Co-existence of race-evasiveness and race-visibility identifications: Complexifying one white male teachers' racial knowledge

Jenna Min Shim

School of Teacher Education at the University of Wyoming, University of Wyoming, School of Teacher Education, 209 McWhinnie Hall, 1000 E. University Ave Laramie, WY 82071-2000, USA

H I G H L I G H T S

- This study reconceptualizes essentialist understandings of white teacher identity.
- It reports on various contextual factors that produce the participant's identification.
- It demonstrates the complexity and messiness inherent in the participant's racial knowledge.

A R T I C L E   I N F O

1. Introduction

In an age in which racial diversity is highly prominent in both schools and society, an increasing number of students of color are not succeeding in K-12 classrooms in the U.S. and other countries (Berg, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010; Sue, 2011; Zeichner, 2009). The demographic reality in the U.S. is that whites represent approximately 90% of all public school teachers, whereas 40% of their students are of color. Considering the similarly disproportionately white teaching force in many other countries, the research findings suggests that most white teachers lack awareness about how racism functions, while also lacking the necessary background knowledge and dispositions to effectively work with students from diverse backgrounds (Amos, 2016; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2008; Sue, 2011).

Many researchers have found that teachers often hold deficit perspectives about racially diverse students. As negative perceptions about diverse students lead to lower educational expectations, this in turn leads to lower student academic achievement. Berg et al. (2010) examined the relationship between white teachers' prejudiced attitudes toward racial minority students and their expectations of academic achievement of those students. They reported that the implicit measure of teacher-prejudiced attitudes showed that "teachers generally hold differential expectations of students of different ethnic origins" (p. 518). These researchers further reported that lower teacher expectations and lower math test scores of ethnic minority students were correlated. They therefore concluded that teachers' prejudiced attitudes at least partially explained differing achievement gap sizes across different groups of students. Similarly, Asthana, Helm, and McVeigh (2010) examined the test scores of students and compared their SAT results with teacher assessments in the classroom. These researchers found that black students performed consistently better in external exams compared to both teacher assessments and internal tests. They contended that teachers' racist beliefs, whereby they perceive black students as less intelligent compared to their white peers, have adverse impact on black students' academic performance.

As race continues to play a fundamental role in the societal structures, schools, and individual minds (Omi, 2001; West, 2001), the researchers have extensively studied the effects of teachers' racial beliefs on their pedagogical practices and teacher expectation (Arber, 2008; Gere, Buehler, Ballavis, & Haviland, 2009; Kubota & Lin, 2009; McKown & Weinstein, 2008; McVee, 2004). While being taught by same-race teachers does not necessarily result in greater student achievement, it is undeniable that white teachers need to recognize and become reflective about their racial beliefs (Gay, 2000, 2010; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Howard, 2003; Milner, 2005, 2010). This view prompted several teacher education researchers to explore white teachers' beliefs, documenting their race-evasiveness and color-blindness (Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Lander, 2011; McIntyre, 1997, 2002; Picower, 2009). While these research studies differ in their focus, their authors share the commitment to moving closer toward antiracist pedagogical actions. An assumption underpinning many is that white teachers'

E-mail address: jshim@uwyo.edu.

confession of their racial bias and white privilege will lead to antiracist thought and action (Lensmire et al., 2013).

Building on and complexifying the previous critical whiteness studies, second-wave white teacher identity scholars argue that, to advance the antiracist work in teacher education that leads to action, and to develop racialized consciousness among teachers that would ultimately advance more just educational opportunities for students of color, we need more nuanced, complex, and non-essentializing understandings of white teachers' identity without reducing it solely to race-evasiveness (Jupp, Berry, & Lesmire, 2016; Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Lensmire, 2011, 2014; Lowenstein, 2009). Jupp and Lensmire (2016) argued that "whiteness and race should be conceptualized as historically and socially variable, and educational researchers should pay more attention to complexity within white racial identities and to the social contexts within which white people lived and worked" (p. 986). In this regard, Lowenstein (2009) also critiqued essentialized representation of white teachers and argued that, if teacher educators want teacher candidates to view K-12 students as active learners who bring resources to their learning, there is a need for a "parallel conception of teacher candidates as active learners who bring resources to multicultural teacher education classrooms" (p. 163).

