

“Looking Outside of my Bubble”: Whiteness-at-Work in Mathematics Faculty Sensemaking about Serving Latin* Students

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Professional development (PD) is often recommended to equip faculty to serve racially minoritized students through instruction. However, limited work has examined equity-oriented PD for mathematics faculty, who often hold views of instruction as race-neutral. This contributed report explores the influence of a two-year PD for faculty in a mathematics department engaged in equity-oriented reform at a Hispanic-Serving Institution. We present two cases of white faculty members who demonstrated a limited ability to interrogate their white racial identities in relation to their instructional impact, despite their engagement in a sustained PD designed to promote racial equity. Implications are provided for equity-oriented PD for mathematics faculty.

Keywords: whiteness, faculty, pedagogical reasoning, Hispanic-Serving Institutions

Study Purpose & Background

Faculty sensemaking about race directly influences instructional practices in postsecondary environments. For example, white faculty with high levels of racial consciousness often disrupt inequitable educational structures to expand educational opportunities for racially minoritized students, while white faculty with low levels of racial consciousness may incorporate instructional practices that uphold white supremacy (Haynes, 2021). Faculty’s critical reflection about their own identity is a component of this sensemaking that is vital to enact anti-racist pedagogy (Haynes & Bazner, 2019; Kishimoto, 2018). For example, white faculty who have interrogated their own racial identity demonstrated less concern for protecting white interests and assumed more risks to teach in racially equitable ways (Haynes, 2017). Similarly, faculty of color often draw on their experiences of race and racism to inform inclusive and humanizing teaching practices (e.g., Williams, 2016) despite the risks to their legitimacy that they assume when adopting unconventional teaching practices as minoritized faculty (e.g., Sulé, 2011).

Within STEM fields, ideologies related to social neutrality impede recognition of inequities (Gutiérrez, 2013; Leyva et al., 2022; McNeill, Leyva, White, & Mitchell, 2022). Colorblindness is a dominant ideology among STEM faculty as a group (Russo-Tait, 2021), with some documented race-consciousness especially among STEM faculty of color (Bensimon et al., 2019; Ching, 2022). For example, Haynes and Patton (2017) report on a white computer science instructor whose course content had racial relevance (e.g., a computer game using a migrant farm worker avatar) but who did not address race due to his perception of computer science as race-neutral. Mathematics reflects these trends with many instructors holding colorblind views of mathematics instruction, with exceptions found largely among faculty of color (McNeill & Jefferson, 2022; McNeill, Leyva, & Marshall, 2022).

Studies call for faculty professional development (PD) to improve instructional capacity to serve racially minoritized students and alleviate pressures on faculty of color to carry out institutional equity aims (e.g., Leyva et al., 2021; Casado Pérez, 2019). PD for mathematics instructors is often integrated through collaboration, apprenticeship, and guidance from course coordinators (Ellis, 2015; Rämö et al., 2019). However, such PD designs have not focused on

equity. In a study of community college mathematics faculty in an isolated equity-oriented PD workshop, Ching (2018) found that faculty demonstrated conceptual change initially, but failed to sustain equitable instructional viewpoints over time. Such findings indicate a need for research that explores the efficacy of integrated and long-term mathematics faculty PD in promoting critical self-reflection about faculty identity and instructional practices.

To address this need, our report presents an analysis of racial sensemaking and identity development among two white mathematics faculty at a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI). We draw from a larger study of the department's reform of instruction and organizational practices to better serve Latin*¹ students, which involved faculty participation in a two-year, integrated PD. Our research questions explore how the PD influenced faculty's critical self-reflection: (1) How do faculty understand their white identities in relation to serving Latin* students through mathematics instruction?; and (2) In what ways does this change over the course of the PD? We raise implications for equity-oriented PD for mathematics faculty based on our findings.

Theoretical Perspectives

We engage two theories to guide our analysis of faculty sensemaking. To examine the ways that participants understand their identity in relation to serving Latin* students, we adopt emerging mathematical and racial identity constructions (EMRICs; Oppland-Cordell, 2014). Originally used to explore Latin* mathematics students' identity development, EMRICs characterize the multifaceted ways in which participants make meaning of their own racialized identities in mathematics spaces, individually, socially, and politically. For example, a Latin* student changing peer groups to enable math collaboration in Spanish can signify a shift in their EMRIC (Oppland-Cordell, 2014). Addressing inequity in mathematics requires white faculty to reckon with the tensions inherent in fostering Latin* student success within a historically white discipline (Hottinger, 2016) as white authority figures. Our uptake of EMRICs thus, facilitates exploration of faculty's reconciliation of their mathematics and racial identities.

