I have yet to enter a race and inequality class without some students giving off signs of concern, if not outright displeasure, with having to take a class on social diversity.¹ Their body language often reveals that they are tense, apprehensive, or uncomfortable. After a general greeting, I always ask, “What do you hope to learn in this class?” Although responses vary, many students share the opinion that despite some overt racism in society, it seems less common today than in past generations, and most of what they have witnessed are specific isolated incidents. Given this interpretation of modern racism, my students say they hope to learn about where and why these acts occur. I often ask students about their own roles in contemporary race relations, and few are willing or able to identify themselves as potential contributors to the racial stereotypes that lead to inequalities. Students often say that others behave in racist ways, including parents and grandparents, but that they do not.

Although these types of ice-breaking discussions around race and personal perspectives can be challenging in any classroom, they also are

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crucial to cultivating racial consciousness among those espousing that they know better. This provides the groundwork needed to implement—in a non-threatening manner—the creative, alternative methods that will combine students’ real-life experiences with difficult academic material, and help them to realize how we all may contribute to racial inequality in society. This article presents an approach to race and inequality aimed at engaging students in the classroom while subtly teaching them that stereotypes exist in many forms and are at times unconsciously applied by most individuals and groups.

This lesson was taught in Race and Inequality, a course offered at Central Michigan University where it can be difficult to connect the content to a mostly homogenous group of students, while also maintaining their receptiveness to new ideas and perspectives. Race is well documented as being a difficult concept for students to understand. Typical approaches tend to shut down students immediately. One specific challenge is debunking students’ stereotypical notions of the phenotypical appearance of Latinos. Latinos are an extremely diverse group, but this information seems lost in many students’ racial ideologies, most likely due to a very narrow window (provided by the mass media) through which they have viewed Latinos. As a light-skinned Latino, I commonly hear, “You don’t look Latino,” or “I never would’ve guessed you’re Latino.” Rather than becoming frustrated with these comments, I had an idea to create a lesson that would challenge students’ understanding of “what Latinos look like” and teach them about the wide range of aesthetic diversity within the Latino community. I use this lesson to introduce a chapter focusing on Latinos and it serves as a powerful starting point on the topic of race in society.

We have access to a variety of literature helping students understand the social construction of race, but there are few interactive class exercises that incorporate students’ views to understand the complexity of race. In classes I have used exercises published in Teaching Sociology surrounding the social construction of race. For example, Khanna and Harris’s exercise asks students to sort celebrities into racial categories and then classify photographs as black or white. These exercises were stimulated by Obach’s work on categorizing patterned circles into similar groupings and Townsley’s in-class exercise of using racial statistics to reflect on societal trends. Nonetheless, even after using these exercises I observed many students still stereotyping Latinos based on typified phenotypes, and failing to acknowledge the actual diversity found within Latino communities. I knew I needed to address this issue before introducing the reading focusing on Latinos and race. Rather than share statistics or social facts about Latinos, I wanted to show how people have their own perspectives regarding this population and how stereotypical these perspectives can be. Although the above exercises involve enhanced learning about race, I wanted to add to existing bodies of literature by further contributing an exercise specifically focused on Latinos, which can then lead to a more diverse approach to discussions of race and inequality overall. Before I get to the specific lesson I created, it will be useful to review the central ideas about race as a social construct.

LATINOS AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE

The idea that race is socially constructed is well documented within sociology, though it is common for many of us to struggle in helping our students make sense of the underlying concept of social construction. Race can be defined as, “a concept that signifies and symbolizes sociopolitical conflicts and interests in reference to different types of human bodies. Although the concept of race appeals to biologically based human characteristics (phenotypes), selection of these particular human features for purposes of racial signification is always and necessarily a social and historical process.” Other scientific fields, such as biology, also have discredited the concept of race as a biological fact. Yet, even in the face of such strong evidence that race is nothing but an idea put into our heads...
by ourselves and others, the stigmas attached to specific racial groups have become acceptable “truths” that hold deep sway in many social situations. With racial characteristics and self-identity appearing to be natural, people in our society tend to view race as a meaningful way to define, separate, and predict the actions of other people.\textsuperscript{11}

In addition to the social construction of race, the issues around racial stereotypes have proven to be difficult for students to take seriously. It is not uncommon to have students who think they know people who stereotype others, but that they do not. This is often due to lack of understanding of how stereotyping takes place. Stereotypes can be defined as, “a belief about the personal attributes of members of a particular social category.”\textsuperscript{12} More specifically, “a stereotype is a shorthand term for a cognitive process comprising three components: a target social group, an attribute, and an assessment of the distribution of that attribute among the members of the social group.”\textsuperscript{13} Stereotypes can be developed through personal observation of a small number of members of the targeted group who may be behaving in a particular way or displaying a certain attribute that conforms to other images of that group. Such experiences lead the observer to believe this behavior or attribute is prevalent amongst the entire targeted group.

