
“The Forum”

Talking About Race

Karen A. Cerulo, Editor

When one spends part of the day in the college classroom, there are certain cues, certain accents that become a familiar part of the routine. When things are going well, there are the smiles, the nods, the pressing and thoughtful questions. When things aren't as successful, these positive cues can give way to drooping eyes, incessant doodling, or students' fixation on their split ends! But certain issues seem to provoke a completely different set of phenomena—reactions such as embarrassment, discomfort, even anger. In my experience, emotions such as these are often tied to discussions of “difficult” social topics, topics such as gender, sexual orientation, and most frequently, race.

How does one talk about race in the classroom? How does one present and pursue the topic in ways that generate meaningful reflection? The answers to these questions are difficult. But in this installment of “The Forum,” several scholars have agreed to consider the issue. We begin with Laurie Mulvey and Sam Richards, co-directors of the Pennsylvania State University's Race Relations Project. These scholars contend that most of us have been trained to “instruct” our students on race, to school them in the prevalence and consequences of inequality. But is that the most effective means to generate a thoughtful dialogue on race? Mulvey and Richards suggest not. And in their essay, they offer an alternative strategy, one that probes how students actually feel rather than how they *should* feel. In response to Mulvey and Richards, Vincent Parrillo, a longtime scholar of race and ethnicity and the 2006 Robin Williams Distinguished Lecturer, raises some issues that complicate Mulvey and Richards' approach.

Want to enter the debate? Send your comments (200 words maximum) on either the Mulvey and Richards essays or the Parrillo essay to me at socforum@sociology.rutgers.edu. I will do my best to publish as many responses as possible.

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