analyses indicated that men and women made about the same number of comments in class. Although this finding suggests a more equal representation of women's voices than has been reported in the past, other factors were noted. For example, some women were excluded from the study because they never talked in class, and a higher percentage of men in the class were seeking advanced degrees. (Contains 2 tables and 26 references.) (ND)

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# When do Education Students Talk about Personal Experience ? An Analysis of Classroom Discourse

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Running head: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

### Abstract

In this study, classroom dialog was analyzed to test the hypothesis that in a college course where students frequently discuss ways to improve education for disadvantaged and minority children, the number of times students discussed their personal experiences as teachers would be significantly higher than the number of times they discussed personal experiences as disadvantaged or minority students. Possible explanations for this difference were explored in the literature review. It is suggested that our system of higher education has developed and maintained conservative norms that govern behavior in the classroom. These norms discourage open dialog by dictating what is, and is not appropriate to discuss in academic settings. In the literature review, the question is raised whether these norms are appropriate in today's society, or whether they are a part of our country's exclusionary past. It is suggested that rejecting students for disclosing who they are can send subtle messages to nontraditional students that they do not belong, and for other students it can discourage learning.

Results indicated that students did talk more about their personal experience as teachers than about their personal experience as minorities or disadvantage students. A *t* test yielded a significant difference at .01 for both comparisons. Also, additional analyses indicated that men and women made about the same number of comments in class. This suggests a more equal representation of women's voices than has been reported in the past. Still, other differences were noted. For example, only women had to be excluded from this study because they never talked in class. And, a higher percentage of men in the class were getting advanced degrees.

**When Do Students Talk About Personal Experience?  
An Analysis of Classroom Discourse**

**Introduction**

Educators who have devoted their lives to promoting equity in education often wonder why minorities and other disadvantaged students are still under-represented in higher education. It is not uncommon for some professionals to point to existing affirmative action policies, financial assistance for low income students and aggressive recruitment policies, and then argue that educators are doing all they can to promote diversity. Still, for many minority populations, the rates of college enrollment and retention are declining instead of increasing (Orfield, 1988).

What is the system doing wrong? While financial aid is important, and recruitment efforts need to continue, other influences are ignored. What seems to be missing is an understanding that disadvantage creates psychological barriers, and these barriers diminish a student's ability to compete in higher education. For example, although research clearly illustrates the impact of self-esteem on academic achievement (Holtzclaw, 1983), educational policies do not reflect a serious consideration for this issue either in admissions or retention efforts. In fact, in many institutions, the idea that the best and brightest will ultimately achieve despite their circumstances is still a commonly held belief.

One reason that society does not recognize or acknowledge the influence of disadvantage on student's experience is because most people are not aware of the subtle ways in which the past impacts the present. While disadvantaged students still complain they are bombarded with subtle messages telling them they do not belong in places historically reserved for the privileged majority (Fiske, 1988), critics claim that disadvantaged students are supported in higher education even more than traditional students. By analyzing dialog, this study suggests one way that subtle prejudice is communicated in higher education. And, it attempts to illustrate who is involved.

Classroom tapes were analyzed to compare how many times students discussed their personal experience as teachers and how many times they discussed their personal experience as minorities or students with disadvantaged backgrounds. It was suggested that students would freely discuss their experiences as teachers, but would hesitate to discuss their personal experience as minorities or disadvantaged students. By perpetuating norms that make it impossible for students who are different to incorporate their personal experiences into the learning process or simply acknowledge who they are, it is suggested that this is one way that society sends messages that nontraditional students do not belong.

This study also examined gender issues. Comments were counted to determine how many times women talked in relation to men. These and other gender issues are discussed.

#### Literature review

Influence of personal history on teaching. Some people may question the assumption that education students should talk just as much about their experience as students, as they do about their experience as teachers. The question is why. Why should students talk more about themselves as teachers? Most students in teacher training programs have had very little professional experience. Besides, in recent studies, it was found that when students enter a teacher training program, most of their current knowledge and opinions have evolved from past personal experience as students (Knowless & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). These professionals believe that thoughtful use of past educational experiences can be an effective method for identifying and understanding broad curricular and pedagogical issues (Krall, 1988; Knowless & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). Some researchers even criticize students for having preconceived ideas based on personal experience. Holt-Reynolds (1992) claims that a student's personal experience often takes the character of a fact or a given against which new, formal theories and principles are tested. If their personal experiences are in opposition to established theories, it can be difficult to encourage students to objectively consider other perspectives. Still, whether or not

preconceived attitudes positively influence teaching ability, it seems important for students to express and then reflect on these ideas.

