Combatting the Myth of "Psychological Distress" in Anti–Critical Race Theory Legislation

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Legal attacks on training and curricula that name race and racism present a grave danger to colleges' and universities' ability to educate citizens who can thrive in a racially diverse and global society.

These legislative efforts claim an interest in preventing discomfort, anxiety, and other forms of "psychological distress" that can arise during discussions, workshops, trainings, and curricular content focused on race, diversity, and racism. For example, in Oklahoma, after House Bill (HB) 1775 banned discussions related to race and gender, the University of Oklahoma canceled their requirement that incoming students take a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion course, and schools like Oklahoma City Community College cancelled longstanding courses about race and ethnicity. "HB 1775 is an unvarnished attempt to silence the experiences and perspectives of Black, Indigenous, and LGBTQ+ people, and other groups who have long faced exclusion and marginalization in our institutions, including in our schools," said Genevieve Bonadies Torres, of the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law who together with the ACLU is challenging the law. In addition, decades of research evaluating the educational efficacy of campus diversity efforts has shown that rather than protecting students from "psychological distress," canceling conversations about race will increase it in unproductive

Key Takeaways

- Psychological distress and discomfort are a natural part of cross-racial engagement and learning about how race and racism are part of U.S. history and contemporary life.

- Legislative efforts to avoid psychological distress and discomfort in schools deny the lived experiences of students of color and will hinder meaningful participation, cross-racial engagement, and positive learning outcomes.

- Legislative efforts to avoid psychological distress and discomfort in schools will increase prejudice and racial divisions, while reducing cross-racial understanding, empathy, and social responsibility.

ways. Such legislative efforts are actually poised to do *more* harm by undermining the learning conditions for meaningful cross-racial engagement, dialogue, and developmental growth. In the case of institutions like the University of Oklahoma, such efforts can prevent them from fulfilling their mission "to provide the best possible educational experience for our students" and "service to the state and society," with negative implications for recruiting and retaining students, faculty, and administrators of color.

Anti-Critical Race Theory (anti-CRT) legislation and its goal of censoring any racial dialogue and content that leads to discomfort or anxiety will undermine college students' educational development because discomfort and anxiety are bound to come up in any racially heterogeneous interaction (Gurin et al., 2013; Page, 2009; Phillips, 2014). Because most white students entering college come from relatively segregated neighborhoods and schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005), we can expect a stress response in new situations where they interact with people of different races (Gurin et al., 2013; Jayakumar, 2015a; Page, 2009; Tatum, 2017). Not only is the stress response reduced with multiple exposures over time (Jayakumar, 2015a; Page-Gould et al., 2010), it is developmentally appropriate and can lead to positive educational outcomes when structured learning opportunities that include dialoguing about race are made available (Gurin et al., 2013). Thus, while superficial and one-off diversity workshops and trainings often fail, sustained diversity efforts are successful when they foster healthy conditions for developing racial awareness, intergroup understanding, empathy, and social responsibility (Bezrukova et al., 2016; Crisp & Turner, 2011; Denson, 2009; Gurin et al., 2013; Nagda et al., 2009; Zúñiga et al., 2015). This is because the latter are more intentional about productively addressing psychological distress and racialized vulnerabilities that can stand in the way of personal and societal growth. Yet if these laws pass, they inhibit the capacity of educators to facilitate such learning opportunities and meaningful participation across race that is productive and healthy.

Promoting healthy racial dynamics in school is impossible without talking about race and racism. Researchers have shown that a healthy campus climate is only possible when students and teachers can attend to racialized structures, policies, and practices. Meaningful, uncensored participation in such conversations supports and expands individual capacity for interracial interactions and dialogue in productive ways. This occurs when students are welcomed as equal participants in the learning context (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014) and when they engage in structured and sustained intergroup dialogue to support empathy and racial understanding (Gurin et al., 2013). Both increase the likelihood that college students will develop cultural flexibility – the ability to navigate diverse social environments, including the workplace, communities, and neighborhoods (Carter, 2010).

