

The Personality Vacuum: Problems in Teacher Education and Clinical Research

By Pepi Leistyna

Psychology with its notion of the isolated, developing individual allows for the interpretation that all societal problems can be ultimately located at the door of the individual actor. This allows for an interpretation of society as an aggregate of individuals rather than a totality that is much greater than its individual parts.

—Sullivan, 1990, p. xii

Mainstream educational psychology, in its various forms, has generally focused on what is perceived as a unitary and self-contained individual. From this perspective, it is as if the cognitive and psychological makeup of each person were somehow formulated outside of history and politics, and thus unaffected by ideology, power relations, and such socially constructed categories as capitalism, race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In fact, this myopic point of analysis systematically ignores the reality that the personal world is, in large part, an intersubjective cultural form.

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Unfortunately, formal pedagogy and curricula are largely the products of mainstream psychology's structuralist and positivist stranglehold on conceptions of the mind. In this article, I would like to

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illustrate, using a specific example of my own experience in a clinical research course at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, ways in which the sociopolitical nature of identity is virtually abstracted from all analysis and understanding of the individual—creating what I refer to as the “personality vacuum.” It will be my conclusion that filtering out the political nature of identity and difference plays an extremely important role in the organization and maintenance of dominant oppressive institutions and practices in our society.

Clinical Research and Teacher Education

In a radically depoliticized environment such as the Harvard Graduate School of Education, professors, for the most part, turn a blind eye to the inherently ideological nature of their assumptions, perspectives, and courses. In other words, they fail to name and engage in the classroom the values and beliefs that inform their locations, hiding behind the modernist notion that knowledge and research are universal and objective.

The clinical research course that I was required to take as a doctoral candidate was taught by a person whose work is grounded in Piagetian theories around the nature and development of intelligence. The class was designed as an attempt to recognize the multiple perspectives of “our” students, and ways of understanding them as individuals. The professor introduced the course with the following statement:

Textbooks, standardized tests, many teacher education programs, and many curriculum programs feed into the belief that there is one best way of understanding. And this is linked with another pervasive, pernicious belief—that students who do not understand it in our way are not smart enough to understand it at all. This course explores the diverse ways that people come to their understanding. What kind of experiences affect a learner’s construction of knowledge, and what, then, can be a teacher’s role? (Harvard University Graduate School of Education Course Catalogue, 1993-94, p. 118)

As I was looking for additional insight into the complexities of multicultural education, this particular class, at least in description, promised a great deal of insight—it implied a rupturing of positivism and the modernist conceptions of the individual. I was especially intrigued to know how a person who embraced Piaget’s structuralist approach to cognitive development would deal with the implications of social interactionism (Au & Jordan, 1981; Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 1996; Heath, 1983; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1996; Michaels, 1981; Moll, 1990; Moll, Diaz & Lopes, 1991; Voloshinov, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). That is, how she would address the postmodern realities of diversity, contingency, and difference.

The course was centered around having the whole class observe the moon for the entire semester. As such, each and every day was dedicated to a discussion of

what different people saw in the night skies. Another typical classroom exercise consisted of attaching a string to our nose, with the opposite end fixed to a mirror on the ceiling—so that we could see each other from various angles. There were also show-and-tell sessions in which some students presented their own personal crayon drawings to the entire class. This was all done in the name of “understanding individual differences and alternative perspectives.”

As these exercises continued week after week, I couldn’t understand how this type of pedagogy would help develop self-reflective, multi-lensed, and critical researchers and practitioners. In addition, I couldn’t help but wonder what any of this had to do with the fact that back in the cultural patterns that constitute social reality, schools and the streets are virtual war zones where drug abuse, teenage pregnancy, school dropouts, illiteracy, and a long list of oppressive practices and social injustices that directly affect the educational process, are running rampant. How would the methodology of this particular graduate course help teachers to understand the dialectical relationship between intergroup strife and struggle and individual psychology?

