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Jung-ah Choi
St. Peter's University

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Shared Authority and Epistemological Struggles: Tales of Three Racial Groups of Professors

Jung-ah Choi[1]

[1]Department of Education
St. Peter's University, United States
jchoi1@stpeters.edu

Abstract

Sharing teacher authority with students is a common pillar of these progressive pedagogies. This paper takes up the issue of authority in establishing credibility in knowledge claims by examining the dynamics of class discussions over race relations. Using pedagogy of positionality (Maher & Tetreault, 2001), the study pays attention to how authority is exercised and challenged in negotiating differences among participants. The primary data for this study draws from in-depth interviews with seven college professors who teach Racial and Ethnic Relations in a predominantly white institution. The findings of this study suggest that knowledge claims and meaning-making is mediated by relationships among members. That is, authority comes not from professors' personal (racial) experience, nor from professors' disciplinary (professional) expertise, but from a mutual construction based on trust, compassion, and empathy between the teacher and students. In order to establish a truly inclusive classroom in race discussions, it is crucially important for professors to care about multiple positionings that students occupy, beyond the student-self and racial self.

Keywords

race, authority, professors, higher education

Introduction

Teacher's authority is a fundamental issue in pedagogical theories. Questions concerning teacher's authority, e.g., who has the authority in knowledge claims, and in what context the authority is presented as an essential component that all pedagogical theories address. The traditional methods of instruction have considered the teacher as an all-knowing-subject, while this model has been critiqued for decades by many progressive educational theories. Such progressive pedagogies as learner-centered pedagogy, feminist pedagogies (Luke, 1996; Weiler, 1991), critical pedagogy

(Freire, 1987), participatory pedagogy, and democratic pedagogy, to name a few, all provide a radical vision for teacher authority by proposing an egalitarian relationship between the teacher and the student. Sharing authority with students is a common pillar of these progressive pedagogies, as the pedagogies are premised upon multiple forms of knowledge constructed by members' participation.

This paper takes up the issue of authority in establishing credibility in knowledge claims by examining the dynamics of class discussions over race relations. Specifically, the study pays attention to how authority is exercised and challenged in negotiating differences among participants. Shared authority has been discussed in a sizeable body of the recent educational literature (Brubaker, 2009; Crawford, 2008). However, there is a scarce literature on how shared authority shapes and shifts ways of constructing knowledge in race discussions. In race discussions, the teacher's disciplinary expertise (i.e., authority) is often mediated by the teacher's personal positions. In fact, every participant's personal experiences are actively utilized in discussions over race relations. For this study, I found a college classroom to be an ideal place to observe the interplay between racial position and legitimacy of knowledge, because knowledge is constructed in close relationships with a knower's social positionality.

Unlike other academic subjects, dialogues over racism typically force one's racial position and emotions to be foregrounded. In such discussions, everyone's racial position is under scrutiny. From a teacher's perspective, it is a challenging task to negotiate textbook knowledge, e.g., professional knowledge, vying constantly against various students' constructions of knowledge. As the literature shows, discussions of racism are particularly taxing because personal knowledge often conflicts with disciplinary knowledge (Chaisson, 1999, 2004; Dnimini, 2002; Fishman, 2005). Much higher education literature documented that professors who teach this course engage in emotional labor in teaching such a sensitive topic as racism (Kadowaki, 2014; Pasque et al., 2013). Teachers who teach this subject had to muddle through student resistance (Jakubowski, 2001; Perry et al., 2009; Rodrigues, 2009; Ukpokodu, 2002; Williams & Evans-Winters, 2005) and emotional discomfort (Hill, 2014; Hytten & Warren, 2003). My research presents the stories of college professors who teach Race and Ethnic Relations, in order to discuss how positional knowledge (personal experience) becomes a legitimate knowledge claim, and how authority is mediated in this process.

