

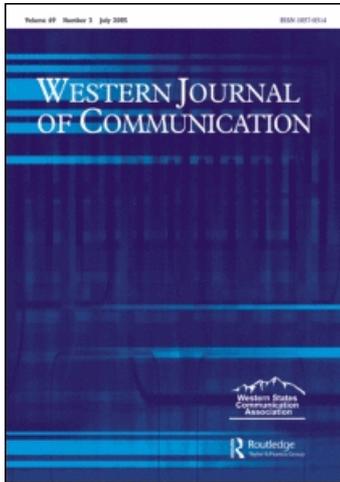
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“I Am Also in the Position to Use My Whiteness to Help Them Out”: The Communication of Whiteness in Service Learning

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“I Am Also in the Position to Use My Whiteness to Help Them Out”: The Communication of Whiteness in Service Learning

Danielle Endres & Mary Gould

In this essay, we examine the relationship between Whiteness theory and service learning, specifically through an examination of an intercultural communication course we taught. In our analysis of student-written assignments, we reveal how service learning provides a context for students to rehearse and affirm White privilege, despite the fact that they have been exposed to critical theories of Whiteness before engaging in service learning projects. Specifically, we identify and examine two rhetorical strategies that perpetuate White privilege in the context of service learning: (1) the conflation of being White with Whiteness, and (2) using White privilege for charity. Our analysis contributes a significant critique of the use of service learning in communication courses.

Keywords: Communication Pedagogy; Service Learning; Whiteness

Service learning is on the rise in higher education, particularly in communication departments (Oster-Aaland, Sellnow, Nelson, & Pearson, 2004). Service learning is already taught across a variety of communication courses (Artz, 2001; Conville, 2001; Bergstrom & Bullis, 1999; Droge & Murphy, 1999; Gibson, Kostecki, & Lucas, 2001; Isaacson, Dorries, & Brown, 2001; Kendall, 1999; Oster-Aaland et al., 2004). Indeed,

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Laura Oster-Aaland et al. (2004) report that communication is a “disciplinary leader in service learning” (p. 349). Service learning encourages instructors and students to link theory to practice and to connect the university with the community through projects that foster student learning while also serving community organizations (e.g., Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999; Stukas, Clary, & Snyder, 1999; Tannenbaum, 2008). James Applegate and Sherwyn Morreale (1999) suggest that the communication discipline’s fundamental link to application makes it amenable to service learning: “Service learning is a perfect pedagogical partner to the study of communication praxis” (p. xii). These tenets of service learning may lead communication scholars interested in praxis (e.g., Freire, 1970/1997), critical communication pedagogy (e.g., Fassett & Warren, 2006; Sprague, 1992), and social justice (e.g., Frey, 1998) to pursue service learning. With the growth and popularity of service learning, it is crucial that we continue the scholarly conversation about this form of pedagogy (e.g., Conville, 2001; Droge & Murphy, 1999; Isaacson et al., 2001). When service learning is lauded as a project of social change and betterment (Tannenbaum, 2008), it is crucial to critically examine how service learning relates to power and privilege. Specifically, this essay turns our focus to the heretofore unexamined relationship between service learning and Whiteness.

Whiteness theory is the study of White privilege as an enactment of institutionalized racism; it critically interrogates the ways in which race is socially constructed and studies the everyday performances of White privilege through discourse and other practices (Dyer, 1997; Katz, 2003; Levine-Rasky, 2002; Martin & Davis, 2001; McIntosh, 1988; Nakayama & Martin, 1998; Omi & Winant, 1994). As George Lipsitz (2006) notes, “Whiteness is, of course, a delusion, a scientific and cultural fiction that like all racial identities has no valid foundation in biology or anthropology. Whiteness is, however, a social fact, an identity created and continued with all-too-real consequences for the distribution of wealth, prestige, and opportunity” (p. vii). In other words, people often go about their day-to-day lives without critically reflecting on the power associated with their identities. Possessing or performing Whiteness is simultaneously an enactment and a masking of power and privilege.

In this essay, we explore the relationship between Whiteness and service learning in communication courses. Specifically, we examine an intercultural communication course for which we designed a service learning component and focused on Whiteness theory. Based upon our analysis of the writing assignments for the course, we offer a description and a critique of how the discourses and practices of Whiteness are performed by students involved in service learning projects. We argue that service learning potentially provides a context for students to rehearse and affirm White privilege. Significantly, we observed that students performed White privilege even after being taught about theories of Whiteness. Although our students should have been equipped to at least recognize and potentially challenge the roles of White privilege in their service learning projects, most did not. We argue that service learning was a significant factor in the way our students upheld conventions of White privilege because it allowed them to approach working with underserved and underresourced community members as privileged Whites who were providing charity, instead of acting as students and allies.