It is even more important for nontraditional students to talk about personal experiences. After studying the differences in learning styles for traditional and nontraditional students, Sheehan, McMenamin and McDevitt (1992) suggest that the valuable life experiences that nontraditional students bring to the classroom can be used as examples or as a foundation for discussion. They claim that a nontraditional student might be able to provide an instructor with valuable real-life applications and examples of the topics being discussed. Still, although professionals agree that personal experience has a powerful influence on teaching style, these experiences remain an unspoken influence.

Norms and expectations about self-disclosure. Why do students hesitate to present personal histories during discussions? Studies show that societal norms govern when it is or is not appropriate to self-disclose (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). In fact, research shows that talking about personal experience in certain situations can make people seem mentally unstable or maladjusted (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). In Chaikin and Derlega's studies, nondisclosure was seen as appropriate, while disclosure was viewed as maladjusted. This is in direct contrast to other views that say self disclosure is necessary for mental health (Ehrlich, 1980; Holtzclaw, 1983). While it is appropriate for society to establish some norms that govern public talk, the question remains why should students avoid talking about issues of race or disadvantage?

Discussing racial issues in college courses. After teaching classes on race relations for many years, Tatum (1992), claims that including race-related content in college courses often generates emotional responses in students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair. Tatum believes that the discomfort associated with these emotions can cause students to resist the learning process. From her experience, Tatum concludes that students are hesitant to talk about racial issues because 1) race is a taboo topic 2) people have been socialized to believe the United States is a just society 3) many students, particularly white students, recognize the

impact of racism on other people's life, but not on their own. She suggests that instructors should set up an environment where:

- student's honor their confidentiality (so they can ask awkward or embarrassing questions and share experiences)
- students refrain from making personal attributions
- everyone discourages the use of overt or covert put-downs
- students are asked to speak about their own experience using phrases like "I think" instead of "people think."

Tatum's experiences indicate that even in a course that is specifically designed to address race, students have problems discussing racial issues. Why should race be such a taboo topic? Tatum claims that parents teach children what is taboo when they are young. She gives an example of a white child asking her parents in a loud voice why another child is black. The parents quickly hush this child and then explain that "we don't talk about such things." Many would agree this is how we communicate to children that certain topics are taboo, and it is also how we tell children that being different is wrong.

Communicating prejudice. Most studies on subtle discrimination in the classroom are focused on teacher behavior (LaFrance, 1991; Marshall & Weinstein, 1986). In these studies, teacher/student interactions are studied closely so that educators can understand and therefore discourage unfair differential treatment. This is important. The teacher is the most influential figure in the classroom environment. However, teachers are not the only people who have internalized prejudices that effect classroom climate. Others, including the principal, the librarian, volunteers, parents, and especially the students themselves also impact the environment. Racism is not communicated by one person. Prejudice and discrimination is perpetuated through a system of interactions.

A recent study by van Dijk (1987) explored how ethnic prejudice is subtly transmitted in our communication patterns. After conducting interviews in Europe and in San Diego California, van Dijk claims that people talk in certain ways to preserve what he describes as a positive self-presentation and a negative other presentation. He gives an example of the way people use *we* and *they*. He sites the example of *we* are of course, hardworking, law-abiding citizens,

whereas *they* don't want to work and are engaged in all sorts of crime. Van Dijk believes that through semantics, this type of contrast has resulted in a type of cognitive and social opposition, therefore producing conflict between *us* and *them*. Van Dijk also states that when topics are delicate and therefore require careful self-presentation, spontaneous talk often runs into production problems. People hesitate, make false starts, repair earlier words or word groups, make pauses, and use many filler uuhmms. In fact, his research team found that when people had to describe ethnic groups by name, (which they often avoided by using pronouns), the ethnic name was usually preceded by uuhmms, pauses or repairs.

