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Empowering students to confront environmental injustice: Dialogue, theory, empathy, and partnership

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Abstract

Many students find environmental justice to be emotionally overwhelming and/or politically alienating, and there is currently little work that provides instructors with effective techniques for addressing these types of challenges. In this paper, upon situating the environmental studies classroom and the broader undergraduate experience in sociohistorical context, we identify four sequential strategies for engaging and empowering students on environmental justice issues. First, instructors can *facilitate an open and honest dialogue* by strategically framing course content for the unique composition of the audience, sharing their own racialized experiences (or working with a guest speaker who would be willing to do so), and using interactive assignments to encourage student participation. Second, *social theory* can be presented to students as complimentary (rather than competing) ideas which can be used for creative, real-world problem solving. Third, instructors and students can *cultivate empathy by acknowledging different standpoints*, particularly those that have been historically marginalized. Lastly, by *working in partnerships* with community-based organizations, instructors and students can think and work beyond hero/savior and perpetrator/victim narratives. These strategies are not intended as a set of silver bullets, but rather as a series of potential starting points that are informed by recent scholarship on these topics.

Keywords Environmental justice · Environmental education · Race and racism · Sociology · Pedagogy

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Introduction

Since the late 1980's, environmental justice (EJ) scholars have compiled a wealth of empirical evidence that demonstrates low-income communities, and communities of color are exposed to more environmental hazards than their counterparts (Bullard et al., 2007). Data collection, of course, is but one step on a long and deeply complicated journey. This is particularly evident in classroom settings, where data and evidence are necessary but not sufficient for meaningful student outreach and engagement. For many students, learning about climate change, environmental racism, settler colonialism, political repression, animal suffering, and related environmental justice topics can be emotionally overwhelming (Sue, 2016; Martinez-Cola et al., 2018; Verlie, 2019; Brookfield et al., 2018).

The field of environmental justice has spanned multiple disciplines and generated rich scholarly discourse, but limited attention has been given to direct pedagogical advice on teaching environmental justice. Some policy and planning scholars have argued for the identification of norms such as exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, and violence and framing environmental justice in the context of fairness and distributive justice (Washington and Strong; 1997). Others have identified tools that are well suited to compliment environmental justice teaching pedagogies, including the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) as a teaching technique (Esnard, et al., 2001) and the use of the Q method to identify students' environmental discourses (Danielson, 2019). However, in today's polarized political climate, it is worth revisiting contemporary perspectives on environmental justice and strategizing on the types of pedagogical approaches that can enable student engagement and empowerment.

Such a discussion is particularly important in light of current environmental education scholarship, which finds environmental justice topics noticeably absent in the environmental curriculum of American colleges and universities (Garibay et al., 2016; Nussbaum, 2013; Haluza-DeLay, 2013). Theoretical explanations for this gap include the concern that social inequality is too politically contentious (Haluza-DeLay, 2013); there will be a perception that the educator is biased (Russell and Fawcett, 2013); and that environmental educators may be ill-prepared to facilitate constructive dialogues (Morano and Lawrence, 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to provide scholars with a set of conceptual tools, best practices, and strategies that can help them to effectively and constructively engage students with these issues rather than turning them off or avoiding painful topics altogether. In what follows, we propose four strategies to mitigate these concerns: facilitating an open and honest dialogue, using social theory, cultivating empathy by acknowledging different standpoints, and working in partnerships. These strategies are not intended as a set of silver bullets, but rather as a series of potential starting points that are informed by recent scholarship on these topics.

Facilitating an open and honest dialogue

A growing body of pre- and post-test studies suggests that classroom dialogue can be a powerful method for improving students' skill and confidence in navigating

racial tensions (Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018). At the same time, these dialogue sessions can also go very poorly (Sue, 2016; Jenkins and Alfred, 2018; Brookfield et al., 2018), and there can be tremendous variation in outcomes due to ''instructor effectiveness, distinctive teaching styles, or student demographic differences in each class (Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018:233).'' Many faculty from historically marginalized groups also face discrimination from their students (Harbin et al., 2019). It is thus important to recognize the historical, institutional, and interpersonal factors that make these conversations difficult in the first instance (Akamine et al., 2019).

While it is easy for scholars to blame racial and political polarization on greedy corporations and fear-mongering politicians, some of the blame is also to be found in the racialized legacy of environmental activism and scholarship itself. Historically, these intellectual communities have encouraged both students as well as the broader public to sacralize ''nature'' and ''environment'' as separate and distinct from the places where people live and work (Taylor, 2016; Williams, 1980; Cronon, 1998). As such, this field has often framed solving environmental problems in terms of protecting ''wild'' and ''beautiful'' locations that can be preserved on behalf of the recreational and ideological concerns of White, upper middle-class communities (Taylor, 2016; Dunlap and Mertig, 2014; Stapleton, 2020). Indeed, "separating environmental issues from those of social inequality are challenges that the conservation movement has had a difficult time overcoming" (Taylor, 2016:397). This lack of diversity in the broader environmental movement is still apparent today. A recent study of 2,057 environmental organizations found that Whites compose more than 80% of board members, with men occupying 62% of these positions (Taylor, 2016). In the American Sociological Association (ASA), membership in the Section on Environment & Technology has gradually become less racially diverse (2005–2016), while ASA as a whole has become more racially diverse during that time (Mascarenhas et al., 2017). It is therefore not surprising that the majority of environmental students are not racial minorities (Synder and Dillow, 2013). Similarly, "colleges of agriculture remain overwhelmingly white demographically, culturally, and epistemologically (Cramer et al., 2021:600)." The racial composition of the environmental classroom thus requires EJ educators to acknowledge that many White students may become defensive when they experience racial stress (DiAngelo, 2018; see also Langrehr et al., 2021).