This study echoes the commitment of the second-wave white teacher identity research. Closer attention is given to complexity within one white male teacher's racial identity while attending to the different social contexts and people he interacts with by asking the following research questions: How are the concepts of race, racism, and racialization understood by one teacher? What are the factors (contexts and people) that shape one teacher's perceptions of race, racism, and racialization? What social and institutional dimensions are imbedded in these constitutive factors? What are the consequences of the teacher's understandings of race, racism, and racialization with respect to becoming an antiracist educator and working with students from historically racially marginalized groups? By closely attending to the participant's sense-making around the issues of race, racism, and racialization as portrayed in the stories and movies that embody intercultural/inter-racial themes and conflicts, coupled with his responses to life-history interviews and discourse-based interviews, the aim of this investigation is to explore and document how the teacher actively construct his *racial knowledge* (Leonardo, 2005) rather than how he denies and resists racial knowledge (Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Lensmire et al., 2013; Lowenstein, 2009). Moreover, by detailing the complexities of the racial knowledge of the participant, a further intent is to empirically demonstrate the messiness and fluidity inherent in one's racial understandings, thereby extending beyond the revelation of race-evasiveness, resistance, and denial.

The present investigation is guided by the premise that "critical work on race does not only study its real manifestations… it must critically understand how people imagine race in their daily lives (Leonardo, 2005, p. 404). Thus, compared to direct interviews, participant's responses to pertinent literary works and a movie seemed a more revealing medium through which to observe his everyday understanding of the issues related to race. This is in line with Schwartz and Oyserman's (2001) view that people's self-representations are often influenced by socially sanctioned desire and self-presentation effects. Moreover, it does not seem unreasonable to assume that such understandings and stances on the issues revealed in Chris's responses to literature and films do and will manifest in his pedagogical practices. In this regard, other scholars have also shown that teachers' everyday race-related experiences and assumptions shape interactions in classrooms (Roger & Mosley, 2006).

Below, I provide a brief overview of the second-wave white teacher identity research that informs this study (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Lensmire, 2011, 2014; Lowenstein, 2009). In the methods section, I discuss the setting, participant, data collection, and methods of analysis. After presenting the study findings, I close the paper by discussing their significance and their potential implications for the field of teacher education.

2. Guiding framework: second wave white teacher identity studies

Building on the first-wave whiteness and white privilege literature (McIntyre, 1997; 2002; Sleeter, 1992, 1993, 1995, 2002), Jupp and Slattery (2010) contended that the second-wave scholarship of white teacher identities should (1) emphasize, through purposive sampling, race-conscious or "visible" identifications; (2) emphasize, through purposive sampling, attention to intersections of gender and experience with difference; (3) articulate "identifications" as processes of "self" narrativization; (4) focus on life history and its "fit" with narrating identifications; (5) emphasize life history as collaborative pedagogy; and (6) develop an archive on white identification creativity and *becoming* (p. 455).

On these points, Jupp et al. (2016) argued for a reconceptualization of research on white teachers' identifications and called for a shift of research focus from white teacher identity toward white teachers' identification creativity. According to these authors, the way that white teachers are traditionally portrayed in the first-wave whiteness studies as race evasive and in need of an intervention is ineffective in moving the conversation on race forward. Additionally, Jupp and Slattery (2010) stated that what might be construed as race evasiveness on the part of the white teachers may actually be a resistance to researcher intervention aimed at changing them. They challenged the interventionist approach in which researchers and teacher educators assume "a monolithic false consciousness" (p. 471) and hold deficit views of white teachers as a homogeneous group.

Relatedly, to allow the possibility of change and antiracist praxis, the second-wave white teacher identity scholars (Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Jupp et al., 2016; Lowenstein, 2009) underscore the importance of honoring teachers as authors of their own stories, while at the same time seeing them as learners who bring resources and complex histories to the race discussion. Jupp and Slattery (2010) argued for life-history methodology, as this would prompt researchers to pay attention to the contextual factors that produce white identity and expose the ways in which they assert racial identifications in the context of their lived experience. This aspect of second-wave white teacher identity commitment is the chief purpose of this study. Specifically, the aim is to pay close attention to contextual factors that produce white identity and honor the participant's sense-making within his lived experience.

This study is based on the following premises: (a) the participant's (Chris's) racial knowledge has a long history, and the complex social variables in which those beliefs are produced must be considered (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Jupp et al., 2016; Lensmire, 2011); (b) understanding of Chris's racial knowledge must extend beyond deficit perspectives and the researcher must see him as a learner who brings rich resources to the race work (Lowenstein, 2009); (c) the researcher must move away from assuming an interventionist role where she attempts to change Chris's racial views and instead attend to Chris's own interpretations and how he makes sense of race, racism, and racialization (Crowley, 2016; Jupp & Slattery, 2010; Jupp et al., 2016); and (d) the process of *becoming*, as well as the states of ambivalence and contradictions, are to be expected and noted in how Chris talks about his racial knowledge (Jupp & Slattery, 2010).