Subtle racism among well-intentioned liberals. The communication of racism is not an isolated phenomenon that occurs only in certain parts of the country. Gaertner and Dovidio (1981) examined the issue of subtle racism among what they described as the well-intentioned. Their theory supports the idea that everyone, including liberals, need to face their internalized prejudices. Gaertner and Dovidio concluded that although liberal whites would never inappropriately discriminate against blacks when they were in public, a discomfort between the races did exist. They conducted empirical studies looking at liberal people who considered themselves nonracist. In one study, they set up an experiment where white liberals and white conservatives had the opportunity to ask either a black person or a white person (with similar characteristics) for assistance. Ninety percent of the time, both the liberal and the conservative subjects asked the white person. Some could argue this study indicates that people claiming to be nonracist liberals care only about how they present themselves. Others would argue that this an example of internalized racism that is unintentional and comes from living in a racist society.

The importance of including personal experience. The importance of being able to bring personal experience into the college curriculum is most often mentioned in writings about women's educational experiences (Chase, 1990; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1986; Lewis & Simon, 1986). Research suggests that women would prefer a type of education that is connected to their personal histories (Clinchy, Belenky, Goldberger & Tarule, 1985). For



example, in a well known qualitative study, 140 women were questioned about what they know and how they learn (Belenky et al., 1985). One of the conclusions was that it was not enough for women to be told they had potential to learn, women needed to be validated for what they already knew.

In most studies about self-disclosure, women disclose information about themselves more often than men (Deriega & Chaikin, 1976; Hayes, 1992). When women cannot express themselves in this way, it can be experienced as a rejection. For example, Chase (1990) presents a case study that describes the experience of a female student who had applied to graduate programs. In Chase's opinion, this student received a rejection from one program because the admissions committee was uncomfortable with her essay that included personal opinions based on personal experiences. He believed that these committee members considered it inappropriate for a student to include this type of personal information in a formal, academic essay.

In academics, it is often more acceptable to present yourself as the objective third party. In the past, social scientists have hesitated to accept a more intuitive, less scientific approach because they were afraid that students who did not distance themselves from their work, would not be able to produce or present objective, scientific conclusions. Today many social scientists are starting to recognize the drawbacks of this restriction. Lewis and Simon (1986) claim that to the extent that academic discourse appears objective and distanced (and is understood and privileged in that way) it becomes a vehicle for domination. It devalues alternative perspectives, understanding, and articulation of experience. The result in Chase's (1990) example of the student applying to graduate school was that ultimately she felt rejected from an academic community that adhered to traditional norms governing academic writing. It seems logical that if students experience rejection when they disclose who they are (especially if they believe they are different than most other college students) then inevitably they will feel they do not belong.

A sense of belonging is not only important for women, it can also significantly effect the rates of retainment in college for nontraditional students (Fiske, 1988; Patkowski, 1989; Fisk-

Skinner & Richardson, 1988; Mandell, 1992). In a recent longitudinal study that tracked the academic progress of 271 English as Second Language (ESL) students in New York, researchers found that a sense of belonging was positively related to academic success (Patkowski, 1989). In another study that supports this conclusion, researchers found that students who maintained enrollment in college had a more favorable impression of, and greater affiliation with, their institutions (Thomas & Andes, 1987).

Finally, although this paper focuses on adults, the issues discussed in this paper are relevant to children as well. In a recent study, investigators concluded that it was also important for pre and early adolescent students to feel a sense of belonging to their school (Goodenow, 1991). The sense of belonging was significantly related to their achievement as well.

Summary. It seems clear that education students have already developed many of their ideas about teaching and learning before they enter graduate education programs (Knowless & Holt-Reynolds, 1991). These ideas are not only formed by their experiences as teachers, but also by their experiences as students. It has been found that these ideas are influential because they have a significant effect on the way candidates learn about education, both positively and negatively (Holt-Reynolds, 1992). So, why do students avoid discussing certain experiences? The literature suggests that norms have been established that govern disclosure in certain circumstances (Chaikin & Derlega, 1974). For example, students are hesitant and nervous about discussing racial issues in the classroom (Tatum, 1992). In the present day, it seems appropriate to question whether these norms exist for important reasons, or whether they exist as part of our society's exclusionary past?

