

Title: Teaching the Veil: Incorporating Race, Ethnicity, and Gender in Classical Theory Courses

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Abstract

By documenting the erasure of W.E.B. Du Bois' scientific contributions to sociology, Aldon Morris' 2015 book, *The Scholar Denied*, was a catalyst for scholars to rethink how we teach and understand social theory. It also became a call to recognize the racialized origins of our discipline. How can we incorporate these insights into our teaching beyond a token addition of Du Bois to classical theory courses? Drawing on classroom material; anonymous student evaluation comments; and completed assignments, including essay exams, final papers, and end-of-the-term reflections from 150 students, we argue that teaching classical theory requires teaching about race, ethnicity, and gender, and outline three helpful pedagogical principles. First, we assert that it starts with the syllabus. Second, we demonstrate how incorporating theorists' biographies situates them in their socio-historical context. Finally, active learning observational assignments reveal how research is a scholarly conversation and demonstrate the enduring importance, and limitations, of classical theories and theorists. Together, they show how the classical theory canon is racialized. By providing conceptual and logistical tools scholar-teachers can use to incorporate race, ethnicity, and gender in classical theory courses, we highlight how issues of race and gender should not be relegated to substantive courses. Instead, they are central to understanding and teaching the foundations of sociology

Introduction

By documenting the erasure of W.E.B. Du Bois' scientific contributions to sociology, Aldon Morris' (2015) *The Scholar Denied* was a catalyst for scholars to rethink how we teach and understand social theory, and a call to recognize the racialized origins of our discipline. How can we incorporate these insights into our teaching beyond a token addition of Du Bois to classical theory courses?

We teach at the University of California, Riverside (UCR), a research-intensive Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI) with over 20,000 undergraduate students. The student population consists of first-generation college students, students of color, and students from immigrant families, among others, which greatly influences our pedagogy. We recognize the “hidden curriculum” and how many of our students may be unaware of the unwritten rules that govern college life. As such, we strive to be transparent in our teaching, which lies at the heart of our call to incorporate race, ethnicity, and gender in classical theory.

As part of a broader pedagogical project for which we received IRB approval (HS-17-204), we collected two sets of data: 1) comments from anonymous student evaluations administered by UCR and ourselves; and 2) completed assignments, including essay exams, final papers, and end-of-the-year reflections.¹ For this paper, we analyzed data and drew on our syllabus from one classical sociological theory course. This course is required for majors and had 150 students. Students could opt-out of participating in our project, but none did.

We argue that teaching classical theory *requires* teaching about race, ethnicity, and gender, and outline three pedagogical principles. First, we assert that it starts with the syllabus.

¹ Syllabus, final paper guidelines and rubric, end-of-the-year reflection guidelines, and anonymous evaluation questions that we administered can be found on the PI's website under “Research”:
https://victoriadreyes.com/?page_id=300

Second, we demonstrate how incorporating theorists' biographies situates them in their socio-historical context. Finally, active learning observational assignments reveal how research is a scholarly conversation and demonstrate the enduring importance, and limitations, of classical theories and theorists. Together, they show how the classical theory canon is racialized.

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Syllabus

Scholar-teachers debate the role of the syllabus. For example, is a syllabus a fluid but strictly enforced contract (Comer 2016)? Or a “plan, promise and manifesto” (Warner 2018)? We follow Bain (2004: 74) in seeing a syllabus as the foundation or the “promise” of a class since it sets expectations for the term. We also recognize that the syllabus itself is not “neutral” or “colorblind” but is racialized and gendered through which authors are included and excluded in reading assignments. Centering race, ethnicity, and gender in a classical theory course means recognizing how readings are not neutral and getting students to think about the syllabus and theory as socially constructed.

The syllabus for our classical sociological theory classes includes explicit discussion about how “the things we’ll talk about *are not politically or culturally neutral*. They have very real ramifications for individuals, organizations, and societies. Given that this is a theory course, this can be a bit frustrating, particularly since the vast majority of theorists we’ll discuss are of a particular demographic (old, white, men)” (Reyes and Johnson 2019:1, emphasis in original). We

also acknowledge that “we take the canon for granted” and “another course on the sociology of science or sociology of knowledge would deconstruct why it is we have the canon we do (see, for example, Aldon Morris’ *The Scholar Denied* about how W.E.B. Du Bois, a Black scholar, was systematically erased from the canon)” (Reyes and Johnson 2019:1). We tell students that one “goal of this course is to see research as a conversation and theory as a way to make sense of the world. In that respect, you are encouraged—nay, required—to critically engage in the theories we discuss.” We teach and remind students that “theories are not just abstract principles that arose in a vacuum, rather they were created by particular people, in a particular place and time, who themselves occupied particular social positions and studied particular things in social life” (Reyes and Johnson 2019:2).