Theoretical Foundation

Pedagogy of Positionality

In higher education classrooms, discussion-based instruction is not surprising. Most instructors, especially social science disciplines, rely on students' active participation in constructing knowledge. The egalitarian pedagogical theories offer epistemological justifications on participatory instructional methods. Critical pedagogues (Freire, 1950; Shore, 1987) also suggest dialogic pedagogy as challenging the teacher-centered indoctrination of oppressive knowledge. The emphasis of dialogic pedagogy is shared by other egalitarian pedagogies. For example, feminist pedagogies center voices and participation of the students based on the premise that knowledge is negotiated by learner's constructions. Feminist pedagogues made a major

contribution to this conceptualization by foregrounding the bodily dimension of knowledge, such as students' firsthand experiences, personal stories, and feelings as legitimate sources of knowledge (Luke, 1996; Maher, 1999; Thompson & Gitlin, 1995).

Critical pedagogy questions the credibility of mainstream knowledge by bringing up the oppressive nature of knowledge and aims for social equity and justice. Critiquing the mainstream knowledge for elites' construction, critical pedagogues employ a learner-centered curriculum, participatory instruction, and egalitarian authority. Critical pedagogy makes great strides in their commitment to equity. However, by not addressing the teacher's social positionality, critical pedagogues fail to explain the relation of power in teacher's authority. Weiler (1991) poignantly points out that critical pedagogy literature neglects to address teacher's raced and gendered position and its impact on pedagogy. Through this absence, she contends, critical pedagogy assumed that teachers are neutral subjects and leaves an important question: given that not all knowledge claims are equally valid, whose firsthand experiences, whose personal knowledge become a form of official knowledge (see Ellsworth, 1989).

Pedagogy of positionality advanced by Maher and Tetreault (2001) offers a more delicate framework to examine the intricateness between knowledge construction and authority. Maher and Tetreault (2001) stated that a true pedagogy of positionality "recognizes that every discipline is always open to critique from the student-expert. If the theory doesn't include me, it needs to change" (Takacs, 2002, p. 62). Foregrounding the voices and firsthand experiences of students, pedagogy of positionality acknowledges that one's knowledge claim is inseparable from one's social positioning. Also, pedagogy of positionality pays heed to the teacher's body, e.g., racial positioning. Thus, the way that class participations lead to negotiations of legitimate knowledge claims can be best analyzed from the lens of pedagogy of positionality.

Method

The primary data for this study draws from in-depth interviews with seven college professors who teach Racial and Ethnic Relations in a predominantly white institution. As a professor who teaches Racial and Ethnic Relations, I recruited seven professors through personal networks. I employed semi structured, individual interviews with each of seven professors. Each initial interview lasted one hour or so. It started as an interview question but evolved into mutual sharings of our teacherly struggles. Because of my insider position, some participants and I built immediate rapport. During the interviews, my stories are naturally injected. Therefore, part of the data source includes my stories of teaching Racial and Ethnic Relations.

All interviewed professors struggled to effectively deliver academic subject matter regarding race, and struggled to determine to what extent their personal experience is valued. No one teaches this course without emotional discomfort. One professor shared his frustrations and complaints: "These students are all religious, and they regurgitate when they were taught in church." Another professor vented, "most students are unintentionally racist. Most here grew up in a small community and never get out of their comfort zone. It is no surprise that they were not exposed to different viewpoints."

The focus of the interviews centered around the dynamics of classroom discussions. I asked how students had reacted to a certain issue, and when a tension arose, who reacted in what way. I probed into how student reactions differ by race and how the classroom dialogue evolved. The dialogue between me and the interviewees naturally evolved into a sharing of our beliefs, and a sharing of our pedagogical strategies. Also included in the data source are after-class conversations and course evaluation comments.

Seven professors' narratives provided in depth descriptions of class dynamics, which constituted the main part of the data. Although observation was not part of the data, the interviews allowed me to visualize classroom scenes. Their detailed narratives provided vivid enactments of the classroom interactions that the interviewed teacher was describing.

Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

	Race/gender/nationality	age
Sara	Caucasian/female/American	30s
Jay	Caucasian/male/American	50s
Alan	Caucasian/male/American	60s
Wayne	African American/male	30s
Laurence	African American/male	50s
Gina	Asian/female/foreigner	30s
Lakshmi	Asian/female/foreigner	40s

Among seven participating professors, four are in the teacher education program, and three are in Liberal Arts Science department. There is diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, and age: some are Caucasian, some are Asian, some African American, and some are foreign nationals. Table 1 provides the demographics of the participants.