Another manner in which stereotypes of targeted groups are learned is, “... indirectly [or directly] from parents, teachers, peers, and the media.”\textsuperscript{14} Racial stereotypes go as far as to determine, “who is wealthy, intelligent, likely to speak English well, welfare-dependent, criminal, sociable, [and what certain groups are ‘supposed to look like.’]”\textsuperscript{15} Once stereotypes and the expectations surrounding them are embedded, they often influence a person’s judgment and actions towards targeted groups. This process is not always direct and can be, “... subtle, in some cases operating without the conscious awareness that a racial stereotypes has been invoked.”\textsuperscript{16}

The anchoring of groups within stereotypes, and therefore the social construction of race, is prevalent in the courses I have taught. It is for this reason that it is necessary for me to debunk racial stereotypes among my students and the idea that racial categories lead to distinct biological groups. The point is to show students that race is indeed a social construction of society, and that such labels are tied to questions of power. The focus on Latinos in this paper is not to deny that other groups also are stigmatized and feel the same sting of discrimination and marginalization. The diversity found amongst Latinos is not only cultural, but phenotypical as well. In other words, the diversity can be observed physically. Phenotype plays a major role today as one of the major racial and social markers (along with gender) that we use to navigate our interactions with others.\textsuperscript{17} Often our guide for mapping race relations depends on pre-determined ideas of how each specific racial group physically appears, and what we expect from those groups based on appearances. In reality, these expectations are complex and must be understood through these groups’ historical trajectories and contemporary standings.

For Latinos, the “typical” image is best summarized by Davila in her book \textit{Latinos Inc: The Marketing and Making of a People}.\textsuperscript{18} “But who and what constitute the generic [Latino]? A casting director explained, ‘You know what they want when they ask you for models; it’s unspoken. What they want is the long straight hair, olive skin, just enough oliveness to the skin to make them not ambiguous. To make them [Latino].’” This type of stereotyping leads to remarks such as, “Funny, you don’t look Latino,” and contributes to an underlying image of what the aesthetics of a Latino should be, to say nothing of how they should act.\textsuperscript{19} These stereotypes reduce all Latinos to a specific fixed type, disregarding the range of variation found within the Latino community.\textsuperscript{20} Thus, “the content of such stereotypes reveals a series of unsubstantiated beliefs about who [Latinos] are and what ‘they’ are like.”\textsuperscript{21}

The exercise outlined below focuses on students’ personal perspectives on how they can contribute and adhere to the idea that phenotypes determine race. It challenges their understanding of what Latinos “look
"Untitled," enamel and oil on canvas, by Manuel Fernando Rios, a lecturer of painting at Sacramento State University. For more of Rios’ work, see manuelfernandorios.com.
This lesson starts with a purposeful focus on a non-race oriented topic: boxing.

Typically the class will gasp, laugh, or make a comment about being confused—why is the red-haired seemingly white boxer speaking fluent Spanish?

To encourage comfortable dialogue with students, this interactive lesson starts with a purposeful focus on a non-race oriented topic: boxing. I share that some Americans consider it a sport, nicknamed “the sweet science,” while others consider it a barbaric display of violence. I ask the class for insight on the issue and typically find that a few students will share short, insightful perspectives. I then comment on the fact that boxing is profitable for some fighters and others in the professional boxing industry. For example, in 2012 Floyd Mayweather made $32 million in a fight against Miguel Cotto who made $8 million—not including the millions more made by the fight’s promoters. The more well known a fighter becomes, the more earning potential s/he has when they fight. I then begin the PowerPoint presentation.