As critical scholars, we feel it is important to articulate the underlying assumptions that frame our essay before proceeding. The standpoint from which we write this essay is also the position from which we engage in teaching. First, we align ourselves with critical communication research that interrogates power and privilege. Specifically, because our study is centered in teaching, we also adhere to the principles of critical communication pedagogy (Fassett & Warren, 2006; Sprague, 1992). Second, following progressive educational theory, we seek to explicitly connect teaching and learning with the everyday life experiences of our students (e.g. Dewey, 1916/1966; Vygotsky, 1986). In our teaching, we seek to make connections between communication theory and our students' practical experiences (whether structured through service learning or in nonstructured everyday encounters). Finally, because this essay engages with Whiteness and race, we would be remiss not to start by laying out our own identities. We are both White females, raised in middle-class families, and now working in higher education. We came to the project from our personal experiences with teaching about race and Whiteness across a variety of communication courses, many of which were challenging and frustrating. We are committed to teaching about power and privilege in relation to the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class in our communication courses. In designing this course, we thought service learning would provide a way to overcome some of the challenges we experienced in previous attempts to teach about power and privilege. Service learning offered the hope of learning through practical experiences.

Our essay is situated within and informs two ongoing conversations in communication studies. First, we draw from scholarship on the communicative dimensions of Whiteness and White privilege, particularly research on specific rhetorical strategies of Whiteness. Second, we situate our essay within the research on service learning, particularly within the communication discipline. Our essay connects these conversations by examining the relationship between the two. Linking these conversations is a significant move that adds not only to our understanding of the communication of Whiteness but also to our understanding of service learning. We then turn to an analysis of our students' writing assignments. Specifically, we identify two rhetorical strategies of Whiteness that our students used: (1) the conflation of being White with Whiteness, and (2) using Whiteness for charity. While we offer a critique of service learning, we are not ready to denounce service learning and other forms of praxis-based education. In the conclusion, we reflect on the role of the instructor in creating service learning experiences and explore the possibility of developing a more critically engaged form of service learning.

White Privilege in Service Learning

The exploration of Whiteness "as a communication phenomenon" is a crucial line of communication research that examines how Whiteness and White privilege are fundamentally performed, enacted, and resisted through discourse (Nakayama & Martin, 1998, p. viii).¹ Thomas Nakayama and Robert Krizek (1995) argue that Whiteness involves the use of strategic rhetoric that has an implicit investment in maintaining

the status quo, specifically power and privilege in their current manifestations. There are multiple rhetorical strategies of Whiteness including the discourse of color-blindness (Lewis, 2004), naturalized definitions of White (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995), and shock at discovering one's involvement in racism (Warren & Hytten, 2004).² These strategies range from ignorance, to denial of one's role in Whiteness, to justification of one's role in Whiteness.

Unlike much scholarship that focuses on the discourses of Whiteness "that are relatively hidden in everyday interaction" (Nakayama & Krizek, 1995, p. 298), our interest centers upon how people talk about Whiteness after they have explicitly read about and discussed Whiteness theory in a classroom (see Warren & Hytten, 2004). In particular, we focus on how our mostly White students talk about Whiteness and White privilege in relation to their service learning projects. While we drew on Whiteness theory as a way to encourage our students to think critically about and challenge current power structures that privilege Whiteness, we faced the task of undoing years of implicit training. Debian Marty (1999) explains that White children are often "raised to experience their racially based advantages as fair and normal" and are not taught the historical context of racial tension in the US (p. 51). Even though we introduced students to White privilege and Whiteness theory, many students still clung to their racial identities and attempted to justify and normalize their complicity in White privilege instead of challenging it. These justifications appeared prominently in our students' writing about their service learning projects.

At best, service learning offers a way to bridge the divide between the community and the university, while offering teachers a means to encourage students to connect theory and practice. Applegate and Morreale (1999) describe service learning as "what happens when students are afforded the opportunity to practice what they are learning in their disciplines in community settings where their work benefits others" (p. 7). Service learning is designed to help students learn course content by engaging in practice while also demonstrating the importance of community or civic engagement, and encouraging students and community members to learn from each other (Soukup, 1999; Stanton et al., 1999; Stukas et al., 1999). Ideally, service learning should be "a marriage of service with learning" (Stanton et al., 1999, p. 2). Expanding on this notion, Oster-Aaland et al. (2004) state, "Service learning is not just serving, as a student might do by working for weeks as an intern. Nor is the learning just cognitive; instead the learning grows out of application and reflection" (p. 349). In addition to the marriage between service and learning, the first proponents of service learning linked it to a desire for social change (Stanton et al., 1999). The emphases on praxis, experiential learning, and social change may make service learning attractive to critical scholars. Indeed, these emphases are what led us to try service learning.

In light of the popularity and growth of service learning (Oster-Aaland et al., 2004), it is important to approach it with a critical lens. One of the criticisms of service learning is that students perceive their experiences as "charity" or "volunteer work" rather than as a form of learning or an act of social change (Artz, 2001; Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Morton, 1995). We argue that this conflation is also

linked to institutional racism and White privilege. Further, because service learning often immerses privileged students in underresourced communities—economic, educational, political—it has the potential to reify rather than challenge the system of White privilege. Framing an experience as charity creates a hierarchy between privileged students and the communities that supposedly need the service. This hierarchical relationship has the potential to reinforce racial stereotypes, thus allowing students to position themselves as superior and view the communities with which they work as having deficits.

