White Institutional Presence: The Impact of Whiteness on Campus Climate by Diane Lynn Gusa – A plain language translation & summary by Jane Hoinville.

This article is written from the viewpoint of student retention and using African American students as a stand-in for all students of color. She uses critical race theory\(^1\) and the worldview that Whiteness is considered normal and White-based educational practices neutral. She examines the effects of White academic beliefs, procedures and traditions on social and academic life at “predominantly White institutions” – or PWIs. She uses this definition of racial discrimination: “the socially organized set of practices that deny African-Americans the dignity, opportunities, spaces, time, position, and rewards the nation offers White Americans”

There are people who believe that because there are increasing numbers of Black middle class professionals and elected officials and because President Obama was elected, that American society is now “post-racial”. The author asserts however:

- that despite this progress for African Americans and other people of color, systemic racism persists at a societal level through housing segregation, inequitable opportunities in education and employment and high rates of incarceration.
- That while individual racial prejudice declines, racism operates through the cultures and practices of institutions set up by and for White people that have not changed to allow for a more multicultural population.
- That racial hostility and discrimination persist with schools and colleges being the third most common setting. The author’s examples include increased harassment of Black students after Barack Obama was elected President and hate speech about the Obama family at various colleges. This shows that college communities mirror society at large and that this is something that PWIs need to understand better.
- That racial discrimination and harassment at PWIs are a major cause of students of color dropping out before graduation. In general African American students experience their campuses more negatively than White students and one reason for this might be an absence of cultural reference points relevant to students of color. This in turn has been shown to adversely affect their learning, development and identification with the institution.
- PWIs do not have to be explicitly racist to create a hostile environment. The fact that White culture permeates the language, traditions and learning requirements makes them racialized. This is something that has not been considered or examined as campuses diversify the racial make-up of the student body, instead if it is considered at all, it is seen as unproblematic or inevitable.

In various studies, African-American undergraduate students have described feeling marginalized and a “chilly climate”, where racial discrimination takes on different forms and levels of intensity. Some academically successful Black students leave before graduation

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\(^1\) UCLA School of Public Affairs definition of “critical race theory” or CRT: “CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of American society. The individual racist need not exist to note that institutional racism is pervasive in the dominant culture. This is the analytical lens that CRT uses in examining existing power structures. CRT identifies that these power structures are based on white privilege and white supremacy, which perpetuates the marginalization of people of color”
specifically because of insufficient support or feeling disconnected from their college. One student noted that the educational system he experienced was designed for “what they call the majority to excel… it’s not blatantly against [minorities] but it doesn’t facilitate the advancement of minorities”.

It is the hostile or chilly campus climate that the author characterizes as “White institutional presence” or WIP. It is the customs, ideologies and practices rooted in the college’s design; the organization of its environment and activities. WIP is a sociological construct that identifies racialized influences on the interactions between students; between students and professors and between students and the institution. The presence of Whiteness and privilege is not visible to Whites but can be perceived by students of color and it shapes their experiences of college.

The author proposes WIP as a framework to identify and understand where White ideologies exist. She breaks it down into four areas: White ascendancy; monoculturalism; White blindness and White estrangement.

First, there is a discussion of what a White worldview means in a social and historical context. Her definition of worldview is the philosophical infrastructure of cultures that come from shared geography and history and determine what “normal” looks like for that culture. It is something that people pick up unconsciously as they understand accepted norms, social roles, social status and power and defines how people perceive reality. Although European Americans and African Americans have some shared history and geography, it has led to cultures that are significantly different. The dominant worldview in the US is White. This is not necessarily based on skin color, but is an attitude or way of behaving, based on each individual’s historical and social contexts. The White, or European-based roots of American society are associated with the English language and social customs from a number of Northern European countries, particularly the United Kingdom. One of the consequences of this is that Whites got to decide who was similar and who was different. It was Whites for example who designated themselves as “White” and others as Black, red, yellow or brown, thus imposing identities, each with specific racial qualities and worth. As the dominant worldview, Whites have been able to assert superiority over anyone else who is not “White”. Historically, the cornerstones of White American ideology are:

- individualism, self-reliance, independence
- capitalist ideas about property, profit and competition.
- meritocracy – equality of opportunity, but not necessarily in outcome

Through these values and the innovation of an open class system, progress and achievement are dominant motivations in American culture and the idea that anyone with enough determination and drive could accumulate wealth and power, which in turn is the measure of a person’s success and worth.