At one point during the semester, the class participated in observing two young Black girls engage in a cognitive exercise of solving puzzles. In light of the current debates and conflicts concerning poverty, racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination, especially the media blitz around the release of Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1995), a book which makes claims to the genetic inferiority of Blacks and other groups, I was extremely uncomfortable with a room full of privileged White people (only one Black male) hanging over two Black girls for the sake of clinical observation. This was especially difficult for me in the sense that we as a group did not problematize the realities that have led to these two individuals (members of a collective that continues to experience a great deal of oppression in this country) to attend by choice, an African-American private school. The fact that in order to maintain their own cultural capital and avoid total domination they segregated themselves to an environment that nurtures and respects them was ignored by the room full of budding researchers and educators.

Finding this radical omission disconcerting, to say the least, I openly expressed to the class the importance of context in understanding the multiple and contingent social identities of people, and how such social identities within unequal relations of power invoke particular kinds of behavior and interaction. When I asked why as a group we had neglected to make the connections among the current national debates, the sociopolitical realities of these young, low socio-economic status, Black girls, what Harvard represents as an “elite,” predominantly White institution, and the contingent nature of cognition, the professor responded:

This is one important and complex set of questions to look at. I think that one can also look at other things.

With one swift and empty statement, these “important and complex issues” were simply dismissed. The professor further defended her refusal to analyze group experience, insisting that “There are the risks of stereotyping.” In the name of observing quote “the individual,” she simply psychologized experience so as to depoliticize the social reality that these girls live in on a daily basis, that is, the realities of the multiple and interconnecting relationships of race, capitalism, class, gender, and so forth, that speak to a more dialectical understanding of the politics of identity and difference, as well as to and the social influences on cognition, psychology, and performance.

This statement about the risks of stereotyping epitomizes the resistance prevalent in many graduate schools of education to theoretically engage the social. In fact, theory itself is often completely ignored. Even those “liberal” classrooms dealing with educational psychology and human development, that break with traditional methodological restraints and pedagogical absolutes—like the one that I experienced at Harvard—are usually mutated into feel-good therapy sessions in which theory is stifled at the level of description. In other words, students and teachers share life stories as if they haphazardly fell out of the sky, but they are rarely encouraged to engage, so as to understand, the historical and sociopolitical realities that in fact have shaped such experiences.

Making Sense of the World

Theory constitutes the ways in which we make sense of the world around us, that is, how we interpret, critique, and draw generalizations (hooks, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987). Generalizations that are not constantly problematized do risk stereotyping and objectifying; therefore, theories should always be flexible heuristics prone to change. As critical educators we need to keep a healthy tension in our understanding of the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, so as to never essentialize and objectify the individual (e.g., to assume that all Puerto Ricans are the same), but to also not disregard group experience—what it means to be marked by race, class, nation, etc. The reality of walking the fine line between analytic distinctions and stereotypes should never inhibit educators from attempting to develop a critical understanding of what we observe. The point of using analytic categories such as race is by no means meant to essentialize—to imply that racial groups are fixed and exclusive, to assume that all racially subordinated groups/individuals think about is their oppression, or to argue that behavior manifests itself in deterministic or monolithic ways. Contemporary African-American culture, for example, “is radically complex and diverse, marked by an intriguing variety of intellectual reflections, artistic creations, and social practices” (Dyson, 1993, p. xiii). However, race—implying racism and racialization (along with a long list of other significant points of analysis)—is a significant shaper of culture and identity. A more sociocognitive approach to clinical research and

practice would require the exploration of the ideological construction of such categories, and their implications and possibilities.

There is a great deal of critical literature and research, none of which was presented to the class at Harvard, that explores the effects of racism and racialization, sexism, classism, and other forms of exclusion, on students' reactions to schooling. In fact, terminology such as *internalized oppression*, *learned helplessness*, and *resistance* are frequently used in the literature to refer to the relationship between the social and the psychological.

If fear of stereotyping and objectifying the research participants in the clinical research course at Harvard were really the issue at hand, then why hadn't the class discussed the realities of representational politics, the malleability of theory, and the ideological foundation of each person's particular point of view as a researcher? Why hadn't we discussed the sociohistorically and ideologically constructed (and relational) conceptions of "Blackness" and "Whiteness," capitalism, gender, or class in this country, and how they work to shape our perspectives? None of these categories that define a politics of identity and difference showed up in any of the readings. The index of the professor's own well-received book, which was used as the course's main text, did not have a single mention of these crucial points of analysis.