As we will show in our analysis, even though our students were exposed to critical theories of Whiteness, they reinforced their positions of privilege through their service learning projects. Contrary to our expectation that service learning would enhance our students' abilities to understand and reflect on Whiteness in practice, our analysis shows that service learning actually provided students with an opportunity to perform and justify their White privilege. Our study thus provides an essential caution. If service learning reinforces White privilege, it may do more harm than good. The widespread use of service learning in communication departments may accomplish some valuable projects that greatly benefit local communities. However, it can also alienate community members by fostering poorly executed projects that are imposed upon communities.

Talking White in the Service Learning Classroom

Our study began with an upper-division Intercultural Communication course that we taught.³ This course offered an introduction to the theory, practice, and scholarly field of intercultural communication. Although we focus on this course here, we will argue that our analysis is applicable to other service learning courses, even those that do not specifically use Whiteness theory or teach intercultural communication.

We designed our course to make Whiteness theory and service learning central components. Our goals with regard to Whiteness theory were: (1) to teach students about Whiteness and White privilege, and (2) to foster students' abilities to use Whiteness theory for critical reflection in practice. We incorporated Whiteness theory into the course in a variety of ways. First, we devoted several class days to it. To give just one example, we used Peggy McIntosh's (1988) well-known simile comparing Whiteness to an invisible knapsack. McIntosh states, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code-books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (n.p.). McIntosh's simile is useful for teaching Whiteness to undergraduate students because it foregrounds the seemingly invisible set of White privileges in an easily understandable way. Second, we designed writing assignments (journal and project report papers) that called for our students to reflect on course content, including Whiteness theory. For example, several journal reflection prompts asked students to reflect on Whiteness theory independently, and in relation to their service learning projects.

For the service learning component of the course, students worked with a number of community members and organizations (Community Partners) in a variety of

projects. Students worked either directly or indirectly with refugee, immigrant, undocumented immigrant, and ethnic/cultural populations in the community through a variety of nonprofit organizations. Student projects included working one-on-one with political refugees from Burma, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan; conducting oral histories of Burmese political refugees; developing an Intercultural Communication training program for a nonprofit organization's staff members; studying Latina/Latino community perspectives on public health; and creating a campaign to raise awareness for the local Italian American community. Our goals with service learning were to encourage our students to engage with various off-campus communities in positive ways, and to provide practical experiences as opportunities for examination of course content.

Data for our study emerged as we collected and analyzed our students' writing assignments.⁴ Students completed multiple writing assignments including a weekly journal and service learning project reports, which serve as our texts for this analysis. Student-written assignments are an important set of data for this study. The journal format provides a good window into student experiences because journal entries have the potential to show student perceptions of their learning.⁵ Moreover, the final project report called for students to reflect on what they learned from their service learning projects. The writing assignments provide insight into how our students thought about the course content and service learning experiences. One of the primary themes that emerged for many students was identity, specifically White identity, and the perceived privilege associated with being White.

In line with John Warren and Kathy Hytten's (2004) research on the faces of Whiteness, our analysis reveals two ways that students performed Whiteness in a classroom in which they explored Whiteness theory. However, before we discuss the two strategies of Whiteness, we will examine how students attempted to work through and understand the concepts of Whiteness and White privilege before engaging in their service learning projects.

Recognition of Whiteness and White Privilege

Students' written responses to the class sessions and readings that focused on Whiteness show that some of our students were able to express basic tenets of Whiteness theory and White privilege prior to beginning to work on their service learning projects. For example, Mindy's⁶ journal response shows that she was able to apply McIntosh's (1988) article to her life experiences. She wrote,

I really do have an invisible knapsack of tools and necessities so that I have a nice, easy, smooth life, compared to other people who are discriminated against just because of a certain feature or skin color.

Mindy acknowledged that her Whiteness provides her with tools and necessities that make her life easy, compared to people of color who do not have an invisible knapsack. The recognition of seemingly invisible benefits that result from one's Whiteness is a key step toward understanding Whiteness theory and White privilege.

Other students also wrote about the benefits associated with White privilege. For example, Allison wrote,

I never have to question (or be questioned) the way this culture and society works—it's all so familiar and “normal” to me. Although I really hate that I have an unearned privilege, I have to be honest with myself and realize that I do appreciate not being in the non-dominant culture, constantly fighting for equality and having to accept someone else's culture as the “better” culture.

Like Mindy, Allison's comment demonstrates her realization that she benefits from her Whiteness. The phrase “an unearned privilege” expresses an important aspect of Whiteness theory that critiques the notion of an even playing field. After noting appreciation of her privilege, Allison's comment wrestles with how it would feel to not have the benefits afforded by her Whiteness.

These typical responses show that students had developed some awareness of their racial identities in relation to the system of White privilege. At the time of grading these and other journal entries, we were thrilled that our students were demonstrating an ability to talk about Whiteness and White privilege in relation to their own lives. In our previous teaching experiences, we had encountered more resistance to Whiteness theory and had had to push our students much harder to understand their relationships to White privilege. Although these responses demonstrate some acceptance and understanding of the theory, having an awareness of Whiteness and White privilege does not automatically result in the ability to renounce it or change practices. The students' comments are abstract and hypothetical; they do not apply the concepts of White privilege and Whiteness to concrete experiences or situations, nor do they challenge them.