In this paper it is suggested that when students are discouraged by an institution to disclose who they are when they appear to be different, this is a subtle form of discrimination that can cause some students to feel as if they do not belong and prevent others from learning (Belenky et al, 1985; Fiske, 1988). Belonging is important for women and for nontraditional students. In fact, the sense of belonging has been significantly correlated to achievement and

retention in school (Fiske, 1988; Patkowski, 1989; Fisk-Skinner & Richardson, 1988). For these reasons, this study was designed to test whether students talk differently about their personal experience depending on how they present themselves.

## Method

### Hypothesis

In this study, two hypothesis were tested. First, it was hypothesized that in an urban education class where students frequently discuss ways to improve education for disadvantaged and minority students, the number of times students discuss their own personal experience as teachers would be significantly higher than the number of times they discuss their personal experience as disadvantaged or minority students. Also, in this study, gender differences were explored. It was hypothesized that in relation to their percentages, men would talk more often than women.

### Subjects

Forty-one education students participated in this study. Most of these participants were graduate students in teacher-training programs. However, some students were undergraduates in social science and some were doctoral students in education. Thirty-three of the students who completed questionnaires were women, eight were men. For this study, five female students were excluded because they claimed that they never talked aloud in class.

The students in this study completed descriptive questionnaires. In this questionnaire, students were asked to identify whether they were teachers, minorities or disadvantaged students. Whether or not someone is disadvantaged can be a difficult question to answer because the definition of disadvantage is so nebulous. Also, since disadvantage is usually determined according to some type of imaginary scale, ultimately there is always someone more disadvantaged than you. It can seem immodest to label yourself as disadvantaged. One woman stated that although she grew up as a ward of the court, and lived in foster homes during most of her early life, she did not consider herself disadvantaged because she was doing well now. So, to make these questions clear, both the category of disadvantage and the category of minority was divided into two separate questions. The students were asked to mark down

whether they considered themselves a typical disadvantaged child according to their own definition of disadvantage or if they were disadvantaged in any way as a child. Also, in the minority categories, students were asked to describe themselves as either an ethnic minority or a person who had experienced being in an oppressed minority group for other reasons. For example, many students considered themselves part of a minority because of their sexual orientation or their religion. The point was not to judge people's definitions of disadvantage, but to determine how many students considered themselves a member of these groups. Listed below in table 1 is descriptive information about each student.

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Insert table 1 about here

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Eighty-six percent of the students in the classroom had been, or were currently working as a teacher. Only a few students were credential candidates who had little or no prior teaching experience. Sixty-nine percent of the students were disadvantaged, and 77% of the students considered themselves part of a minority group. Thirty-nine percent of the students considered themselves part of an ethnic minority.

Students in this class were unusually liberal. In fact, only one student appeared to be what some would describe as moderately conservative. Everyone in the class was dedicated to understanding how education could be more responsive to diverse children. The instructor was not considered one of the subjects, his comments are listed below as part of the social context of the classroom.

#### Social Context

This study was conducted in a large education class at a prestigious university. The goal of this course was to teach educators how they could effectively work with disadvantaged

students from poorer urban areas. The course was entitled, *Urban Education* and in this class student's discussed these issues:

- is class inequality perpetuated through our educational system, if yes how?
- what are the consequences of tracking children ?
- how do teachers deal with discipline problems in urban schools?
- what is the deviance model and how has it been presented in educational research?
- do we have admissions equity in higher education?
- how are intellectual differences explained?
- how do difference in teaching styles effect different students ?
- what attitudes do teachers have toward minorities and other disadvantaged children?
- what are the effects of desegregation/busing on education?
- how can the educational system be more conducive to African-American and Hispanic males?
- what is the best way to advocate for policy changes in schools/striking etc.?
- how should schools be funded/locally versus through the government?
- what accounts for different achievement levels among different ethnic groups?

This course was uniquely suited for this study. In this class, students were encouraged to discuss issues related to disadvantaged status, minority status, and teaching. Each seminar discussion provided an appropriate place to discuss personal experiences in any of these three categories.