I interviewed seven participants multiple times and transcribed each interview. With most participants, follow-up interviews were necessary for clarification of meanings, for detailed elaboration of the story, and further questions. Some interviews were recorded, and some were not per the interviewee's request. While I was interviewing them, I positioned myself as their colleague who teaches the same subject. The insider position was well utilized since the interviews often turned into juicy conversations on how we better teach this course.

It turned out that the interviews had an enlightening effect to both the interviewees and myself, as we introspectively examined our own teaching strategies and beliefs. We shared confessions about our frustration over students' critical remarks written on the course evaluation, and affirmed how we were disheartened and hurt by some slanderous comments. This sharing was not toward placing the blame on the students; rather, we came to re-examine the goal of the course, and the goal of our teaching on a more fundamental way. In other words, our conversation enabled us to reflect on our teacher self, as a teacher who espouses egalitarian pedagogy. There were moments during the conversations where we came up with a better teaching idea or insight toward a more inclusive and egalitarian pedagogy.

Different Strategies by Race: Three Tales from Three Races

All professors who were interviewed expressed their belief that first-person narratives provided epistemological authority to substantiate a knowledge claim. The professors believed that their own personal experiences as well as student's should be shared in practicing egalitarian pedagogy. Data shows that race-based positional authority was used mostly by minority professors who have experienced racism in their own lives. All interviewed professors also used textbooks and other scholarly products as well as personal experiences.

African American Professors

The three African American professors liked to integrate their personal experiences about racism into the course; at the same time, acknowledged the importance of delivering disciplinary knowledge. Laurence, an African American professor, remarked in the interview, "I use a lot of my personal experiences as examples to explain things. Students love to hear my stories, eye opening to them." Laurence is adamant in using his personal experience to educate students who are often oblivious of racial-ness of everyday life. He continued,

> Students enjoy listening to my story, a story about being followed around by clerks, being discriminated against, or being stereotyped… On the evaluation form, one student wrote "I am so glad to hear an African American's perspective, which I would not have learned from a Caucasian professor."

Another African American professor, Wayne's, narrative below concurs Laurence, demonstrating that an African American professor is in a legitimate position in disputing the students who tend to deny the existence of racism.

> Students tend to think that we African American people can overcome all racism when we achieve status. Students often say that African American lawyers and doctors are not subject to racism. I respond by saying that middle class African Americans face racial obstacles, even when they achieve status. For example, when I am trying to buy a house, I have to check whether the neighborhood is safe for African Americans. When I send my kids to school, I have to make sure my kids are not going to be tested.

Laurence's and Wayne's positions helped students get out of their narrowed perspective, and thus make critical contributions to the class discussions.

However, it is interesting to note the opposite side of the value of personal experience: one's firsthand experience can be invalidated and discounted as biased, self-serving, or too political. Laurence, an African American professor, revealed a powerful point that some students do not appreciate his personal story about racism, some simply discredit for his story as being only partially representative of African Americans. In Laurence's words, "they write off my perspectives, saying, 'you don't represent all African Americans.'" Students are cognizant of knowledge being partial, self-serving, or biased. This episode validates that not all firsthand experience is validated in race discussions.

African American professors do not just rely on their personal experience, rather they heavily use textbooks. Textbooks help students understand the institutional and structural level of racism, which is beyond individual-level racism. For this reason, African American professors stress the need of textbooks. Wayne, an African American professor said,

> There is no way that I can convince students without showing statistics. I was tired of hearing the subtly and indirectly racist views students put forth such as 'African American NBA players earn a million dollars,' 'there are African Americans doctors and lawyers,' I confronted students by asking 'what percentage of African American people will become lawyers, doctors, CEOs' I showed stat data to back up my points.

Wayne strategically deployed discipline knowledge in conjunction with his personal experience. This dialogue illustrates that discipline authority overrides personal experience. Professors were able to situate students' views within a larger ideological context and help them understand the connection between individual views and structural inequality.