One of our goals in using service learning was to give students an additional set of experiences from which to learn about Whiteness theory. As we will discuss in the next two sections, when students talked about their service learning projects—concrete, tangible, and power-laden experiences in interracial contexts—they rhetorically performed or justified White privilege. Despite being exposed to and demonstrating some level of understanding of Whiteness theory and White privilege in the classroom, our students' writing does not move beyond an awareness and ability to use the vocabulary of Whiteness. Instead, our analysis reveals how our students used the vocabulary of White privilege and Whiteness to recenter and reinscribe Whiteness in the context of their service learning projects.

Being White vs. Whiteness

The first strategy of justifying White privilege is to conflate “being White” with “Whiteness.” While being White is related to an individual's identity, Whiteness is an institutionalized system of power and privilege that benefits Whites. As Raka Shome (2000) suggests, “Whiteness is not just about bodies and skin color, but rather more about the discursive practices” that sustain White supremacy (p. 108). Although Whiteness theory assumes that White individuals need to recognize and reflect on their White identities, it also assumes that the power of Whiteness lies

in its systemic and discursive nature (Katz, 2003; Lipsitz, 2006). Lipsitz notes, "White supremacy is an equal opportunity employer; nonwhite people can become active agents of White supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards" (p. viii). In other words, the study of Whiteness attends to the ways in which White privilege is normalized and institutionalized through discourse. We found that our students conflated being White with Whiteness most overtly in a journal assignment that asked them to reflect on how Whiteness theory and White privilege might affect their service learning projects. Instead of reflecting on Whiteness and White privilege, our students reflected on being White. Most of our students focused on how their White bodies and identities might or did affect their interactions with community members in their service learning projects.

Before moving on, it is important to make two points. First, Whiteness theory assumes that race is a social construct. According to Judith Katz (2003), "The very term 'White race' is a definition of status, not genetics. As scientists have noted, race is a social construct, not a biological one" (p. 11). As such, the concept of Whiteness shifts our attention from viewing race as a static biological characteristic, to attending to Whiteness as a set of cultural constructions imbued with privilege and power. Parker Johnson (1999) states:

Whatever biological characteristics constitute White skin, the *meaning* of White skin is created through the ways we communicate about and the ways we are communicated to concerning Whiteness in many contexts and in many media. Understanding these larger social discourses lies not in any individual attempting to challenge his or her communication patterns; rather we need to understand the ways that communication about Whiteness are embedded in our social fabric. (p. 5)

Second, we recognize the importance of our students' abilities to call themselves White and acknowledge their privilege (as we discussed in the previous section). As Katz (2003) suggests, many Whites do not yet recognize their racial identity and White privilege. Thus, an important step towards challenging Whiteness and White privilege lies in first recognizing it. However, our students' next step after recognition was not to challenge Whiteness, but to uphold it.

The conflation of being White with Whiteness recenters the individual experiences of Whites and normalizes White privilege. In response to a question about how Whiteness theory would affect her service learning project, Joanie wrote:

Whiteness can relate to my project in several ways. First of all, the refugees might not warm up to me because I am White I know I am White and therefore I know that I am privileged. I need to make sure I don't have a "better than you" attitude when I am with these people.

Although she started by stating that "Whiteness can relate to my project in several ways," her examples conflate her perceptions of how being White will relate to her project with the system of Whiteness. In other words, being White stands in for Whiteness in Joanie's explanation. This conflation shifts focus from the systemic nature of Whiteness to Joanie's individual experiences and racial identity (later in this section we will return to how Joanie sees being White as a potential problem for her project). This conflation is problematic for several reasons.

First, the focus on the individual allows students to see only the individual consequences of their racial identities for their projects, whether good or bad. Many of our students described being White as a detriment to their projects. Joanie, for example, focused on her White skin as a potential obstacle to her ability to complete her service learning project—the refugees may not “warm up” to her. Instead of recognizing that non-White political refugees face a complex system of racial relations in the United States and that there might be risks and harms for them in choosing to participate in the project, Joanie’s response focused inward on the potential consequences for *her*, based upon her White identity. While Whiteness theory explains that the system of Whiteness socializes and harms everyone (e.g., Katz, 2003), the exclusive focus on how being White may hurt a service learning project perpetuates Joanie’s White privilege and supports White supremacy by placing her concerns as a White person at the center of the project. As Warren and Hytten (2004) note, examination of one’s White privilege in the absence of critical reflection can serve as a continuation of social domination. As an alternative, they advocate that one way for Whites to productively engage with Whiteness is to “balance their own relationship with or investment with Whiteness—that is, they must not obsess about their own actions, ending up with a worldview that begins and ends with them—while always keeping their own implication in the perpetuation of racism in play” (p. 330). It is neither wholly problematic to reflect on individual experiences and identities, nor to see Whiteness as a detriment. However, it is crucial to critically reflect on the individual in relation to the systemic nature of Whiteness. Joanie’s inability to see beyond her own identity reflects a lack of understanding of how Whiteness plays into her relationship with the refugees. Without this type of critical reflection, Joanie and many of our other students conflated their individual experiences of being White with the system of Whiteness.