Most important however, the professor in this class was an African-American male. He provided an example to the class as a person who considered himself part of the community that was studied. For example, on the first day of class, he not only talked about his own experiences as a teacher, he also offered some personal information about his own background. He claimed that he was raised in a working class family, where he lived in what he described as projects. Later in the semester, he described his problems with peer pressure. He stated that as a teenager he felt pulled between being a good student and being accepted by his friends. Later still, he described his experience with an ivy-league university that he attended as an undergraduate. In this school, he felt like an outsider, not as much because he was black, but because of social class differences. Finally, he also mentioned that he now lived in what some people may call a rougher urban neighborhood. So, even today, he lived in a community that could be effected by the issues being discussed in class.

The classroom was small and the students were often crowded. A few tables and desks were scattered about the room, but many students had to sit in chairs or on the counters along the walls. Usually, of the three hours designated for this class, approximately one hour was used

as whole-group discussions. In this class, people were encouraged to talk. The professor tried hard to moderate conversations, carefully calling on the students who spoke the least, constantly trying to encourage shy students to voice their opinions.

#### Data collection

To assess how often students talked about their own personal experience, classroom conversations were audiotaped. These tapes were analyzed at a later date. The class was only taped during whole group participation, not during lectures or group presentations. 225 minutes of tape was recorded and then divided into fifteen minute segments. One 15 minute segment was discarded however, because the instructor talked exclusively during that segment. Taping did not begin until the fifth week of class. Therefore, students who were shy had time to become comfortable with the professor and other students.

Each time a student presented an example of a personal experience, this dialog was recorded as one comment. The length of the story was not considered. Although a student may have placed herself in one story several times, each story was considered only one comment, not several. The scoring sheet was divided into three areas of personal experience including disadvantage, minority and teacher.

In addition to taping the class, students were asked to fill out questionnaires that provided descriptive information. This descriptive information was factored into the data analysis of this study.

Finally, as a alternative method of data collection, the investigator in this project was a participant observer. Throughout the class, the investigator was involved in lectures and activities and watched as students discussed the issues being addressed in this paper. Qualitative observation notes provided additional information.

### Data Analysis

Both the mean and the standard deviation were calculated using the number of comments made in each 15 minute segment. In this way, it was possible to determine variance. If all comments were made in one 15 minute segment, then it would be more likely that this was an unusual event.

Also, in order to make an accurate comparison, it was necessary to consider the percentage of people who were teachers, minorities and or disadvantaged children. If students never had those experiences, then it would not make sense for them to describe experiences or talk about themselves in these ways. So, the percentage of participants was factored into the analysis. This was done by scaling both the mean (average number of comments per 15 minute segment) and the standard deviation by the percentage of students in each category, (ie, teacher, ethnic minority etc.). Seventy-eight percent of the class responded to the descriptive questionnaires. Since the response rate was high, it was assumed that this sample accurately reflected the composition of the class.

Three separate groups of comments were compared to the teachers comments. These included comments about being disadvantaged, comments about being a minority that included people who labeled themselves minorities in any way, and comments about minorities using only those students who considered themselves ethnic minorities. A  $t$  test was then used to determine whether a significant difference existed between each group (see table 2 in the results section).

As a side issue, descriptive information was also used to describe the composition of the class in relation to gender issues. This information is presented in the results section.

### Reliability

After the investigator listened to the tapes and recorded observations, as a reliability check, this same procedure was repeated two weeks later with one tape, (approximately one hour of tape). A score-rescore reliability was determined to be 100%.



Also, two outside observers were asked to listen to two, 15 minute segments and record the number of times they heard men and women talk, and each time someone described a personal experience. A comparison was made between the three researchers to determine if consistent numbers were recorded. After comparing three observation score sheets, a reliability of .92 was established. The two outside observers were both advanced doctoral students, working to complete their final research projects.