On the first slide, titled “The Next Big Thing,” three bullet points appear, one at a time. The first shows a boxer’s professional record at an impressive 45 wins, including 33 by knockout, and one loss. I share that this man is only 25 years old, and that this is an impressive record for any professional boxer regardless of age or experience. In addition, I tell them that many promoters and people are excited about this young man because they think he is a future super star.

The second bullet point is titled “Pictures of a Future Star.” At this point, I display three pictures of the young boxer, one at a time, so that students can see a variety of pictures and mentally process each one. The first is of a shirtless young man posing in the boxing ring, gloves help up, during training. He is young and in great physical shape. His face is spotted with freckles, the color of his hair and eyebrows are bright red, and he has brown eyes. Once students acknowledge they have considered and absorbed the photo in its entirety, we move on. The second picture is of the young man in the ring immediately after a fight. He is holding up his silver gloves, shirtless again, and facing directly into the camera lens. The final picture shows the young boxer in non-athletic apparel in a non-boxing setting, wearing a fleece jacket, with his bare fists protruding toward the camera as if punching it. His hair is styled and he is wearing jewelry. Once the class has seen all three pictures of the boxer in various settings, I move to the final bullet point of the slide.

The final bullet point reads, “How can we promote him to maximize his earning potential as a boxing super star?” At this point I turn the discussion over to the students and ask them to come up with different ways to promote the young boxer. Often, after some initial hesitation, students become eager to share their ideas on promotional tactics. “Call him the ‘Irish Grenade’ because of his knockout power,” or “Call him the ‘White Hope’ because so many champion boxers today are minorities,” they have suggested. Students have also come up with “The ‘Red Machine’ because of his red hair” or “What about ‘Irish Red’ because he looks like a strong Irish guy.” On a broader scale, another response was “Have him appear on a game show or reality TV show so people can get to know him.” After students share various perspectives, I thank them for their participation and direct their attention to the screen to view an awaiting YouTube clip.

The video, which can be viewed at http://bit.ly/10SWaOe, consists of an interview of the boxer. I begin the clip at 39 seconds to capture the voice of a man speaking in Spanish. The class views the video, seemingly perplexed, and six seconds later the boxer appears and responds to the interviewer in Spanish. Typically the class will gasp, laugh, or make a comment about being confused—why is the red-haired seemingly white boxer speaking fluent Spanish? At this point, I stop the video clip and display the second and final PowerPoint slide, titled “Boxer Bio and the Social Construction of Race.”

The final slide is made up of three bullet points. The first says, “Saul ‘Canelo’ Alvarez,” (Canelo is Spanish for cinnamon and I explain like” and introduces discussion on Latinos. Furthermore, this lesson helps educators introduce to students the difficult topic of race and how racial stereotyping on a broader scale can lead to inequality in society.
this to the class), the name of the boxer. I immediately follow this with the second bullet showing that Saul was born and raised in the city of Guadalajara, in the Mexican state of Jalisco. I also point out that both of his parents were also born and raised in Mexico. Following this statement I show the final bullet point, a statement that I read out loud to the students in class, “So? What do Latinos look like?” It is at this point that I begin to see some movement in students’ interpretations of at least one racial category, though it is only the beginning of a long and arduous journey towards their better understanding of stereotypes and the depth and strength of our thinking about the other.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Teaching courses about race is a challenge—not only in actual content or theory, but because of the perspectives students carry into the classroom from their social worlds and personal experiences, which often are minimal and mass-media generated. Students approach the concept of race as “real” and feel that racial groups are innately different from each other with predetermined characteristics that become salient in any given situation. The exercise described above was created to draw their attention away from racial themes, allow them to “let their guard down,” and learn about race in a non-threatening and unobtrusive manner.

I agree with Khanna and Harris when they argue, “We find that readings, lecture, and class discussion help students understand that race is a social construct, but we argue that presenting this same information in an interactive and visual format allows for a more enriching experience.” Many students come to class with the utmost confidence regarding their knowledge of what racial groups “look like” and how they behave. The idea that specific racial groups fit into phenotypical, or appearance-driven, categories leads them to determine race based on the outward aesthetics of an individual. (Interestingly, students often do not reflect on the idea that maybe others think the same way about them.) By introducing a chapter about Latinos with this exercise around the boxer, faculty can contribute to the understanding and debunking of phenotypical stereotypes students may have of Latinos, and also challenge the idea of racial groups “looking a specific way.”