Previous work has depicted mathematics faculty shifting between colorblind and race-conscious views of instruction (McNeill, Leyva, & Marshall, 2022). This reflects broader societal patterns in which whiteness demonstrates elasticity to maintain dominance in a continuously changing U.S. racial context (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Whiteness flexibly adapts to embody contradictions and paradoxes that maintain racial inequity while seeming race-neutral or progressive at face value. To examine these contradictions in mathematics faculty sensemaking, we engage Yoon's (2012) construct of whiteness-at-work that explores how paradoxes are enacted to reinscribe whiteness as neutral and invisible while reinforcing the marginalization of people of color. For example, white teachers expressing a desire to call out colleagues on racially problematic viewpoints while also avoiding workplace conflict exemplifies whiteness-at-work (Yoon, 2012).

Methods

Study Context and Participants

Our present analysis comes from a larger study exploring the effectiveness of an ongoing, equity-oriented PD in the mathematics department at Sonoma State University (SSU), conducted by two SSU faculty involved in the PD, three SSU students, and educational researchers at

¹ The asterisk in Latin* creates space for fluidity in gender identities among Latin American people. Latin* responds to (mis)use of Latinx, a term reserved for Latin* gender-nonconforming peoples (Salinas & Lozano, 2019).

Vanderbilt University. SSU is a medium-sized, public HSI in the western United States. In 2021, undergraduate students at SSU were approximately 45% white, 35% Latin*, 7% two or more races, 5% Asian, 2% Black or African American, and 6% some other race. The two-year PD aims to develop culturally responsive instruction and student support practices to better serve Latin* students. PD began in summer 2021 and data collection started in fall 2021. This report presents an analysis of data collected over the first year of PD.

The SSU mathematics department holds a widespread commitment to advance equity, as evidenced by nearly complete mathematics faculty participation in the PD, and by approximately 75% of the PD faculty participating in the study. Active and inquiry-based learning is the norm in SSU mathematics instruction, and faculty regularly voice teaching philosophies related to normalizing mistakes, encouraging multiple approaches, building students' confidence with mathematics, and fostering positive instructional and peer relationships.

Data Collection

Educational researchers at Vanderbilt (1 faculty, 2 Ph.D. students, 1 master's student, and 1 undergraduate) assumed all data collection responsibilities to maintain participant privacy. Data from faculty participants consisted of journaling and interviews. Faculty journaled about events specific to instruction and support that they perceived as marginalizing or supportive for Latin* students, including a description of the event and a reflection on their interpretation. Faculty journaled throughout the 2021-2022 academic year without a required number of entries.

Near the end of each semester, participants completed a 90-minute, semi-structured individual interview on Zoom. Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. The first interview explored how participants characterized serving Latin* students and solicited participants' interpretations of two instructional events that reflected emergent themes from journaling. The second interview explored participants' experiences of the PD, and asked participants how thinking about Latin* students as a group or as individuals supported their aims related to serving Latin* students. Both interviews prompted faculty to reflect on how their own identities shaped their perspectives, practices, and instructional efficacy in serving Latin* students.

Data Analysis & Positionality

Vanderbilt research team members de-identified data prior to sharing with SSU research team members for analysis. Information that explicitly or implicitly revealed participants' identities (e.g., names, professional histories) was redacted. For the present research report, we completed an analysis of data specific to two white participants, Tina and David, who regularly invoked ideologies tied to whiteness (e.g. universalism²). Our focus on white faculty responds to the reality that even at HSIs, most Latin* mathematics students will be taught by white faculty. Thus, understanding how white faculty develop capacity to serve Latin* students is essential. Our findings begin with profiles of the focal participants to provide context for interpreting their narratives. We omit details about their professional roles to maintain confidentiality.