Caucasian American Professors

Caucasian professors hardly used their personal experiences. Caucasian professors often expressed frustrations at the perceived lack of racial experience. Alan and Sara, both Caucasian professors, said that they seldom injected their raced experiences in class. Rather, they tried to defer to African American students in relaying subject matter knowledge on racism. Their skin color, they believe, served as a hindrance in leading the discussion. Jay also expressed his discomfort, "I have been told that Caucasians do not have the upper hand in teaching about racism. Perhaps minority faculty have a better position. I often wonder, who am I to speak about African American experiences? I haven't been in that position." Alan is aware of the importance of the presence of African Americans in delivering the magnitude of racism, he once invited a guest speaker to have his students hear firsthand stories of racism.

Sara, a Caucasian professor, said that African Americans are actively participating and vocal, and their voices immediately gain acceptance, and even mute White student's voices. Jay, a Caucasian professor, aware of this, affirmed the importance of presence of African American students in the classroom: "African American students are willing to talk about their experience. I also encourage them to talk because their comments are very helpful. African Americans are quick to understand the concept of racism and institutional racism." All interviewed professors expressed their wish to have a more diverse population in class, as Alan (Caucasian) said, "when I see a sea of white faces in my Racial and Ethnic Relations class, it drives me crazy."

In addition, some Caucasian teachers strove to establish authority only through disciplinary expertise, without reference to their personal experience. They used scholarly reading materials (peer reviewed research articles) to develop critical thinking. For example, Sara said that she assigned an article or two on Affirmative Action, before a discussion on Affirmative Action. As she said, "I am tired of hearing students say that Affirmative Action is unfair to whites. Without the assigned reading, I can't handle students' resistance." Generally, reading scholarly materials inform students of the historical, social, political context, and help them rethink their beliefs. These narratives demonstrate that a theory or scholarly article complements the limitation of firsthand experience.

It is apparent that Caucasian professor's strategies are also attacked. Imparting seemingly disciplined knowledge does not go without resistance. Students do not always trust the scholar's product, as they believe scholars carry their bias. Sara, who remained objective by referencing the scholarly articles and not revealing her personal position, encountered a student who was cynical and scoffed at the very fact that a white teacher teaches this subject. The student took offense from the teacher who merely delivers subject matter knowledge. In Sara's words,

> Those resistant students expressed their anger only in paper. Their reaction papers showed that they resented the author's perspectives. They never spoke in class, and they waited until they found a safe place. I've had several students so far who have written that everything we learned in class was nonsense.

Although professors tend to believe that textbook knowledge is impartial and objective, some students still accused textbook knowledge as biased and partisan's products (Eastman, 2016).

Asian American Professors

Asian foreign-born female faculty, as much literature documents, occupies the most vulnerable position in terms of authority (Bazemore et al., 2010; Hernandez, 2015; Mayuzumi, 2000; Obiakor, 2019; Takaki, 1998). Lakshmi, an Asian immigrant professor, shared her personal experiences of racism, only to hear a student criticizing: "why did you come to the U.S. since your country would have treated you better?" Lakshmi was extremely frustrated with the impossibility of teaching the course, because she realized that no matter what and how she teaches, students will not find her scholarship valuable. She told me in the interview that she was planning on imploring the department chair not to assign this course again. In her reflections of her teaching experiences, Lakshmi felt secure when she played a role of merely a messenger of the textbook knowledge. She stated that she does not talk about her personal beliefs or personal experience, for fear that her foreigner identity will enable students to use that as a source of invalidating her scholarship. Gina, another Asian immigrant professor, said she became tired of getting her experiences invalidated based on her immigrant background. Gina said she later learned the lesson not to talk about 'American' problems in the international context. Unlike African Americans, whose discrimination story usually is highly acclaimed in the classroom, a foreigner's discrimination story often fails to be constructed as legitimate knowledge.

A more telling incident is shared by Lakshmi. She once presented statistics about Black-White gaps, an African American student shouted, "are you telling me that we are less smart than Whites? Why are we presenting this?" She shared her recollection that African American students were emotionally charged and rebuked the teacher who presented 'objective' information, sometimes denying the veracity of the data. Lakshmi talked about how often she felt vulnerable as a teacher. Gina expressed a similar feeling:

> We talked about the achievement disparity between black and white. I was merely repeating what the textbook said about class reproduction. One student said, "America is much more advanced society than your country. In America, those who work hard can achieve. I refuted saying this is from the textbook. It is not my personal opinion. Still there are students who refuse to accept the textbook as truth.