Second, the focus on being White may allow for the reinforcement of White privilege. In her journal response, Cindy focused on the benefits of her group being White. She wrote, “Because me and my group are White, I believe people will respect us more just because it is a typical view of society. I think they will especially respect the fact that we are White people *trying* to make a difference.” In comparison to Joanie’s comment, this comment is more explicit in its perpetuation of Whiteness. Rather than focusing on the ways that being White might harm a service learning project, Cindy asserted that her group’s White bodies would give them automatic respect. Cindy’s comment assumes that “being White” is all she and her group need in order to make a difference for the people with whom they worked. Cindy chose to reflect on the benefits of being White. Instead of challenging these benefits, she suggested that they are a good thing. She lauded her group for trying to make a difference, but at the same time reinforced the constructed superiority of White bodies. Cindy failed to consider any difficulties/challenges she and her group might face working with diverse community members. She also failed to reflect on how the benefits of being White are related to a problematic and damaging system of Whiteness.

Joanie reinforced White privilege in a different way. As you may recall, Joanie accepted her privilege by stating, “I am White and therefore I know that I am

privileged.” However, instead of challenging the system of privilege, she wrote that she must make sure that she does not “have a ‘better than you’ attitude” towards the non-White political refugees with whom she would be working. This comment reinforces hierarchy between Whites and non-Whites—it assumes that there is a “better than” relationship between her and the refugees. By cautioning herself not to have this attitude, Joanie did not challenge the hierarchy but instead sought to censure her attitude in response to her acceptance of the hierarchy. Joanie’s comment upholds White privilege through the attitude of internalized dominance. Katz (2003) explains Maureen Walker’s concept of internalized dominance as “the inbred assumption among Whites that superiority over people of color is our birthright” (p. 11). She goes on to explain the consequences of this attitude: “This attitude infects all interactions with people of color and influences our immediate reactions to their competence, talents, and achievements” (p. 11). Beyond the problematic nature of Joanie’s attitude, both Joanie’s and Cindy’s comments focus on their individual intentions—to not have a better-than-you attitude and to gain respect. The reliance on intent signals an underestimation of the role that our students’ Whiteness plays in the relationships they create with community members. These comments reinforce the focus on the self, specifically the self’s intention to do good, while sustaining Whiteness. The service learning project gave Joanie, Cindy, and many other students a context for performing and recentering White privilege instead of challenging it.

Third, the conflation of being White with Whiteness risks the possibility of linking being White with genetics. As we stated above, Whiteness theory fundamentally adheres to the social construction of race. Being White, then, is based on a set of social constructions and discursive patterns. Being White is not a fixed, biological fact. Although our students never explicitly said that being White was a part of their biology, our analysis could lead to the conclusion that our students saw their being White as a stable, unchanging fact. This appears to be the case with Joanie and Cindy. This perception could lead students to focus on the benefits or harms that come from being White instead of challenging the social construction of being White. In other words, it is possible to remove oneself from or ignore the system of institutionalized racism and White privilege by assuming that Whiteness is a biological fact that cannot be challenged.

Even though our students were equipped with theories of Whiteness, in the context of their service learning projects they demonstrated a lack of understanding of Whiteness theory and White privilege. Ultimately, our analysis reveals that our students did not challenge the system of Whiteness. They accepted it. Beyond this, their comments reinscribe White privilege either by upholding their privilege or by asserting (and appreciating) the benefits of that privilege. Service learning did not help our students with the process of critical reflection. Rather, it placed them in a position that they perceived as a position of power. Because our students were working with underresourced/underprivileged community members (as is the case with most service learning projects), they approached this dynamic in the only way that was familiar, as an act of charity or volunteering.

Using White Privilege for Charity

Although service learning proponents hold that good service learning produces student learning and not charity (e.g., Oster-Aaland et al., 2004), we found that it was difficult for our students to make a distinction between the two. Indeed, our analysis reveals that most of our students framed their projects as charity or volunteer work. Viewing service learning interactions as charity is problematic because the notion of “helping the other” is historically and institutionally embedded in power—privileged people help underprivileged people. Along with charity, there may be unspoken expectations of assimilation to the norms of dominant groups or assumptions of White superiority. The history of American Indian boarding schools is just one example of how “helping the other” can perpetuate racism and normalize White culture (e.g., Adams, 1995). In this section, we discuss how our students talked about their service learning projects as charity, using the language of “volunteerism.” Most interestingly, we reveal how our students explained that their White privilege would benefit them in their service learning projects.

Many of our students described their service learning projects in the frame of charity. In her final project journal, Sally explicitly called her service learning experience “volunteer work”:

On our first day into our new volunteer work we were given information as to where our families lived . . . We sat down in his tiny apartment and began to tell him . . . that we were volunteers and we were here to help him get established . . . as well as get used to the laws that are set here in America.