In higher education, while students arrive with diverse identities and worldviews, they find that they must live within the dominant one. When the dominant worldview is considered the norm,
the effect is that of immobilizing or diminishing other cultures. The dominant culture may not have complete control, but it gets to set the terms within which other groups must operate. Others who diversify the culture can be socialized into the dominant worldview and find “ways to signal that they were willing to join the game as it has always been played”. It has been observed that “The White race is like a private club, which grants privileges to certain people in return for obedience to its rules”.

White privilege, or White supremacy, is a system that gives unsought dominance to Whites from birth. There are two factors that lead to Whites often being unaware of their own privilege. One is the dominance of White worldview and the other is that Whites most often do not reference their own place in society with regard to minorities, only to other Whites. Elements of White privilege include:

• “Conceptualizing race as not being White”
  • The social costs of not being white include structural, institutional practices in the housing market that include mortgage redlining, racialized “steering”, resulting in segregated neighborhoods. Residential segregation is associated with higher poverty, poorer schools, poorer health care and higher pollution related health problems.
  • Whites have better access to education, because of a legacy of access and an expectation of a college education. In addition, standardized tests that are believed to show meritorious achievement have in fact been shown to show societal advantage instead.
  • White cultural standards are considered normal, so White students are not required to give up any part of their cultural identity in order to fit in; their US citizenship is not questioned and their own culture is not viewed negatively by others.

White Institutional Presence (WIP)

The author originally came up with the idea from personal observations and reflections on racism in a historically White college. “White as normal” messages and practices can remain subtle and unnamed, but they can nevertheless be harmful to the well-being, self esteem and academic success of those who do not conform to White culture. WIP comes from the mix of White ascendancy, monoculturalism, White Blindness and White estrangement.

White Ascendancy

This refers to thinking and behavior that arise from White mainstream authority and privilege, which in turn comes from a historical position of power and domination. It can be broken down into a sense of superiority, a sense of entitlement, domination over racial discourse and White victimization.

• Superiority is the belief that one’s ideas, knowledge, values, societal roles and norms, and understanding of history are universally and exclusively correct. White middle and
upper class students who have had many advantages in their K-12 education may assume they have superior skills and a greater right to be in college. With this attitude, they may question the abilities of students who did not have these advantages and exclude them when they refuse to “whiten” their social practices.

- Entitlement is the sense of ownership White people may assume over a space in the belief that it ought to reflect White culture and superiority. Entitlement is sustained by subscribing to a meritocratic ideology and is a consequence of White privilege. It is a form of racism that is acted out on US college campuses. It results in feelings of entitlement around classroom power, discussion time, grade expectation, and faculty support. African Americans can feel this as a lack of support, exclusion and that they are not considered full members of their institution.

- Feelings of superiority and entitlement can mean that when the subject of diversity does come up, Whites feel authorized to dominate the discussion. They might question the authority of professors of color, or turn the discussion to being about Whites. They may be unable to take seriously classes that present an unflattering image of Whites, or reframe the discussion to become consistent with White preconceptions. They may also become defensive or hostile when challenged in this way and simply reject the course and/or instructor.

- White victimization is a manifestation of being challenged in this way. Some Whites will feel that Whites are losing ground because of Black progress. Some feel reduced by multiculturalism, victimized by affirmative action or personally attacked by discussions on racism.