It is hard to know whether the resistance is waged vis-a-vis female professors (Li & Beckett, 2006; Moore, 1998; Pittman, 2010), or from the content of knowledge. This excerpt shows that students do not believe just because knowledge is an academic product. Consistent with the literature (Choi, 2019; Hill, 2014; Perry et al., 2009), students in this study were conscious of the position of the instructor and speculated why it was necessary to present such 'fact.'

Discussion: Rapport, Shared Authority, Epistemological Struggles

All the above narratives evidently show that there is no perfect racial positioning of the professor who automatically grants credibility, and even the authority of scholarship presented in the textbook is not automatically accepted by students. Three races of professors suggested that neither race of the professor is in a perfect position in establishing epistemological authority in

constructing knowledge. When students discredit the professor's knowledge, it is always the person's position (i.e., body) -whether it is the professor's position or the author's- that becomes a site of discrediting knowledge.

The teaching strategies of three racial groups vary. Each racial group of the professor in this study narrated differently as to how much personal experience is validated in class and in what context. African American professors tended to use personal experiences more than non-African American counterparts, and White professors rarely used their personal experience in class. African American professors believe that personal experiences served as an asset in discussing racial relations. Asian professors sometimes shared their personal racial stories but often backfired. Caucasian professors, Sara and Alan, believed that delivering neutral facts, such as statistics or scholarly knowledge is more effective than injecting personal experiences.

Personal experience of racism often supports scholarship on racism; however, it is not always the case, as demonstrated in the interviews. Some students discounted personal experience as biased. Discipline expertise can also be bashed by students. Students often doubted the veracity of the data, and/or question the intention of showing the facts. Students were quick to read the author's and the messenger's biases. This corroborates Freedman and Holmes's (2003) assertion that the teacher's body is constantly read into when she presents textbook knowledge. Asian immigrant professors, Lakshmi and Gina, suffered the most in teaching social justice issues, because their students often did not easily authorize the knowledge delivered by foreign-born immigrants.

This analysis reaches an interesting truth that authority comes not from a professor's personal (racial) experience, nor from a professor's disciplinary (professional) expertise, but from a mutual construction based on trust, compassion, and empathy between the teacher and students. In participatory pedagogy, knowledge claims and meaning-making is mediated by relationships among members. A close reading of the interviews reveals that student's resistant reactions to the professor stem from the lack of trust or lack of good rapport with the teacher. It is interesting to note that most of the resistant and cynical remarks occurred early in the semester when the trust between the teacher and students was not yet built. Gina's story clearly speaks to the importance of classroom relations: early in the semester she was condemned for criticizing American problems (students used dichotomy between them, American, and her, non-American); however, once trust was built, students embraced her as 'us' and pursued solidarity with the foreign teacher. Despite her outsider status, Gina was able to obtain a new relational position through her students who embraced her and formed a feeling of solidarity. Sara had a student who threateningly stared at her and refused to participate, later turn around and open up to the class. This is presumed to be due to the benefit of rapport and trust amongst members including the professor.

The research findings suggest that trust, compassion, and empathy are a crucial source of validating other's experiences. The importance of the good teacher-student rapport is acknowledged in several interviews. Lakshmi was well aware that the dynamics of the discussions improved over time, therefore, she saved the race discussion for last when the class established a good rapport with the professor. All the interviewed professors said that they faced more challenges and resistances at the beginning of the semester. Once trust is built, they concurred,

students are less likely to accuse teachers as biased, and more likely to validate other's experiences.