In addition, if understanding alternative perspectives were really the goal of such a methodology, then why hadn't we discussed in depth (that is, beyond the official course description) the social construction of cognition and literacy, and how schools reinforce only certain kinds of language use, values, beliefs, bodies of knowledge, and learning styles—the cultural capital of White, affluent, heterosexual, male ways of knowing? These issues were clearly avoided. The end result was that the professor simply imported Black students from the ghetto for clinical observation only to send them back.

Legitimizing this type of pedagogy and research, and contradicting her reluctance to engage the social via issues such as race, gender, and class, the professor stated that, "It is good for these children to be around Harvard, it builds their self-confidence." When I asked, "What has led to a lack of 'self-confidence,' and how do such affective dispositions impact educational attitudes and cognitive performance?," I was ignored. It comes as no surprise that the professor, who discouraged critical reflexivity among her students, never questioned her own assumption that the children lacked self-confidence. In fact, such a disposition was never voiced by the girls themselves, nor was it apparent in their performance during the exercise.

Instead of perceiving my questions as potentially edifying, I was getting the feeling that, in the eyes of the group, I was being disruptive. What often happens in these learning environments is that a deceitful form of democracy is used in order to make the teacher's interactions with students' ideas appear just. For example, a critical question is avoided at the level of "Okay, because of the limited time, let's

hear from someone else" (a common response to my questions during the semester). The apparent emphasis on equal opportunity to participate strategically disrupts any possibility for profound theoretical engagement and analysis among classroom participants. Such limiting practices are often strategically used in public institutions as mechanisms of ideological control that work to privilege and exclude particular perspectives, voices, authorities, and representations.

A major role of critical research/interpretation should be to expose and transform inequities of power. However, educational psychology, and its concomitant pedagogical practices, for the most part, completely sidestep such an ethical dimension. As Joe Kincheloe and Shirley Steinberg (1996) observe:

This is the great paradox of contemporary schooling and teacher education: educators speak of empowerment as a central goal, but often ignore the way power operates to subvert the empowerment of teachers and students. (p. 191)

A Context for Reading and Interpretation

For the next assignment, we were asked to do field work that entailed randomly selecting people to read and interpret Audre Lorde's poem "Progress Report." The professor, when I asked in class if we should get any background information about our participants, responded, "No! We cannot draw conclusions about a particular group from one person's response." Again, any effort to get inside ideological formations that shape the structures of meaning, forms of life, and the norms and social practices, in order to make sense of them through and beyond the individual, were thrown out the window. From this perspective, Lorde's subject position as a Black, Lesbian woman (among other defining characteristics) would also have to be considered irrelevant to understanding her expressive work. Any theoretical inquest was reduced and dismissed by the professor as, "We can never really know the person." This particular stance, which categorically precludes the social, serves to reinforce the myth of individualism in this country. It also minimizes the interpretive role and ideological lens of the researcher while contradicting the ostensible purpose of the course itself.

Psychological development and the production of knowledge are sociocognitive processes. Socialization thus plays a significant role in shaping the individual. This shaping process was evident in watching the professor's own ideology about individualism grow in the minds of her students. For example, on one occasion, a White woman was asked to participate in a math experiment in front of the class. She told the group, in no uncertain terms, that she had been treated poorly by her male math teachers and that she had ultimately done poorly in this subject area. Approaching the task, the participant was clearly nervous and sweating in anticipation. These important social-psychological manifestations and insights, even after I raised some concerns about sexism and cognitive performance, went untouched. Not a sound was heard from the forty other students who, perhaps following the

professor's logic, made no publicly stated connection from the personal to the social, let alone to the political.

Instead, I heard students describe the personality of the woman as introverted or extroverted, inhibited or uninhibited, field dependent or field independent. Not once did I hear people interrogate the history of the participant, or the immediate context of the classroom and the task, in order to address why it is that a learner may sometimes be motivated, extroverted, and confident, and other times unmotivated, introverted, and anxious. Nor was there a discussion of why in one set of circumstances there may be social distance and antagonisms (whether we are conscious of them or not) among a specific group of learners, and less in others.