To determine the success and influence of this exercise, students are asked two questions. First, “Did you like or dislike the lesson? Please explain.” Responses to this question have shown 99 percent of 102 students like the lesson. One stated, “Yes, I liked the lesson because it drew us in with the idea of boxing and then had more of a twist at the end that really surprised me.” Another wrote, “I really enjoyed the lesson because it had a media component, a real life person, we all got to contribute, and the topic was unique by incorporating boxing into our race class.” A third expressed, “I thought the lesson was a good one. Focusing on the boxer as a person and not discussing race really caught me off guard and showed me my own stereotypes. I like that I learned so much about my own views with this lesson.” Students showed excitement throughout the lesson, adding to its success, as I was able to actively engage them.

The second question is, “What did you learn from this lesson?” Surprisingly, 99 percent of the students answered that they learned Latinos are more diverse than they had previously been aware. Importantly, many also said they learned about their own racial stereotyping. For example, “I don't think that any of us expected him to be Latino and it was eye opening to realize that we really don't know anything about a person based on how they look or the color of their skin,” said one, while another shared, “I thought the guy was white because he looks like people in my family. I thought Latinos were all tanned or dark skinned with dark hair. Wow, I learned a lot about diversity amongst Latinos.” A third wrote, “I was shocked that the boxer was Latino when I was positive he was white! The thing that surprised me is that I immediately assumed he was a white American, the thought of him being another race didn't even cross my mind, and I learned I have a specific 'mold' of what a Latino looks like.
Unexpectedly, students also made connections beyond the immediate topic of Latinos to their own broader views of race. One student stated, “…It makes you think of your own stereotypes and what you think of other people. It surprised me to think how quickly I made the assumption that he was European American.” Another wrote,

One student stated, “…It makes you think of your own stereotypes and what you think of other people.”

I was personally convinced that the boxer was an all-American, Midwestern hometown, upstanding patriot. For this reason I was utterly surprised to learn that he was Mexican. This showed me that even though I consider myself an open-minded individual I am just as susceptible to racial stereotyping as anyone else. While these assumptions were harmless in class, they could be dangerous in another situation.

The student’s realization of his own stereotypes evidences the beyond-superficial impact of this lesson on students. Another student explained,

It was an eye opener because it showed how easy it was to stereotype and racially profile. I assumed the man was white and that because he was white, he would not be able to speak Spanish. I didn’t realize the implications of my assumptions. I would hate for someone to jump to conclusions because of how I look; however, I was guilty of doing just that. It reminds me that people are people regardless of race and I need to remember that.

This student made an insightful personal connection about the potential of feeling unfairly judged based on appearance, thus reminding himself about the need to avoid applying racial stereotypes to others.

From both the extant literature and my own experience with students in my classes, I have found many students believe race is a concept with clear categorical distinctions that they believe to be social facts. These stereotypes and biases pose major challenges in the classroom, making it imperative for faculty to develop alternative lessons that will deconstruct their taken-for-granted notions of reality. This specific exercise takes on that challenge and meaningfully influences students, helping them to understand the complexity of race and how easily people racially profile in many situations. Students’ responses attest to the lesson’s success, as well as its ability to get them thinking differently about race in a larger context. By the end of the class, further strengthening student responses, the body language that I initially observed of students had changed: Students learning forward in their seats, eager to participate, and showing signs of full engagement. Doing this work—creating lessons that penetrate our students’ minds and help them understand and learn about issues of race in a real and powerful manner—will help dismantle harmful stereotypes that still thrive.

ENDNOTES

1. Readers will note that this article is being written in the first-person singular subjective case. This is because, while the classroom examples are based on Dr. Hernandez’s experiences, Ms. Loebick undertook much of the research and writing, and, therefore, deserves credit.
3. Rather than use the term Hispanic/Latino, I differentiate between Hispanic and Latino, and use the latter. Researchers have found that the term Hispanic “highlights Spanish heritage and language but [does] not acknowledg[e] the [diverse roots of these groups in Latin America]… In contrast, Latino stresses the common origins of these groups in Latin America and the fact that each culture is a unique blend of diverse traditions.” See Rothenberg, Race, Class, and Gender in the United States.
5. Khanna and Harris, op cit.
6. Ibid., p. 370.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
17. Rothenberg, Race, op cit.

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