

Discussing Family Science's Negative Spaces: Teaching Diversity Using Current Events and Politics

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Background

- Family diversity courses provide students with opportunities to analyze diverse families' experiences and challenge oppressive structures and systems.
- The sociopolitical climate in the U.S. is continually shifting and becoming more visibly hostile to people holding marginalized identities (Edwards & Rushin, 2018). Hostile sociopolitical climates may make it more challenging, although arguably more necessary, to discuss current events in the classroom.
- Numerous scholars and educators are calling for increased critical pedagogy in higher education (Pennell & Ristock, 1999; Redmond, 2010; Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005).
- Critical pedagogy is a "philosophical approach that aims to examine the role of power in the production of knowledge and holds that the purpose of education is the emancipation of oppressed groups" (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005, p. 2)
- **Purpose of the Study:** *To examine the pedagogical practices used by social work educators teaching diversity courses to discuss current events within the socio-political climate of Fall 2016-Spring 2018 using a critical pedagogical framework.*

Methods

- Eligibility criteria:
 - Located at U.S. based college or university
 - Teaches within social work and/or family studies
 - Taught at least one diversity course Fall, 2016 – Spring, 2018
- Qualitative online survey (January – March, 2019) explored experiences teaching diversity courses
- Data Analysis
 - Thematic coding of open-ended questions:
 - **“Do you bring in current events related to social inequity in classroom discussions? How so?”**
 - **“Have your students brought up current events and news stories related to social inequity in the classroom? How did you and other students respond?”**
 - **“If your institution does not allow faculty to talk about politics and politicians in their professional roles, how do you approach situations when students bring that up? (How) do you address the political climate related to social inequity in the classroom?”**

Sample (N = 84)

Race/Ethnicity	71% White 29% BIPOC
Gender	78% Cisgender Women 17% Cisgender Men 5% Transgender Men and Women, and Non-binary Faculty
Sexual Orientation	69% Heterosexual 31% LGBTQIA+
Age	mean 40-49 years old
Location	42% Midwest 25% Southeast 16% West 8% Northeast 7% Southwest
Rank	33% Assistant Professor 36% Associate/Full Professor 31% Non-tenure track faculty

Qualitative Results

Why do you NOT discuss current events and political topics in teaching diversity courses?

- Some faculty are limited in what they can discuss in the classroom by their institution.
 - “I attempted to send out an email related to the Kavanaugh Hearings to the entire college community ...and was not allowed to do it. I was told we cannot talk about politics.”
- Some faculty attempt a position of neutrality or avoid discussions altogether.
 - “I try to divert the discussion back to the concepts being taught...I do not want political figures from either side being bashed in my classroom.”
 - “I listen, I validate their concerns, and I challenge them to explore the ideologies from both sides, for a broader perspective.”
 - “I have honestly avoided discussing some current events...I have had difficulty feeling like I could bring up these issues and discuss them without the white students being flooded, feeling like the class was ‘contentious’ and being able to discuss perspectives with me having any agenda.”

Qualitative Results (continued)

How do you discuss current events and political topics in teaching diversity courses?

- By focusing on facts
 - “I usually just try to present facts and information. There’s a preponderance of evidence for the presence of inequity and how inequity harms human development.”
- By situating conversations within professional codes of ethics
 - “Students have introduced issues such as police killing of unarmed Black men...Border Wall...political figures. I ask students to discuss the issues from the perspective of the NASW Code of Ethics.”
 - “I try to really root the conversations in social work values and be clear that no political party 100% aligns with or 100% diverges from our values.”
- By protecting student confidentiality
 - “We address social inequity the entire semester, but I have found that making students write reflections is the best, where they can say what they want, without other students knowing their beliefs, in case they are nervous, or ashamed.”
- Through playful inclusion of critical pedagogy in graded assignments
 - “I challenge students to explore current events through local and national news articles. They present the events to the whole class and we have an online discussion. Most articles are about discrimination and oppression. Most of the discussion surrounds topics of racial inequality, the inequality of people with mental illnesses, and discrimination related to sexual orientation.”
 - “Students have to bring to class events that have happened in the USA related to topics that I assign. These conversations were about things such as unconscious bias toward marginalized groups in society, diversity initiatives on college campuses, and the 2016 election...Each student who presents has to provide 2 questions to facilitate discussion of their topic.”
 - “I generally use a short video or a vignette to begin the conversation [about current events].”
- By following students’ lead in bringing up topics
 - “The second day after the election, I asked my students how should we talk about race related issues with our children, since that week was about racial socialization...students diverted the conversations [to] why they voted for so and so. It was a stressful day.”

Discussion

Several faculty did not include current or political events in classroom discussions of diverse families’ experiences. This ‘negative space’ in pedagogy could have significant implications for student learning.

- Neutrality (whether by choice or by institutional instruction), in the face of oppression, favors the oppressor by maintaining the status quo and inequitable distribution of power.
- Neutrality can also be seen as “obstructionist,” impacting activism and the educational goals of supporting social justice work (Rose, 2018).

Other faculty members shared specific teaching strategies for addressing current events and politics in the classroom. Hopefully these results can empower others to find ways to discuss this area of ‘negative space’ in family science classrooms.

- An approach to teaching diversity from a critical pedagogy framework requires active acknowledgement of power systems and training students to dismantle inequitable systems that oppress diverse groups.
- Using current and political events to connect education and theory to real life experiences could aid student growth in this area (Sikes, 2010).

References

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