Educational psychology is certainly concerned with issues of affect—which includes the learner's motivation, self-confidence, and level of anxiety. But, as illustrated in this clinical research class, all of these variables are far too often relegated to the confines of the individual and abstracted from the social context. It is off-base to assume that stress in working on particular assignments is simply the result of intersychic factors. As Bonny Norton Pierce (1995) argues,

We need a theory of social identity that integrates the learner and the learning context, and how relations of power in the social world affect social interaction between learners and teachers and among peers. (p. 7)

On a similar occasion, a Black male student was asked, by his peers in the class who were in the process of celebrating their personal histories, to share his experiences growing up. He replied, "How can you ask me to speak when for so many years of my life, my voice, my people's voice, has been taken away." Regardless of the blatantly obvious overtones of this powerful statement, the conceptual understanding of racism in this classroom was reduced to the individual's world of experience. In other words, caught in the paradigm of individualism, acts of racism were not interpreted by the White students listening as social and institutional. Racism was psychologized into individual and pathological behavior. As such, any oppression along racial lines was disarticulated from White supremacy. Consequently, the Black student was met with sympathy for having to face such harsh treatment from "those people," but was never rewarded with the anticipated self-critical and social reflection that he was looking for from his immediate White colleagues: i.e., with recognition that it's Whites' responsibility to transform such institutionalized sociocultural inequities. He never again contributed to the class discussions.

Questions of Race

Whiteness has been a sociopolitically and institutionally sanctioned marker of status in the United States. Racialized cultural patterns are embedded in the practices and institutions of White-America. As John Ogbu (1987) points out,

...feelings of aversion, revulsion, and disgust they [negative images of other racial groups] evoke come to be incorporated into the culture of the dominant group and children learn them "naturally" as they learn other aspects of their culture. (p. 260)

Educational institutions continue to perpetuate cultural racism through their curriculum (e.g., what/whose values, beliefs, voices, and representations of history, identity, and difference are included?), teacher assumptions and teaching styles, and de facto segregation of racially subordinated students via tracking. But few Whites recognize the impact that such racism has had on shaping our own values, beliefs, personal and social interests, and actions. The students did not see themselves as White, privileged, and perpetrators, whether consciously or not, of racism and other forms of discrimination. They were never encouraged to explore the history of racialization of identities, which clearly reveals how White supremacy has historically been an important mechanism of cultural production and reproduction in the United States. In other words, how hundreds of years of Anglo domination have been a fundamental part (as opposed to an external or separate feature) of most institutional and everyday cultural practices in this society. The classroom participants apparently did not understand how the psychological makeup of individuals—the vehicle through which researchers and practitioners see and interpret the world—is among other things, racially driven.

It has been my experience that pedagogy based on psychological models of the unified individual effectively produces future teachers who actually believe that they can be bias-free in their classrooms. By not recognizing whiteness as a racial identity, most Whites see themselves as race-free and less ethnic than "Others," and consequently take for granted the privileges they secure by such an ideologically charged racial marker (Alba, 1990; Allen, 1994; Dyer, 1997; Frankenburg, 1997; Franklin, 1995; Fusco, 1988; Hill, 1997; hooks, 1992; Macintosh, 1990; McCarthy & Crinchlow, 1993; McIntyre, 1997; McLaren, 1994; Roediger, 1994). It is thus essential that educators and citizens interrogate the unspoken centrality of White, male, affluent, heterosexual identity. As Peter McLaren (1994) insists:

Unless we give white students a sense of their own identity as an emergent ethnicity, we naturalize whiteness as a cultural marker against which Otherness is defined... White groups need to examine their own ethnic histories so that they are less likely to judge their own cultural norms as neutral and universal. (p. 59)

In the graduate courses that I teach that deal with whiteness and other forms of oppression, there are always teachers who argue against drawing attention to racial and cultural differences. "I see my kids as individuals, I don't see color," is a common response. However, as well-intentioned as they may be, this lack of acknowledging and engaging such ideological markers has negative consequences. As Sonia Nieto (1992) asserts:

To see differences, in this line of reasoning, is to see defects and inferiority. Thus,

to be color-blind may result in *refusing to accept difference* and therefore accepting the dominant culture as the norm. It may result in denying the very identity of our students... (p. 109)

By no means is Nieto implying that skin color predisposes behavior, but rather, she is emphasizing that in this society the sociohistorical and ideological construction of race, and the concomitant realities of racialization and racism, dramatically impact cultural practices and personal experience. It is thus theoretically insufficient and dangerous to simply psychologize experience via the notion of individuality, abstracting it from the realities of social and institutional practices. Articulating the psychological effects of racialization, Howard Winant (1995) states: "Despite exhortations both sincere and hypocritical, it is not possible to be 'color-blind,' for race is a basic element of our identity" (p. 31).

An elementary school teacher in my *Cross Cultural Perspectives* graduate course at the University of Massachusetts recounts the following story. She observed a group of thirteen children between the ages of three and five years old, who were asked to describe themselves. The children, looking at pictures taken of themselves, responded, "happy, angry, sad, bored, and so forth" They then began describing their clothing. The final angle of inquiry pertained to "skin color." When it was the African-American girl's turn to describe herself:

She became suddenly and unusually troubled and very apprehensive. At first she hesitated, then without conviction, described herself as "white." A Euro-American child shouted at the top of his lungs, "Black, black, you are black!" With lots of embarrassment she brought herself to say "brown."

The young girl from India also identified herself as being "white," even though her skin tone was darker than that of the African-American girl. The Mexican child "simply said 'blanco' and then withdrew from the group." The teacher later commented:

It's important to note that none of the students, although very young, have problems distinguishing between the seven basic colors. The difficulties started when the children had to describe their own skin color. When it was my turn to describe myself, the students volunteered to identify my skin color. Out of the entire group, only two Euro-American children labeled me, hesitatingly at that, as "brown." It was not until I described myself as brown that the Mexican child consented to rejoin the group with a big smile. In subsequent descriptions, I noticed a propensity for all non-white children to describe themselves as brown.

It is clear from this anecdote that the process of racialization, regardless of whether or not we chose to recognize and address it, begins at an early age. The children not only reveal an internalized stigma about color, but also how whiteness has come to signify the norm, as well as a marker of intelligence and beauty. It seemed apparent to the students that the Dominican woman could only be "a teacher" if she were White. When the positive attributes of intelligence and

power were then identified as belonging to a brown person, the racially subordinated kids suddenly found comfort, solidarity, and motivation in their racial identities. The Mexican child's rejoining of the group is symbolic of the necessary process of rupturing internalized oppression and cross-cultural ambivalence.

Understanding Difference

The clinical research course that I have been describing does not prepare educators for this type of predicament. It does not help them develop the interpretive tools to understand and use such an incident as a pedagogical moment to engage the realities of racism and whiteness—any form of exclusion for that matter. Such graduate courses provide little opportunity for students to develop the presence of mind (i.e., critical awareness) necessary to understand what constitutes *difference* and how the dominant referent shapes otherness. In most cases, ill-prepared teachers simply sweep such forms of discrimination under the rug with the false hope that they will simply go away. An additional reductionistic byproduct of this type of pedagogy is that educators theorize disruptive acts in the classroom around an individual's pathology, rather than investigating such behavior as a conscious or unconscious reaction to dehumanizing social and institutional conditions.

Within the uncritical and abstract environment of this research course, students seemed (or were being educated) to believe that others' minds were individually different, and that diversity of this sort was okay. The central problem as I saw it was that the participants in this class could not clearly articulate their own perspectives, but they had little idea where these thoughts were generated from, nor were they encouraged to explore such avenues. As such, the referent that they were using to define *difference*—what the professor described as “our ways of understanding”—went uncontested. Who is the *our*, how has it become the norm at the exclusion of others? Why are some cultural portraits deemed more valuable than others? How have the antagonistic relations that have emerged over the struggle for a place in these exclusionary practices and institutions led to certain attitudes toward different world views, literacies, education, and learning styles? If educational psychology is really “a scientific discipline that is concerned with producing general knowledge about how the educational process affects students” (Royer & Feldman, 1984, p. 6), then one is compelled to address such crucial questions; certainly if we are to ever really engage what the professor described as, “the diverse ways that people come to their understanding,” and how the kinds “of experiences affect a learner's construction of knowledge.” Unfortunately, this type of inquiry was discouraged in this graduate classroom.