Sally, even in her final project journal, viewed what she did as volunteer work. Calling a service learning project volunteer work focuses on providing help for and/or teaching “the other” instead of examining one’s own learning process. It is troubling to see Sally’s reference to her role in service learning as that of a “volunteer” because we explicitly told students that their role was to work with and learn from Community Partners and community members. In another example, Max stated: “Overall, this visit was very positive and helpful for the family. The children really enjoyed going through the flash cards and yelling out the answers.” Again, this response frames the experience as charity. Max assumed that the visit was positive and helpful for the family, but provided no evidence that they told him this. He used his own perception of the situation to characterize how the family felt. He did not reflect on his own experience and what he learned. Through analysis of Sally’s and Max’s comments and the journal entries of other students, we found that students continually conflated volunteerism/charity with service learning.

While these examples uphold previous critiques of service learning as charity, what is more interesting here is how our students positioned their White privilege as a benefit to doing volunteer/charity work. Although some students had viewed their Whiteness as a disadvantage in other contexts, when using the frame of charity many students viewed their Whiteness as an advantage that they could use to help others. Recall, for example, Cindy’s comment: “I think they will especially respect the fact that we are White people *trying* to make a difference.” This strategy is similar to

the missionary face of Whiteness (Warren & Hytten, 2004) and the altruistic White (Delpit, 1995; Marty, 1999; McIntyre, 1997). Essentially, this strategy allows Whites to view their privilege as something useful for helping people of color. Imagining that one is using one's Whiteness for charity also reinforces the cultural deficit model, which has been criticized because it assumes that the cultures of people of color are deficient in comparison to that of the dominant group (e.g., Delpit, 1995). We saw this strategy most clearly demonstrated when our mostly White students reflected on their projects. For example, Joanie wrote,

I am in the position to use my Whiteness to help them [the refugees] out. If I see that they need something and their case manager isn't giving it to them, my request could carry a little more weight than theirs.

Similarly, Greg commented on how he could use his privilege to help those who do not have it:

The realization I have come to is basically this: Whiteness does exist. I can be offended or embarrassed by it and pretend it doesn't exist, or maybe I can utilize the privileges I have to the benefit of those who are not awarded those benefits.

Joanie's and Greg's statements justify White privilege as a way to provide charity. Joanie will use her Whiteness to help people and Greg will utilize his privileges to benefit others. These statements not only explicitly frame the service learning projects as charity, but also show that students view White privilege as a useful tool for providing charity.

Using White privilege to "help the other" is an explicit acknowledgment of White privilege/Whiteness accompanied by a justification for sustaining privilege and power as a means to help others. This strategy reifies dominant and subordinate social positions and is problematic because it creates a paternalistic relationship between Whites and the "others" that they serve. This relationship—between perceived dominant and subordinate groups—reinforces the deficit model, and, as a result, does not challenge Whiteness. Marty (1999) explains: "White children who become adults of goodwill most often oppose racism by helping people of color to help themselves. Albeit well-intentioned, this form of White antiracism never challenges the racial privilege on which it relies" (p. 51). This tendency relates to a similar tendency that Bickford and Reynolds (2002) observed among their service learning students to resist "activism" in favor of the less challenging role of "volunteer."

Service learning is not merely volunteering or charity work, and this point must be made clear to students. Ideally, service learning provides a way for students to connect coursework with practical community-based problems and experiences. However, the tendency to view service learning as charity may have been compounded by our students' complicity with Whiteness. As we will discuss in the conclusion, teachers play an important role in service learning by monitoring students and emphasizing the role that students ought to adopt in their service learning projects.

Although our analysis could serve as evidence to condemn service learning as an approach to teaching, we believe service learning may have the potential to be antiracist. Katz (2003) argues that the challenge for White antiracists is to work as

allies in a quest for and process of social justice for all people. Can service learning be part of an antiracist quest?

Conclusion: Moving Service Learning Beyond White Talk?

Our analysis contributes to ongoing research about the discourse and strategies of Whiteness. By looking at communication about Whiteness in an educational context, we attended to the ways in which people who had been exposed to Whiteness theory wrote about it. This yields different insights than research focused on the strategies of Whiteness that occur in everyday talk by people who may not know about Whiteness theory or White privilege. Although we focus primarily on the relationship between service learning and Whiteness, our analysis offers two new strategies of Whiteness worthy of continued examination: 1) conflating being White with Whiteness, and 2) using Whiteness for charity. Both strategies recenter Whiteness and justify White privilege. As Whiteness theory becomes more familiar outside of the academy, we may see these and other strategies emerge to acknowledge but not challenge White privilege. We call for further analysis and critique of these strategies of White privilege as we continue to build an understanding of the communicative dynamics of Whiteness.