A research team member from each university coded David's data. Two Vanderbilt team members coded Tina's data since de-identification was still in progress. Team members independently and inductively coded data to flag instances when participants grappled with their own identity in relation to professional practices. One coder from each pair synthesized codes for each participant's data to identify whiteness-at-work in their perspectives and described instructional practices. Themes were exchanged and discussed during weekly team meetings.

² In relation to whiteness, universalism describes the framing of white experiences as universal (Bonilla-Silva, 2006)

Our research team approached the present analysis with critical reflexivity. The team consists of a nonbinary Latinx person, a Latina cisgender woman, two Latino cisgender men, a Black cisgender woman, a Black and white mixed cisgender woman, a white transmasculine person, two white cisgender women, and a white cisgender man. We brought awareness of how our varying forms of privilege and oppression influence our inquiry on whiteness in mathematics. The team resisted deficit engagement with participants' reflections and constantly recognized how mathematics instruction is situated in broader systems of social power. Interviewers and coders bracketed their lived experiences when engaging with participants' reflections to avoid analytically distorting their perspectives, all while approaching the study with a lens of criticality to interrogate whiteness in mathematical contexts across HSIs.

Findings

David and Tina hold a combined 40 years of experience as mathematics faculty. They each entered interviews with questions prepared and took notes throughout, showing a desire to learn from the interviews. Of all faculty, David submitted the most journaled events and reported that he “spent a couple hours on every one of those” each week in addition to his PD participation. Tina discussed PD topics at home when struggling to integrate her learning about racism into her professional practices. Both shared a deep concern for students' comfort and wellbeing. As examples, David shared a time in which his offer of instructional support to a Latina student resulted in the student leaving the class crying for reasons he didn't understand. David sent multiple emails to the student afterwards in an effort to re-establish rapport and after the semester passed was “still losing sleep over that student.” Tina shared an experience in which a Latino student sought her support after experiencing sexual violence, which she characterized as “one of the successes of [her] career... that a student in crisis felt comfortable coming to [her].” This context importantly illustrates that their ideological engagement in whiteness cannot be attributed to lack of effort or care.

In what follows we illustrate how David's and Tina's EMRICs depict whiteness-at-work, maintaining the invisibility of whiteness to impeding their focus on Latin* students, addressing our first research question about faculty's perception of their racial identities. Tina cited gender as an analog to support her (in)attention to race, using experiences of gender marginalization to claim insider insight into Latin* marginalization and alternately appealing to math as gender-neutral to justify her inattention to students' race. David demonstrates awareness of systemic racism, including inequity in education, but uses race-neutral frames to reason about teaching and learning in mathematics. In both cases, the construction of mathematics as socially neutral supports colorblindness in instruction. In each case, we discuss how their perspective changed over the first year of the PD, addressing our second research question.

Tina

Tina described “foster[ing] females who are going through the program” (Interview 1) as central to her professional role. This shaped her orientation to the PD, viewing her developing support of Latin* students as analogous to her support of women: “I like this idea of broadening my horizons of how to not just help females, but all students of all ethnicities” (Interview 1). Her characterization of helping “students of all ethnicities,” however, illustrates incongruities in her analogy of gender to race; when discussing women, she explicitly names this group, while her reference to students of all ethnicities illustrates a discursive avoidance of Latin* identity. This incongruity signals whiteness-at-work; although Tina sees the PD as an opportunity to develop

advocacy for Latin* students as she had for women, she does not center Latin* students when discussing issues of race as she does for females when discussing gender, as we further elaborate.

When asked how she saw herself serving Latin* students, Tina shared an experience of coordinating sections of calculus with all-male colleagues as an example of how she leveraged her own experiences of marginalization in mathematics to relate to Latin* underrepresentation.

I was... the only woman in the room... I remember one of the males looking at me and saying – We're putting together a calculus final, you got to understand that – He looks at me and goes, “As a woman, what questions do you think should be on the calculus final?” And I thought, “As a woman?”... It wasn't an issue that should depend on gender at all... I think I may be able to understand a little better than maybe some people about how odd it is to be sitting in a room and to be, say, the only woman, or the only Hispanic student, or the only African American student, or the only...Muslim student... I taught a class once, I had a nun... She's obviously going to feel singled out. (Interview 1)

Although Tina cites her gendered experience as a way to relate to Latin* students, she doesn't discuss how Latin* students could experience marginalization in unique ways. Instead, Tina de-centers Latin* servingness by universalizing the experience of being singled out. Her framing of final exam questions as gender-neutral demonstrates how the construction of mathematics as socially neutral supports her generalizations about underrepresentation in mathematics.