Within any relativistic paradigm of similarities and differences, the dominant group in society is perceived as the norm, and its plethora of inherent inequalities and injustices are uncontested. As such, even if educators were able to successfully

teach “other people’s children” (assuming that they are willing to do so) in terms of recognizing and building on what they bring to the classroom, it does not mean that as soon as those children leave the safety of the classroom they will not face socially and institutionally sanctioned forms of exclusion and abuse.

A classroom discussion about the politics of identity and difference would surely raise dangerous questions about the relationship among power, capitalism, language, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, identity, and exclusion. However, such critical questions in this country are for the most part, with the help of mainstream discourses of psychology and teacher education, avoided at all cost. As a diversionary tactic, mainstream pedagogy simply abstracts the learner’s identity from the institutions and socially-sanctioned practices that produce inequality, injustice, and cultural resistance—institutions and practices which ultimately remain in tact.

The Need To Engage

Unwillingness to engage the complex interrelationships that constitute identity and social reality only serves to fragment and disarticulate experience from its sociohistorical construction. In fact, fragmentation of knowledge is largely the norm at graduate schools of education. For example, at Harvard, a prevailing rebuttal among faculty to critical and interdisciplinary comments is “That’s not *blank* (a particular field of study), that’s politics.” As Noam Chomsky (1996) states when asked, “How can you talk about moral development and violence without talking about the larger social, cultural, and economic environments in which people live and develop?”:

You can’t! On the other hand, if you simply talk about the world in the accepted ways, that would not be called politics, that would be being reasonable. It becomes “ideological” or extremist when it deviates from the accepted patterns. (p. 125)

This disarticulation of knowledge, via the fragmentation of disciplines, serves to obscure political awareness, a clarity that can only be achieved through an interdisciplinary view of the world, what C. Wright Mills (1959) refers to throughout his work as “the sociological imagination.”

The disarticulation of the social and the psychological is not surprising in a school of education such as Harvard’s that houses its courses in literacy and language acquisition in the *Department of Human Development and Psychology* with very little connection to the *Department of Learning and Teaching*. The logic seems to be that the reason millions of people in this country are illiterate has predominantly to do with cognitive internal processes rather than the sociopolitical climate of the classroom and the greater society. As Jim Gee (1990) argues when discussing the so-called “failure problem” of students, “we need to question several ‘commonsense’ assumptions inherited from the discipline of psychology:

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- (1) Thinking and speaking are functions of individual "minds."
- (2) Literacy is an individual mental skill involving the ability to read and write.
- (3) Intelligence, knowledge, and aptitude are states of individual minds. (p. 6)

Within these closed-world presuppositions that Gee contests, the responsibility for success, or lack thereof, resides within the individual. Accordingly, a problem is individualized away from the social conditions within which the learning process takes place. At best, this leads to a mean-spirited, victim-blaming, meritocracy that demands that everyone pull themselves up by their bootstraps. At worst, it supports the idea that the reason that disproportionate amounts of certain racial groups are not "succeeding" in schools and the workplace, is that, as argued in *The Bell Curve*, these people are categorically and biologically inferior to the White mainstream.

Discarding these two fundamentally racist and oppressive conclusions, educators need to understand that thinking, speaking, knowing, and literacy are functions of social groups, and that "intelligence and aptitude, as measured by tests, are artificially constructed measures of aspects of social practices taken out of context and attributed to individuals" (Gee, 1990, p. 7). Teacher education programs, especially courses in clinical research, need to stress the social nature of the mind, the ideological nature of perception, and the fact that the way in which we learn to think and feel is the product of the groups we belong to and value. If any course of study truly hopes to "explore the diverse ways that people come to their understanding" and provide "the kinds of experiences that affect a learner's construction of knowledge," then we need to move immediately away from the personality vacuum. For, within this abstract space, the psychological realities of such oppressive institutions as white supremacy go unseen and thus untouched.

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