### Results

Discussing personal experience. A significant difference was found in the number of times people talked about themselves as teachers and the number of times they talked about themselves as minorities or disadvantaged students (see table 2 below). Forty-two comments were made describing experiences as teachers. This produced an average of 3 comments per 15 minute segment. Once the percent of teachers was factored into the analysis, the average increased to 3.4 comments per 15 minute segment. On the other hand, students made only three comments about personal experience as minority students over the course of the semester; and also, students made only three comments related to their disadvantage over the course of the semester. A  $t$  test was used to determine if a statistically significant difference did exist. The  $t$  test yielded a significant difference at .01 when comparing teachers with all minority students and students disadvantaged in any way. To provide even stronger evidence, it was found that even when only the ethnic minorities were considered in this study, a significant difference at .05 was still achieved.

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Insert table 2 about here

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Beyond recognizing that a difference does exist, as a participant observer, the investigator had the opportunity to observe the students as they talked about personal

experience. Students behaved as though personal stories about teaching provided strong evidence to support their assumptions. When they talked about themselves as teachers, they were articulate and sure of themselves. They provided precise dialog, and often their stories were long. During these personal testimonies, other students laughed and asked questions, sometimes fellow students argued or agreed.

When students talked about their personal experience as minority students, or as students who were disadvantaged, often they hesitated, stammered and blushed. These stories were usually short and the students looked down or in other directions to avoid eye gaze while they talked. The tone was always serious. In fact, as students talked, the classroom was silent. This silence generated an eerie sense of reverence. Other students rarely asked questions. In fact, there was little evidence that other students even heard what was being said.

This was even more evident during one class session that was designated for discussion about personal experience with racism. This class was not recorded since the students were specifically asked to discuss their personal experiences. In this session, the students did talk more about personal experience, but not as much as was expected. This was observed by both myself and the instructor. Once again, when people discussed their own experience with racism, those who talked had physical reactions. Students blushed, spoke softly, and avoided eye contact as they spoke. Other students in the class rarely responded to people's testimonies. In fact, when students finished their personal experience stories, usually an uncomfortable silence lingered until someone else spoke. Then, when a new person did speak, he or she would start talking without even acknowledging what had just been said. This did not seem to bother anyone as there were no expectations that others would respond.

Gender differences. This study also provided the opportunity to examine gender issues in classroom discourse. Unfortunately, women still out-number men in what has been called a more feminine subject area. In fact, 80% of the people who filled out questionnaires were women, 20% were men. Still, women seem to be making headway in their push for equality. As far as the number of comments were concerned, men made 24% of the comments and women made 76% of the

comments. Although men did talk a little more in respect to their numbers, this suggests a much fairer split than has been reported in the past. The length of talk was not calculated, but no differences were apparent. It could be concluded that women are starting to have a more equal voice in higher education. Still, other factors must be considered. For example, the majority of the people in this class were women, and they were discussing issues that historically have been addressed by women. Also, the atmosphere in the classroom encouraged open discussion. It would be interesting to test the same hypothesis in an engineering design seminar where the men outnumber the women 33 to 8. Also, some interesting differences were noted, while only 21% of the women in this class were getting a doctoral degree, 38% of the men were getting a doctoral degree. Also, although five women were excluded from the study because they claimed they never talked aloud in class, none of the men made this claim. Although advances are being made, gender differences were still apparent. Results are summarized in table 3 located below.

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Insert table 3 about here

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#### **Limitations of the study**

Some variables in this study could not be controlled completely. For example, obviously, some people talked more than others. To control for this, students were asked to rate their level of participation in class discussions. The students who claimed they never spoke were not included in the analysis. Also, 86% of the class rated themselves as either a 1 or 2 (talking occasionally or at least once during each class session) which indicated most students talked at comparable levels. Still, some students talked more than others. This was unavoidable.

Finally, although explanations for the differences were suggested in the literature review and from qualitative observations, this study does not attempt to claim cause and effect. Instead, it demonstrates that a difference does exist. The reasons that have been suggested, give

only a few possible answers, not definitive explanations. It is suggested that for future studies, qualitative data collection methods could provide additional information.

### Discussion

Results of this study indicated that students talked more about their personal experience as teachers than about their personal experience as minorities or disadvantage students. A *t* test yielded a significant difference at .01 for both comparisons. While the statistics demonstrate that people talk about personal experience differently depending on how they present themselves, it does not provide an indication of why. From the qualitative observations and from the literature review, the evidence would suggest that students feel uncomfortable to talk about personal experiences that involve taboo topics.