Tina saw her gender influencing the effect of her professional practices on students, but did not identify her racial identity as playing a role. For example, when asked if there were any racial trends among students who seek her support, Tina described establishing mentoring roles specifically with female students, but characterized her student support as race-neutral.

Math... you picture the male professor. And I think...females really associate with me just because they're seeing a female doing math... I really don't really have a perspective on ethnicity. I'm not sitting in my office keeping track of ethnicity of students, and anybody who comes to my office is always welcome in my office. (Interview 1)

Despite Tina's previous assertions that her experiences of marginalization sensitized her to Latin* underrepresentation in mathematics, she does not voice an understanding that Latin* students, like female students, may experience mentorship differently from faculty of different racial identities. Tina's statement that anyone is welcome in her office suggests that her white racial identity would play a role in student support only if she were to discriminate against Latin* students. She further elaborated this view when asked if she perceived her white racial identity as playing a role in Latin* students' comfort with class participation.

The area we lived in [growing up] there was a lot of Hispanic students when I went to high school... maybe I'm a little different because I grew up constantly around them, constantly seeing them doing as well in their classes as I did, so I never had any stereotypes, any ideas of, they can't do this or they can't do that... My identity, maybe I just was more colorblind because that was just who I was with all the time. (Interview 2)

Tina discusses colorblindness as a desirable personality trait that negates the role of her racial identity in her teaching practices, rather than as one that reinforces systemic racism. Explaining her racial identity as formed from adolescent experiences suggests a stagnant EMRIC.

Tina's portrayal of her identity remained largely unchanged after a year of PD. However, at the end of the second interview she reoriented to focus on Latin* students. She shared, “I've spent a lot of time understanding what issues women deal with, I think it's important that I try to understand better what Latin students...specifically face that may or may not be the same challenges that other students face” (Interview 2). This pivot allowed her to mine her teaching

experiences for insights on serving Latin* students. She shared, “From what I've seen with the Latin culture, I think it's harder for them to ask for help” (Interview 2). Such remarks still evade recognition of how her white identity influences serving Latin* students; she didn't consider how Latin* students' may seek help differently from white faculty or Latin* faculty, for example. However, this shift represents a disruption of her colorblindness that centers Latin* students.

David

David described himself as newly exploring issues of equity through the PD: “I've recently learned the difference between equality and equity... over summer during my reading on anti-racism, preparing for my workshop... My struggle is looking outside of my bubble to make sure that I can embrace those ideas” (Interview 1). As part of this struggle, David had trouble characterizing how race played into students' experiences of mathematics instruction.

Interviewer: How do you see race or ethnicity playing a role in... students' concern about [speaking in class]?

David: Just that, if a student's not comfortable. And so how would race or ethnicity play a part of that? It's just, it would be common that they're not as comfortable as other students possibly. And yeah, probably just a comfort level and maybe they're shy for a number of reasons, but that's what I would think it is.

David's response suggests race enters math instruction only to mediate students' comfort. His understanding of how inequity arises in everyday mathematics instruction lacked specificity. For example, when asked what his goals were with respect to understanding and relating to Latin* students, David responded, “Let's zoom out, big picture, there's inequities in education. And now, understanding that's important, but when it comes down to in the classroom, helping students, I can't think of doing something specific directed towards Latinx” (Interview 2). Such responses demonstrate that David's understanding of racial inequality was decontextualized from his professional practice, reflecting ideologies of mathematics as a race-neutral discipline.