The author proposes that all of this leads White people to ignore people of color and their abilities. In addition, a 1993 study found that:

- 89% of students of color overheard negative comments at least occasionally.
- 59% of students of color had been personally insulted
- 36% had been personally threatened during their time at college.

A more recent study in 2003 found that participants reported a race-related event approximately every other week. They found this to be both stressful and exhausting. White students who were showing White ascendancy behavior proclaim their rights to express their biased views regardless of the racial consequences. When this kind of hostile environmental pressure results in lower grades for students of color, they are labeled as not up to standard and are left to carry the sole responsibility.

**Monoculturalism**

This is the expectation that all individuals conform to one “scholarly” worldview. Where White ascendancy reflects individual social behavior, monoculturalism reflects institutional policies and practices which again are based on a White worldview. Thus White standards define what knowledge is, how to assess it and what has greater value. Historically, these standards have
valued objective, rational, linear thinking, with quantitative data valued more highly than qualitative data. Often, for example, retention policy and decision making are determined by quantitative research results which do not take into account diverse or any other worldview.

- For the effects of monoculturalism in the classroom, the author offers the example of a poem:

  We sat there in silence
  Thoughts raced, raged,
  With a quick slip of the tongue and no pretense
  He asked me to remove the soul, the voice that fills the page

  Cross this out, this is awkward,
  What do you mean here?
  My dear
  Begin again
  Please remove the bones, flesh, and spirit from your possessions
  Please subtract the incoherent nonsense that you created.
  That essence
  *Does not belong here*

When policy, course content, research practices and methods and teaching methods are structured through White ideology, a monocultural approach, the “bones, flesh, and spirit” of another worldview are considered inappropriate and not scholarly. So PWIs are the gatekeepers of mainstream knowledge and the effect is of privileging the voices and perspectives of White historical culture and marginalizing those of anyone with a divergent view. White values emphasize individuality and survival of the fittest over a more emotional approach. Students are expected to eliminate their emotions in pursuit of objective scholarship, resulting in competency in the subject matter only. This methodology places the responsibility for learning entirely on the student and encourages professors to use “weeding out” as an assessment tool. Knowledge is supposed to flow from the expert professor or text to the student without reference to any experience the student might be able to add.

- Monoculturalism is also embedded in the built environment of predominantly White institutions. Research shows that the physical space of a college also has an effect on students of color, that they can feel that they are in a White space. The White history of most PWIs is manifest in the names of the buildings, the pictures, decorations and aesthetics. If a student of color feels that there is nothing to represent their own culture, then this is another way they can feel excluded and alienated from the college.

**White Blindness**

This is based on the idea of color blindness: that the race of a person is and should be immaterial to any decision-making process. At a societal level, this ideology arose in the 1960s when it was about abolishing the discriminatory color-coded laws in the American South. It has become a widely accepted view among Whites, and has become a way to push away any
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discussion of racism at an individual level. At a societal level it has come to mean that because “everyone is the same”, regardless of race, that race can’t be legitimate part policy decision-making. Because it can’t be discussed, existing social hierarchies are maintained and the status quo remains, even though the equality that was the original goal of the ideology has not been achieved. The consequence is that Blacks and Whites have opposite views on the significance of discrimination in the US. When Blacks complain of experiencing discrimination in the housing market, or finding a job, in restaurants or higher education, it is often dismissed by Whites as “excuses”. In effect, it has served to make the subject of racism a taboo subject and simultaneously pushed racism deeper under the public radar, while also making Whiteness even more invisible to Whites.

In colleges White blindness can come up in curricular decisions, such as which texts to use, where there is no sensitivity to potential racial messages in the text or pictures. For example, introductory economics textbooks on the subject of poverty which portray poor people and welfare recipients as Black, while portraying Social Security recipients as White. This kind of thing might go unnoticed by White professors and students, but the racialized message is still there and is painfully obvious to African American students.