Our analysis also takes a first step in investigating the complex relationship between service learning and Whiteness theory. Service learning provided a context for our students to affirm and reinscribe White privilege and White supremacy through the two strategies of Whiteness we discussed. Lacking an understanding of Whiteness theory as opposed to a mere recognition of it, many of our students were unable (or unwilling) to reflexively approach their service learning projects as a way to challenge and/or question White privilege. Students were able to recognize themselves as having White privilege, but were not able to see themselves as agents of change or allies in antiracist struggles. Despite the appeal of service learning as a praxis-based and social justice oriented form of teaching, our critique calls for a continuing examination of the relationship between service learning and Whiteness. The popularity of service learning makes this examination even more important. Whether or not Whiteness is intrinsically linked to service learning, our analysis suggests that students may make such a connection even when they have learned about Whiteness. Continued focus on service learning with this in mind may yield strategies for creating critically informed, antiracist models of service learning or other forms of praxis-based education.

Although we focused on one intercultural communication course in which we taught Whiteness theory, we believe our critique has implications for other service learning courses. Indeed, we are concerned not only with courses that explicitly couple service learning with Whiteness theory, but also with courses that employ service learning alone. Because we taught students about Whiteness theory, we could see how they connected this theory to their service learning projects in quite explicit ways. In the absence of teaching students about Whiteness theory, would they still perform and rehearse White privilege? Previous critiques of service learning have shown the

tendency of students to confuse it with charity or service (Artz, 2001; Bickford & Reynolds, 2002; Morton, 1995). Our analysis leads us to speculate that the charity frame for service learning may be a reflection of White privilege, even when not explicitly stated. Of course, we need more critical examination of service learning to address whether it is inherently entrenched in White privilege. For now, we caution communication instructors who use service learning to attend to its potential to reinscribe Whiteness, whether or not the class is focused on race, culture, or diversity.

In order to understand the connection between White privilege and service learning, further research should more explicitly address the roles of the instructor in the classroom. This is in line with the calls of several scholars for reflexivity about communication practices in the classroom and how educational identities are created and maintained (Fassett & Warren, 2004; Hendrix, Jackson, & Warren, 2003; Sprague, 1993, 2002). Regardless of the class being taught, it is imperative for instructors to be conscious of the choices they make in syllabus construction, course design, and classroom communication. These forms of communication may be indicators of the complex systematic patterns of communication, some of which take the form of strategic rhetoric (Fassett & Warren, 2004; Nakayama & Krizek, 1995). Instructor communication is rhetorically constructed in complex ways that are embedded in power dynamics, and ultimately serves to normalize particular ways of communicating. Further, instructors must recognize that institutional Whiteness refers (among other things) to the ways that the university itself is embedded in the discourses of Whiteness.

In reflecting upon both the design of and our participation in the service learning projects, we see a number of ways in which we could have both prepared for and redirected students who viewed their project as volunteer work and those who acted out their White privilege as a sign of authority. As discussed above, we were thrilled that our students used the vocabulary of Whiteness and seemed to accept that they had White privilege. As a result, we may have missed opportunities to critically assess the ways our students used the vocabulary. We discovered the strategies of Whiteness in this essay well after we completed the class, and after spending much time on data analysis. At the time of first reading our students' written assignments during the course we sometimes neglected to challenge or question their affirmations of White privilege. Instead, the pedagogical choices we made may have inadvertently permitted our students to continue to demonstrate the forms of White privilege. Warren (2005) argues that it is the responsibility of the instructor to challenge the systemic and institutional dimensions of Whiteness in the classroom, an act that we were only partially successful in achieving. Moreover, we often failed to continually remind our students of their actual role in service learning. Students should not perceive themselves as helpers or teachers, but instead understand themselves to be colearners and participants in a shared experience. Students are responsible for learning with the community they enter, and reflecting on their experiences in relation to classroom material. Bickford and Reynolds (2002) suggest that explicitly framing service learning as activism can help to avoid the conflation between service learning and volunteering. In adopting this strategy, instructors must counter the common negative perceptions of "activism" by discussing the practical life lessons that can be learned from acts of dissent.

In examining Whiteness in relation to service learning, it is also important to consider the role of the institution of higher education. As instructors we would always like to view ourselves as responsible educators, immune to the inherently political system of the university, but we realize that this is not always possible. The pervasive dominance of Whiteness and White privilege on the university campus seeps into the classroom, often through the actions of the instructors. As instructors we must therefore attend to the “White blinders” that we perpetuate because we are embedded in an institution that privileges Whiteness. In other words, because of the normalization of Whiteness in the academy, it is easy for instructors to view students and classroom situations in ways that normalize Whiteness. White blinders can result in situations where the instructor fails to recognize the constructed nature of classroom norms and, hence, acts in collusion with Whiteness. Additionally, White blinders potentially impede instructors from challenging students’ acceptance or misunderstanding of Whiteness. Upon reflection, we see several situations when we did not address situations with the entire class that were clearly opportunities to discuss racist behavior. For instance, on several occasions we observed our students speaking loudly and slowly with political refugees. Discussing this behavior in class would have been a good opportunity to examine the marking of “foreign” or “colored” bodies (Shome, 2000) and the normalization of White English.