David held an oversimplified understanding of whiteness as structural advantage that left him unclear about how to acknowledge his identity in classroom teaching, “I've yet to stand up... in front of the class and tell them that I'm a white male and that I apologize... I haven't figured out how to do that” (Interview 1). Similarly to his difficulty grasping the role of race in instructional contexts, David struggled to articulate specifics related to his white identity. When asked how his identity influenced his teaching practice, he initially characterized his identity as tasking him with the responsibility to help those with less privilege “I have to recognize that I'm white and that I do have white privilege, and I, just to be able to help other people and recognize that it's a real thing” (Interview 1). He further characterized his goals related to serving Latin* students as “trying to be educated on the subject and sympathetic” (Interview 2). Frequently, David referenced students' “disadvantaged backgrounds” (Interview 1) as motivating his desire to help. These motivators suggest that David may be subject to the common pitfall of using pity to guide his attempts to serve Latin* students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015). This orientation allowed for an EMRIC as a helper, fostering Latin* students' assimilation for success in white disciplinary structures. Such orientations, combined with his limited ability to recognize inequity occurring in his classroom, leave the influence of his white identity, as well as the hegemonic role of whiteness in postsecondary mathematics, uninterrogated. Whiteness-at-work can be seen in David's helping attempts that reinforce whiteness in mathematics.

While David articulated the role of his white identity in reductive ways during the first interview, he later characterized himself as not knowing the influence of his identity on his professional practices.

Interviewer: How you see your own identity... as a white person... as a man... shaping your perspective on how effective your teaching practices are in serving Latinx students?

David: How is my identity? I don't know. I don't know. How is my own identity? It's a really hard question. I'm not sure. One of the first things I was supposed to do in this [PD] workshop before the semester started was to come up with my own racial identity... It was the hardest thing. And how my identity relates to how I'm supporting Latinx students? I don't know. I'm not sure that being a... white male, what that does... Am I not as good because of my identity? I don't know. It's really challenging for me. (Interview 2)

Such recognition could be seen as progress in his developing white identity, as David shifted from a position of “helper” that reflects paternalism (Jones & Okun, 2001), to a position that reflects more openness to learn about his whiteness. His receptivity to learning was further underscored by his verbalized commitments to growth, despite the emotional strain he felt when discussing topics of race, “Just to be 100% honest, our last interview, it was really hard for me, but I just believe that I can't walk away from the conversation. I have to try” (Interview 2).

Despite David's expressed commitment, he reported reducing actions intended to develop capacity to serve Latin* students. In the fall, David described being “focus[ed]... [on] really paying attention to Latinx students” (Interview 1) despite feeling “uncomfortable” (Interview 1) in doing so. However, by the second interview, David had lessened his practice of paying particular attention to Latin* students, “This semester, when I tried to put myself in the headspace of like, ‘Am I helping a Latinx student?’ That just felt awkward” (Interview 2). David's shift in attention demonstrates whiteness-at-work. Although David's stated intention is to engage in equity-related learning despite the discomfort that may cause, he relinquished his practice of specifically attending to the needs of Latin* students because it “felt awkward.” In this way, David's commitments had limited efficacy in advancing his EMRIC.

Discussion & Implications

Although David's and Tina's cases differed in many respects, they shared a struggle to recognize how their white identities influenced their capacity for serving Latin* students through instruction. Relatedly, both faculty demonstrated limited awareness of how race influenced the mathematics discipline or institutional structures. Tina's claim that test questions are gender-neutral, and her framing of race and gender as analogous, indicates that the construction of mathematics as socially neutral shaped her inattention to racialized features of mathematics practice. Although David made no explicit statements about mathematics as neutral, his appeal solely to decontextualized social phenomena, like student comfort, when explaining classroom inequities illustrates that he does not perceive mathematics itself as a racialized feature that should be attended to when serving Latin* students. The invisibility of their own white identities and of whiteness in mathematics served as mutually reinforcing to impede critical EMRICs.

Our findings indicate further need for PDs to integrate activities that scaffold examination of the hegemonic role of whiteness. Although, as David's reflection indicated, understanding one's own racial identity was an activity in the PD, this was not central to PD activities. We argue, contrary to David's articulation of his obstacle as “struggling to look outside of [his] bubble,” that struggling to look *inside* their bubble was the primary obstacle in advancing equity. Equity-oriented PDs can address this by extending reflections on racial identity to explore characteristics of white culture (e.g., valuing white segregated environments; DiAngelo, 2016), white ideologies (e.g., meritocracy; Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and whiteness embedded in disciplinary epistemologies and values (e.g., proof; Hottinger, 2016; McNeill & Jefferson, accepted). Future research can explore the efficacy of PDs that integrate such methods.

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