In relation to their total percentages, women and men made about the same number of comments in class. This finding suggests a more equal representation of women's voices. Still, other differences were noted. For example, only women had to be excluded from this study because they never talked in class. And, a higher percentage of men in the class were getting advanced degrees.

It is interesting that even in a liberal education class, where the teacher and the students are dedicated to educating diverse students, and where women feel comfortable to talk, we still communicate who belongs and who does not. It was surprising that so many students in this class considered themselves either minorities or disadvantaged students. After interacting in the class myself, I had the impression that most of the students came from privileged backgrounds. When people do not disclose personal information, an assumption is made that all students are the same. For this reason, it is easy for nontraditional students to feel isolated.

This study illustrates that even well-intentioned liberals can perpetuate an exclusionary system by refusing to admit who they are and by conforming to norms that discourage others from disclosing who they are. Talking about yourself as a minority or as a disadvantage child is taboo; talking about yourself as a professional is not. Expressing opinions that are based on

your personal experience is taboo, talking about other people's opinions that are based on their personal experience is not. It seems appropriate to determine whether these norms are detrimental in today's society. If they are, they need to be acknowledged, understood and discarded.

Looking at these issues globally, if educators want to attract diverse students who more accurately represent the population in this country, we need to understand how self-esteem is effected by disadvantage. This study presents one example of how discrimination is subtly communicated in higher education. In other situations, the communication is not so subtle. For example, often programs like ethnic studies and women's studies are cut from the university curriculum when funding is low. If these departments provide diverse students with a feeling that they belong and that their ideas are valued, then cutting these programs will send a message that only conventional students who have traditional interests, beliefs and perspectives will be supported. Fisk-Skinner and Richardson (1988) emphasized this point in their study that explored why some universities have high enrollment retention of minority students and some do not. They found that minorities can succeed in a variety of settings when the institution accepts responsibility for improving its environment as well as working to improve the preparation and opportunity orientations of its students.

Being able to integrate personal experience into the college curriculum may not seem like an important issue, but on closer inspection, it is symptomatic of subtle prejudice; it is an example of how we shame the victim; it is one way to discourage achievement among women and nontraditional students. People often wonder why abused children do not tell anyone about their abuse. This does not seem so unusual when graduate students are hesitant to talk about racial issues. If we want children to integrate personal experience into the learning process, discuss and analyze taboo topics, explore uncomfortable social issues and develop a level of confidence to challenge detrimental, out-dated norms and laws, then educators need to be the first to set an example.

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Table 1

Information from Descriptive Questionnaire

	Total # in class	Disadv. in any way	Typical disadv. student	Ethnic minority	Minority (any)	Teacher	<sup>a</sup> Ave. level of talk
Total who completed questionnaire	41	28	9	16	31	34	1.44
Total in study	36	25	8	14	28	31	1.64
Percentage of those included in study		69%	22%	39%	77%	86%	

Note. The total number of students in the study include only those students who talked in class

<sup>a</sup> Scale used to measure level of talk:	Number selected
0 Never	5
1 Occasionally	20
2 At least once during each class period	11
3 More than once during each class period	3
4 Often	2

Table 2

A Comparison of the Number of Comments Made Regarding Personal Experience as a Teacher with the Number of Comments Made about Minority or Disadvantaged Status.

Group	Comparison groups	% of class	Comments made	$\underline{n}^a$	$\underline{M}^b$	$\underline{SD}$	df	$\underline{t}$
Teacher		.86	42	14	3.488	3.442		
	Minority (all)	.78	3	14	.275	.747	14	3.413*
	Disadvantaged (all)	.69	3	14	.311	.836	14	3.356*
	Minority (ethnic)	.39	3	14	.549	1.487	17	2.933*

Note. The original means and standard deviations were scaled by the percent of people in class.

<sup>a</sup>  $\underline{n}$  = number of 15 minute segments

<sup>b</sup>  $\underline{M}$  = number of comments per 15 minute segment

\* $p > .01$

Table 3

Descriptive information about gender

Gender	% in class	total comments	% of total comments	% getting Ph.D. degrees	never talked in class
Female	80%	162	74%	21%	5
Male	20%	52	24%	37.5%	0