Because this course is a requirement for sociology majors and is often the only opportunity to delve into classical writings, it is important for us to say at the beginning of the course that even if we take the sociological canon for granted in the class—that is, we learn the works of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, among others who are seen as founders of the discipline—we also recognize it is socially constructed and racialized. To that end, while we cover the classical canon that includes the aforementioned authors, we also expand its traditional parameters to include men and women of color and white women who have been central to the development of classical theory but who are often invisible, such as Addams, Cooper, and Du Bois. In doing so, we: 1) acknowledge that what counts as “classical sociological theory” may be problematic and discuss how we address some of these biases; 2) recognize historically marginalized scholars’ contributions to classical theory by expanding who is on the syllabus; and 3) teach the canon but interrogate theorists’ biographies and socio-historical context, as described in the next section.

Theorists' biographies

Recently, there are calls for scholars to rethink how we teach social theory. Abrutyn (2013), for example, argues that sociologists “teach, better than most disciplines, critical thinking and communication skills; biographies and meandering portions of Marx are not necessary for developing and enhancing these skills” (141). Similarly, Rojas argues in the popular sociology blog, *Org Theory*, that history of sociology and social theory are two distinct fields, and that historical approaches to sociology can, among other things, “make it hard for typical students to transfer what they learned in theory class to another class, and thus undermine the entire purpose of theory class!” (Rojas 2017b, see also Rojas 2018, 2017a). Elsewhere, Rojas (2017c) advocates for a mechanism-based approach to understand theory, which focuses on the daily practice of social scientists who critique and test theories, something that he is skeptical can be accomplished with a history-based approach.

While we agree that history of sociology and social theory are distinct, we disagree that historical approaches make it difficult for students to understand theory. We suggest that calls to divorce theory from biography and history fall short because theories are not constructed in a vacuum. They are generated by particular people who were shaped by their biographies and the socio-historical context in which they lived and conceived of their theoretical contributions. We must historicize concepts and biographies, where what is “white” or “privileged” differs by era, by centering who theorists are, where they grew up, their inspirations, and how these contexts shaped their worldview. We use biographies to promote this kind of critical thinking, which spurs students to think about the merits of theoretical concepts and subject them to scrutiny and debate. Theories are fallible precisely because they are created by people.

Let us walk through a few brief examples. Max Weber is recognized as one of the most influential thinkers of sociology. He is known for his work on bureaucracy, domination, authority, and Protestant work ethic. Teaching his biography reveals how his father was a political bureaucrat and his mother was a devout Calvinist. Similarly, Tocqueville critiqued how American democracy treated slaves and native peoples, yet he supported French rule in Algeria. Knowing Tocqueville's background as a Frenchman and politician helps shed insight into how and why he may have reconciled two seemingly opposing views.

Starting conversations with classical theorists' biographies also reveals what is missing: knowledge, research, and methods of women and men of color who are marginalized and ignored because of interlocking systems of oppression (hooks 2014 [1984]; Minh-Ha 1989; Crenshaw 1991; Trask 1996; Anzaldúa 1999; Collins 2000; Moraga and Anzaldúa 2015; Wingfield 2019; Bonilla-Silva and Zuberi 2008). Take, for example, Anna Julia Cooper who is not traditionally included in classical theory syllabi. She was born into slavery and obtained a PhD in Paris. She wrote about the isolation she felt, for example, when she, as a Black woman, saw bathrooms categorized by race and did not know where to go. Her writings are the seeds of intersectionality and particular experiences that Black women face because of both their marginalized race and gender. We asked our students to think about what these perspectives tell us and how they add to knowledge about social life. When we do this, students understand the richness that theorists like Cooper add to our thinking.

Has this biographical approach to social theory made it difficult for students to comprehend and critique social theory as Rojas argued? Responses from our students suggest not. Students found this approach to teaching refreshing and it helped them understand classical theories and their applications to today. One student, for example, wrote,

One of the things that really stood out to me was when Dr. Reyes discussed the significance of knowing the biographies of the different theorists we read about. This caught my attention because learning about the various backgrounds of the theorists provided me with a great amount of insight to how and why they came up with their ideas, what and/or who influenced them, and ultimately just provides an important perspective for how I viewed their work.

Interrogating biography and history allowed students to critique the concepts they were learning. Another student noted, “With this new point of view, knowing that an individual’s point of view greatly influenced these ideas or theories which we now used as a standard made it easier for me to think outside of the box and be more analytical when trying to apply the theories since I knew these theories weren’t as concrete.” It also allowed students to see how various types of people make critical theoretical contributions to the discipline. One student commented, “This class has made me enjoy theory more than what I had anticipated. Usually classes that focuses on theories, speak on the typical white people. However, this class focused on a variety of everything. As a matter of fact, I never thought there were women who were considered theorist at all.” This student was just one of many who didn’t realize there were women theorists in sociology before this class. Linking biography to theory is not detrimental, it is necessary for critical thinking and interrogating the bounds, limits, and application of theories.