The author contends that White blindness also comes up at a policy level. The example she gives is a study of diversity action plans at a number of colleges and universities. These overwhelmingly noted the problems and issues that students of color had in attaining a feeling of safety, but did not address the source of the “chilly climate” in White actions and environment.

White blindness arises from the failure to recognize White racial identity and ideology; the failure to understand that what Whites say and do can be perceived as racialized and biased. It fails to acknowledge the White contribution to race relations on campus. Acknowledging Whiteness is the first step to uprooting it.

White Estrangement

WIP is sustained and perpetuated through White estrangement – when Whites are physically and socially distant from people of color. Making a campus more racially diverse does not by itself bring about more interracial relationships. The social-racial isolation of Whites underpins their alienated relationships with African Americans. It has been noted that “racial/ethnic separations – in neighborhoods, in elementary and secondary schools, and on college campuses – produce and reinforce both cultural ignorance and interpersonal awkwardness”. A study in 2007 of White students and their interpretations of racial segregation and isolation found that:

- 67.7% stated that of the five people they interacted with most on a daily basis, most were White.
- A smaller group was interviewed and it was found that only 4 of 41 grew up in a neighborhood with a significant minority presence.
- These participants saw not interacting with people of color as “natural” or “unintentional”.

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Only 3 of the 41 had Black friends while growing up.

Lifelong segregated White students lack the understanding and tools to navigate a more diverse environment in college. Lifelong segregation means that students coming to a multicultural college are racially ignorant and rely instead on stereotypes and avoidance, which can be a cause of tension between the races. Whites also express a higher level of fear in encountering African Americans as opposed to other Whites. One reason for this is fear of behaving in a way that could be seen as racist.

So White students, ignorant of other cultures and unsure of how to interact with students of color tend to self-segregate. Meanwhile Black students, observe that the White students are uncomfortable around them, and don’t want to see the color and deal with race issues. The author proposes that to address White estrangement, campuses must examine the quality of personal relationships across campus.

**Conclusion**

The author quotes Dr. Maurice Bryan of the University of Kansas for a definition of diversity: “diversity is about welcoming the challenge of engaging with difference, about our willingness to have our lives impacted by ideas, people, values, or lifestyles that run counter to our comfort zone”.

A focus on increased knowledge among faculty and staff and on institutional practices is a pathway towards achieving racial equity. Using the framework set out in this paper, it is possible for faculty and staff to bring into the light the racial consequences of White ascendancy, monoculture, White blindness and White estrangement on campus. These are the root causes of a “chilly climate” for students of color on campus.

The author suggests a cultural audit to assess the level of engagement in the classroom of students of color:

- Develop an understanding of what minority engagement entails through focus groups and interviews.
- Develop a campus-wide review of representative documents to determine the culture being advocated.
- Add cultural climate questions to course evaluations.
- Focus on disciplines where the engagement of students of color is low and collect data to identify the challenges.

The author calls for an institutional praxis – or process by which a theory is put into practice. It should focus on three areas of diversity:

- Structural (numerical representation)
- Programmatic (diversity-related initiatives, such as cultural awareness workshops)
- Social (socializing across race; discussing racial/ethnic issues)
To successfully tackle race relations on campus, the needs of White students should also be addressed. In particular there should be curricular and co-curricular activities that allow White students to develop their own racial identities, recognize White privilege and understand other cultures. Examples include:

- A cross-cultural speaker series
- “Days of Dialogue” modeled on an idea created by the city of Los Angeles
- Building racially/ethnically balance curricula
- Development of a racial justice alliance under the umbrella of multicultural student services to promote White involvement in multicultural activities on campus.

Addressing the sources of a “chilly climate” on campus involves acknowledging the importance of race in the campus community and rigorous introspection to identify how White culture and assumptions inform structures and policy. As core assumptions of WIP are uncovered and critically examined through multiple worldviews, solutions can be identified and implemented with the result that a campus culture can emerge that fosters emotional safety, trust, belonging, empowerment, and integration for all.