Another noteworthy point is different attitudes of African American students toward different races of professors. Conducting cross analysis across the narratives of seven professors, it is apparent that African American students hardly resisted African American professors, whereas their resistant behaviors/observations were observed in Caucasian and Asian professors' classes. All non-African American professors have experienced the feeling of disconcertedness about recalcitrant African American students. Jay (Caucasian), Lakshmi (Asian), and Gina (Asian) all confessed that African American students were the most cynical about the professor's scholarship and made them uncomfortable. However, strikingly, the two African American professors said they never experienced resistant African American students. When I shared my and other professors' frustrations over African American students, Wayne was genuinely puzzled, and remarked in amazement, "African American students are generally very receptive and sympathize with what I say in class. I never encountered a situation where they had to challenge my view." One plausible interpretation of why African American students do not resist African American professors is their invisible bond and empathy with the professor (i.e., brotherhood). Without a trusted relationship among participants, knowledge claims are easily discounted. All these episodes speak to the importance of trust building in the process of knowledge constructions.

Practical Implications: Trust, Empathy, and Compassion

This study is small in scope with seven participants. Although follow up research will determine the validity of the finding, the data of this study clearly shows that the body is a site of attack for all three races of professors, and conversely, the body can be a site of credibility. How can the teachers embrace body in their teaching strategies? At this point, the mantra of Maher's pedagogy of positionality is aptly reminded, where a teacher "recognizes that every discipline is always open to critique from the student-expert. If the theory doesn't include me, it needs to be changed" (p. 62). Pedagogy of positionality epitomizes a truly inclusive pedagogy, embracing all student constructions, not to be judged from the perspectives of scholarship. How can we privilege student-expert over scholarship? This question addresses how specifically professors genuinely care about students and build rapport in the participatory pedagogy. Important practical implications were drawn from the data for professors who teach race issues.

The interviewed professors and I mutually reached a revelation that it is crucially important for professors to care about multiple positionings that students occupy in race discussions. Acknowledging multiple positionings of students is the first step of establishing rapport. Professors are often oblivious to multiple self-positionings, preoccupied solely on the racial identification or student-identity. In race discussions, participants engage in shifting and contested processes of multiple identifications. Other relationships such as peer relationship, relationship within their immediate family, or relationship within their racial community, become a constitutive element of truth-claims (Moore, 1998; Schick, 2000). Recall the African American student who denied the existence of Black-White achievement gap. Although the professor invalidated his remarks, his remarks may be a sign of his emotional reaction. He may have felt uncomfortable with being positioned as a marginalized subject. Or it may be because the student did not want to be perceived

as a subordinate group. Or it may be that the student came from their middle-class background and wanted to dissociate himself from a low-achieving racial group. When we consider multiple subject positions of a student, there is a new way of embracing all student's constructions, which is key to pedagogy of positionality.

Recall the Caucasian student who scoffingly claimed to a foreign-born professor that America is an equal opportunity country, therefore there is no inequality in America. Her utterance was received as resistance in the particular discussion. However, an alternative interpretation is possible: she may have wanted to perform her patriarchy identity over the student-self. Or she may have wanted a classroom identity where she gained more peer recognition. Students are constantly engaging in what Preves and Stephenson (2009) call impression management while participating in discussions. They might be trying to earn a 'cool guy' identity, which is far away from brown-noser. The classroom is not only a place to construct knowledge/truth, but also a place for students to perform and fashion their identity (Friedman & Roseberg, 2000). It is important for professors who engage in racial discussions to acknowledge multiple constructions of knowledge based on multiple social positions that each student takes up. This is one step toward practicing pedagogy of positionality, a truly inclusive pedagogy.

Besides acknowledging student's multiple locations of social positioning, another crucial step for building trustable and respectful relationships is to not be afraid of student resistance. The interview data reveals the professors' deep-seated fear of losing authority, contrary to their faith in authority-sharing egalitarian pedagogy. Confessional tales of some professors found themselves inadvertently privileging the transmission of expert knowledge over student voices and placing the blame on the student for lack of critical consciousness. What appears as resistance against scholarship or lack of critical consciousness should be viewed as student efforts of (de)constructing knowledge. It is only when we professors acknowledge the vulnerability of scholarship that shared authority is truly practiced. Echoing Kishimoto and Mwangi's (2009) points on the importance of self-disclosure and vulnerability on the part of teachers, the findings of this study suggest that teachers ought to learn to 'teach vulnerably' as a way of connecting with the students at a deeper level (Kishimoto & Mwangi, 2009.; also see Choi, 2018).

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