Linking observations to theory

Across disciplines active learning is a pedagogical tool that reinforces students’ understanding of course material via experiences (Bonwell and Eison 1991; Keyser 2000; Nilson 2010). The goal is to get students to retain knowledge and use it in real-life situations as independent, critical, and creative thinkers (Bain 2004; Barkley 2010). In sociology, instructors use in-class experiential learning and “lived experiences” activities to practice or demonstrate research methods, such as, reflexivity in interviewing (Hsiung 2008), nonparticipant observation

based on a setting of students' own choosing (Ostrower 1998), in-depth analysis of behavior from film (Tan and Ko 2004), or texts and images of historical and contemporary documents (Peyrefitte and Lazar 2018).

Similar techniques are also used in non-methods classes to encourage a deeper understanding of content. For example, Nichols, Berry, and Kalogrides' (2004) designed a "Hop on the Bus" assignment, which asks students to take a bus ride and make observations on places and individuals and Grauerholz and Settembrino (2016) added a visual component, suggesting that "[s]imply talking about inequalities does little to confront students' deeply held ideas about privilege and (in)equality. Letting students see or experience privilege and power(lessness) for themselves is likely to be more effective" (201).

However, active learning activities are less frequently found in classical theory courses. One exception is Herring, Rosaldo, Seim, and Shestakofsky (2016). They asked their students to apply their personal experiences and a current affairs topic to create a conversation between theorists. We similarly teach students to see classical theory as a scholarly conversation by incorporating observational assignments. This demystifies the research process and allows students to take ownership of their projects and how to understand and critique scholarly work. We unite this approach with that of scholars who use tools like the White Supremacy Flower (strmic-pawl 2015), food autobiographies (Friedman and Graham 2018), memorial readings of documented lynch victims (Bailey, Leiker, Gutierrez, Larson and Mitchell 2015), and reflective journals and family research papers (Jason and Epplen 2016), to teach race and racism.

Our observational activities center around the last part of class that covered: 1) symbolic interactionism (Simmel, Mead, Cooley); 2) space and place (Park, Burgess, Thomas and Znaniecki); and 3) place, gender, and race (Addams, Du Bois, and Cooper). They reflected our

goal of getting students out of the classroom to see the importance of sociological concepts with their own eyes. Instead of holding lecture one day, we asked students to conduct 50 minutes of observations at a place of their choosing. They wrote about how their observations linked to concepts and workshopped their notes during their discussion section with a Teaching Assistant. For their final paper, students conducted an additional two to three hours of observations and drew on their written memos to make an argument related to any two or three concepts from this last part of class.

The exercises helped students understand theories more concretely. As one student noted, “Ultimately, learning what a concept meant was not enough. If I could not apply it to something, then I did not entirely understand the concept.” Another wrote, “Doing observations helped me learn how to apply what I learn to real life social situations. It also helped me teach other people how to apply certain concepts and explain why it applies... I definitely feel like I learned way more in this class than in other classes because of the final paper and the in-class learning activities.”

How do these activities relate to race? Many students wanted to discuss and “observe” the veil or double-consciousness. Although we were uncomfortable with using observations to make sense of these concepts, which—though social—are internal and not easily seen, we encouraged students to think specifically about how, why, and what they observe relates to the veil and double-consciousness. Many students found that paying attention to body language was helpful. As one student said in an end-of-the-year reflection,

It was very interesting being able to learn about that theorist and concepts and actually going out into the world and applying concepts. For example when I did my observations I was able to relate WEB Dubois’ concepts veil and double consciousness. I was able to relate them on how the students communicated and how their communication and body language changed when being around white students...

Asking students to go out into the social world and link what they observed to the theories they learned in class demonstrate how classical theory is not “dead.” It encourages students to investigate the usefulness and limitations of any theoretical concept, which is foundation to critical thinking.

Discussion and Conclusion

How can teacher-scholars respond to Morris’ (2015) revelation about the purposeful exclusion of Du Bois in sociology? We argue that adding a token reading of Du Bois to classical theory courses is not enough and further minimizes Du Bois’ pioneering life work on race and racism. Instead, we call for recognition that teaching classical theory necessarily entails teaching race, ethnicity, and gender, and provide three practicalities to do so. First, use the syllabus as a promise to the students that makes explicit reference to the political underpinnings of the canon and include influential theorists of color’ writings. Second, incorporate theorists’ biographies. Rather than hindering critical thinking and application of concepts (e.g., Abrutyn 2013, Rojas 2017c), theorists’ biographies are a springboard for students to critically think about the socio-historical context in which concepts arose and whether, to what extent, and how they continue to be useful. Finally, employ observational exercises that make classical theory more applicable to students’ lives and contemporary society by tying what they see to what they are reading for class.

We acknowledge that our students at a HSI may be more likely than students at Historically White Institutions to be receptive to faculty who teach the racialized and gendered foundations of social theory. However, we believe these activities are applicable to varied higher-learning environments given that our commitment is to show how and why classical

theory remains important. We encourage students to apply concepts from the class to events outside the classroom, including police shootings of unarmed Black men and the racist and anti-immigrant rhetoric of U.S. President Trump, among other examples. In doing so, students can learn to interrogate whether and why classical theories can be used to understand contemporary social life and where theorists' thinking falls short, important and useful skills for all.

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