The scholarly literature demonstrates that barriers to full and meaningful cross-racial engagement and dialogue within postsecondary educational environments will result in:

- **Greater racial divisions** (as opposed to productive cross-racial engagement),

- **Increased anxieties and racial isolation** (as opposed to the reduction of such anxieties in productive ways),

- **More hostile and unwelcoming classroom and campus environments** (as opposed to a healthy campus climate), and

- **Diminished participation, development, and growth for all students.**

When these qualities exist, we have a hostile racial climate – an environment that does not foster a culture of regular interactions across racial groups. My own work, in which I employed structural equation modeling to a longitudinal data set spanning ten years (Jayakumar, 2008; 2015b), demonstrates that such climates lead to racial balkanization (i.e., "self-segregation"), and diminish opportunities for white students to develop cross-cultural workforce competencies (Jayakumar, 2008) and racial awareness (Jayakumar, 2015b).

A central claim of the anti-CRT legislation is that to talk about race is to be racist – advocating instead for a "colorblind" approach. However, a great deal of scholarship has demonstrated that such a race-evasive approach only censors educators' capacity to discuss the actual facts of race-based violence and discrimination that are a part of U.S. history and contemporary life. Race-evasive approaches increase white graduates' likelihood to choose segregated living and work environments post-college (Jayakumar, 2015b) and have been shown to increase racial bias (Plaut et al., 2009; Richeson et al., 2004; Warikoo & De Novias, 2014). Ultimately, erasing the reality of racial inequality reduces institutions' ability to promote educational benefits for all students. But it does so differently for students of different races.

Harms of race–evasive approaches for students of color

Race-evasive curriculum, values, and pedagogy can foster conditions of racial isolation and discourage participation among underrepresented groups. Students of color are effectively pushed out by learning contexts that require them to abandon or reject their own cultural traditions and values or their sense of worth as members of particular communities in order to achieve (Deyhle, 1995). Students who feel their cultural integrity is threatened may disassociate from their identities in order to remain engaged. This can lead to fragmented participation, or may leave the environment altogether (Deyhle, 1995; Staples, 2015). Numerous studies have reported that underrepresented and marginalized students may choose silence as an act of resistance to perceived hostile learning environments – a response that inherently limits meaningful participation (Deo, 2011). Multiple studies have found that unsupportive educational conditions are related to Black, Latinx, and Indigenous college students' departure from the STEM circuit (Museus et al., 2011; Hurtado et al., 2007). These studies demonstrate how racial stereotypes and racial isolation can contribute to decreased student participation in academic programs (Yosso et al., 2009).

The aforementioned psychological and emotional outcomes can be encapsulated under *racialized vulnerability*, an "unease based on perceived control over protection against various threats to integrity and personhood, which are shaped by dominant or marginalized racial identity statuses" (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, p. 916; Jayakumar, 2015a). In this way, race-evasive approaches that erase the reality of students' lives impede institutions' efforts to recruit and retain students of color and nurture a healthy climate where they may thrive.

Harms of race–evasive approaches for white students

Statistically speaking, students of color are likely to interact across racial lines with both students and teachers throughout their schooling. But since white students are not, encounters with diversity can cause initial discomfort, often communicated as feelings of victimization and defensiveness. This sense of racialized vulnerability manifests in a distinct set of concerns and behaviors often referred to as *white fragility* or, more aptly, *white hostility*. These harmful views and patterns stem from unconscious bias and stereotypes, fears, and resentments about Black people and other people of color, and/or a threat to social status and power (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Sidanius et al., 2008; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2007). White students have to be taught to engage with their own perception of vulnerability, and reframe their temporary discomfort in the context of new knowledge about race and racism. When they are not, they simply avoid the discomfort by decreasing their engagement with students of color and self-segregating (Jayakumar, 2015b, Quillian & Cambell, 2003). If they are supported by training and curricula that engages race and racism, they are more likely to develop intergroup understanding and social responsibility (Gurin, et al., 2013, Nagda et al., 2009; Zúñiga et al, 2015). Repeated meaningful cross-racial interaction is more likely to lead to positive emotional responses, improved attitudes, and reduced prejudices, particularly among white students (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

Institutions seeking the benefits of diversity should therefore not avoid tension in the learning environment – it is a natural and beneficial byproduct of exposure to people from different backgrounds. Legislation that censors conversations and interventions on race and racism blocks productive pedagogical responses to the discomforts and harms that can arise during cross-racial interactions and race-focused curriculum, along with the capacity of educational institutions in fostering healthy campus environments where all students thrive. Ensuring race-conscious programming in schools (and higher education in particular) provides an essential tool for recruiting and retaining students of color, reducing racial divisions and divisiveness, and developing cross-cultural and structural competencies among all students.

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