Considering our critique of service learning and our examination of the role of instructors, is it possible to use service learning or other forms of praxis-based education in the service of antiracism? Although we cannot decisively answer this question, we do find some hope in service learning. One of the tenets of service learning is that it fosters applied and experiential learning. Our analysis of student-written assignments uncovers that a few of our students learned from service learning and used it to think about how to challenge Whiteness. Peter’s journal response shows that he learned from others through his project: “I thought as I went to serve the refugees I would be able to teach them things about America and I think I did but I know I learned a lot more from them.” Peter’s comment shows that he was able to move past the idea of service learning as charity to recognize that he learned even more from the experience. The marriage of service and learning that proponents claim is the hallmark of good service learning is evident in Peter’s reflection. Although most of our students did not come to this realization, Peter’s comment demonstrates the possibility in service learning. Moreover, with regard to Whiteness, a few our students demonstrated a desire to challenge White privilege instead of justifying it. In her service learning project paper, Erica wrote:

I am very unsure of how to help fix the problem of White privilege. I think my best approach right now would be to be aware of the White privilege and to inform others of it when possible. Another approach is to not ask people to speak for their entire race. Perhaps in the future I will get into a position where I can really affect the outcome of White privilege and be able to change things a little bit more.

Both of these responses provide glimmers of hope for the possibilities of using service learning in combination with Whiteness theory in ways that contribute positively to broader social transformation. The notion of mutuality seems important here.

Indeed, Paulo Freire (1970/1997) suggests that teaching should not be for or imposed upon but rather practiced with “the other.” Service learning, conceived of using Freire’s notion of praxis, may provide a context for practicing with and encouraging “reflection and action on the world in order to transform it” (p. 33).

If presented thoroughly and discussed in the context of individual students’ projects, we remain optimistic that Whiteness theory could potentially provide resources for engaging in service learning without upholding Whiteness. Cynthia Levine-Rasky (2002) states that critical examination of Whiteness involves:

Systematic interrogation of such things as its social and historical dimensions; the denial and legitimation of White hegemony; the texts in which Whiteness is read; how Whiteness is constructed and practiced; how it structures social relations; how it produces power and is produced by power; the problem and contradictions of White pluralism; how it converges with other social categories that modify and fortify White privilege; and the diffuse tensions attending the question of how to prompt Whites to challenge the social order from which they benefit. (p. 2)

Although it can be difficult to achieve all of these goals, constructing service learning courses aimed at doing so would tell us more about the possibilities and limitations of Whiteness theory in a service learning context. We believe that more critical examination of Whiteness theory and White privilege in association with the service learning is warranted.

The goal of multicultural education according to Gorski (2006) is to overhaul the education institution so that it does not uphold and reward White privilege and instead promotes social justice for all. Although a move to multicultural education requires large-scale systemic change in the institution of education, practices in individual classes can have important implications for students. The more we study how Whiteness and White privilege are embedded into common educational practices, the more we can make moves toward social justice in higher education.

Notes

- [1] See also: Albrecht, 2005; Bahk and Jandt, 2004; Bonilla-Silva and Forman, 2000; Crenshaw, 1997; Cushman, 2005; Jackson, 1999; Kendrick, 2005; Kennedy, Middleton, and Ratcliffe, 2005; Nakayama and Krizek, 1995; Nakayama and Martin, 1998; Prendergast and Shor, 2005; Shome, 2000; Welch, 2005; West, 2005.
- [2] Nakayama and Krizek (1995) identify six rhetorical strategies of Whiteness: linking White to power, negative definitions of White, naturalized definitions of White, confusing Whiteness with nationality, refusal to label oneself, and linking White with European ancestry. Warren and Hytten (2004) discuss four faces of Whiteness: Torpefied, Missionary, Intellectualizer, and Cynic.
- [3] The course was cross-listed through the Department of Communication and the Ethnic Studies Program. Enrollment for the course consisted of 32 undergraduate students—2 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 15 juniors, and 11 seniors. There were 16 males and 16 females in the class. We do not have ethnic or racial information on the students; however, the majority of the class self-identified as White or European American in the first journal assignment that asked students how they would answer the question, “Who am I?”
- [4] This project was approved through the IRB process. Students chose whether or not to participate in this study by granting or denying permission for us to use their written assignments

as a source of data. In total, 19 out of 32 students agreed to contribute their course written assignments to this study. Of those 19 students, 17 contributed their journal, consisting of 13 journal assignments. On average, each writing assignment was 1–2 typed pages. In addition, 13 of the 19 students contributed final projects to our study, consisting of their final group paper and written reflection on their service learning project. We were not in the classroom when students decided if they would participate in the study. An unaffiliated graduate student explained the study and collected consent forms. The unaffiliated graduate student made it clear that the students' participation in the study would have no effect on their grade and that the consent forms would be kept in a locked cabinet in the graduate student's office until after the course was over and final grades had been assigned. Student written assignments were copied, coded, and analyzed after students completed the course and received their final grade. Each participating student was assigned a pseudonym and no record was kept that would link student names to the pseudonyms.

- [5] At the same time we acknowledge that our students were well aware they would be graded for their journal work.
- [6] All student names are pseudonyms.

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