University campuses are the first opportunity that many students have to comprehensively engage alternative worldviews, and college peer networks have profound impacts on the formation of students' political identities (Rauf 2021). By the same token, race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status have a strong impact on college students' environmental identity development—particularly with respect to their success in locating mentors and having significant life experiences with nature (Miao and Cagle, 2020). Most American college students have little to no first-hand experience or awareness with which to understand the realities being discussed by environmental justice scholars and practitioners. Moreover, many students enrolled in non-liberal arts majors may only be introduced to concepts of values identification and public deliberation for the first time through courses on environmental justice, sustainability, or ethics (Chiles and Coupland, 2017; Morano and Lawrence, 2020). College is also the first time that many students will be among peers of

different races and nationalities. In and of itself, however, mere exposure to different ideas and different types of people will accomplish little unless it is deliberately combined with engagement and inclusion efforts. Despite the many economic, cultural, religious, and political differences that exist between college students in the United States, the biggest divide between college social networks continues to be race and ethnicity. The racial divide among peers is due to both *baseline homophily*, or the demography of the pool that one finds oneself in, and *inbreeding homophily*, or the self-selection of racially similar peers (McPherson et al., 2001). Not only do Whites have higher levels of baseline homphily, but they also have fewer pre-college interracial friendships and fewer interracial friendships in their dorm. Many college campuses across the US accordingly have de facto segregated peer networks (see Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018). Without the intervention of college administrators, the emergence of interracial friendships is likely to be rare (McPherson et al., 2001), and students' racist ideologies and myths may well go unchallenged by the college experience (Stearns et al., 2009; Bowen and Bok, 2016; Putman, 2017).

Perhaps the single most powerful myth that colleges and universities need to deconstruct is the ideology of "color-blind racism," or the belief that minorities are disadvantaged solely because of market dynamics, naturally occurring phenomena, and "cultural limitations (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:2)" as opposed to institutional racism. The ideology of color-blind racism, in co-opting the 1960s civil rights movement discourse on equality, effectively allows members of the dominant group to maintain historical advantages without sounding "racist." Many Americans, including college students, have been deeply acculturated in this ideology (Burke, 2012; Mueller, 2012; Valiente-Neighbours, 2015; Jason and Epplen, 2016; Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018), and it thus warrants further attention and discussion here.

The work of Bonilla-Silva (2010) is foundational to contemporary sociological understandings about the power of color-blind racism in American society (Golash-Boza, 2016; Christian, 2019). As outlined by Bonilla-Silva, color-blind racism has four central frames: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism, and minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism is the modern belief in the pre-eminence of "individual choice" (individualism), the need to hire "the most qualified" (meritocracy), the notion that "you can't force people" (free markets), and "equal opportunity" (egalitarianism) (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:31–38). While these are laudable principles, throughout most of Western history, these values have not been extended to include marginalized social groups. When divorced from a broader acknowledgement of this disenfranchisement, the valorization of abstract liberalism effectively serves to legitimize the fallacy of racial pluralism, or the false assumption that all racial groups have the same power in American society. Similarly, the frame of naturalization legitimizes racial inequality and segregation by positing "that's just the way it is (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:47)," i.e., that birds of a feather flock together. These frames are further reinforced by cultural racism, or the myth that "Blacks have a cultural of laziness (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:41)," and the minimization of racism, the ideological assumption that "discrimination is rare (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:47)."

In a neoliberal political culture that valorises free markets, the myth of individualism and the preeminent value of individual choice is a particularly significant barrier to achieving environmental justice. According to the frames of individualism

and meritocracy, an individual's want for a better life and his/her commitment to "hard work (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:1)" will lead to improved conditions for the wider society. Again, these frames effectively serve to justify and legitimize environmental injustice and social inequality more broadly. Bonilla-Silva describes this as laissez-faire racism, or the idea that people should be left on their own to succeed (or fail) in the free market system, and that if minorities can't compete it's because of cultural deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2010:7). In his more recent work, Bonilla-Silva (2019; 2020) has emphasized the importance and impact of racialized emotions, analyzed the impact of color-blind racism on essential workers and the inequitable impact of COVID-19 on marginalized communities, and implored White sociologists to be more active in confronting the legacy of racism in the discipline. With regard to the latter, Bonilla-Silva and Peoples (2022:1) have further argued that "most colleges and universities in the United States are in fact historically white colleges and universities (HWCUs)" and that "seemingly 'race neutral' components of most American universities (i.e., the history, demography, curriculum, climate, and sets of symbols and traditions) embody, signify, and reproduce whiteness and white supremacy."

While Bonilla-Silva's concepts of color-blind racism and abstract liberalism generally refer to politically conservative views, in many ways, the reluctance to confront racial inequality is also found in mainstream liberals' calls for class-based or universal programs of uplift rather than race-specific remedies—what Wise (2010) describes as "post-racial liberalism." For Wise, the problem with post-racial liberalism is that it is inadequate for addressing persistent racial discrimination and inequality. Wise prophetically asserted in 2010 that post-racial liberal strategies were unlikely to be an effective political tactic, as critics would see universal programs as a handout to minorities anyway. Wise (2010) moreover predicted that post-racial liberalism would make it more difficult to challenge institutional racism openly, and that this phenomenon would only worsen racial tensions.

In sum, prior to initiating difficult conversations about race, we encourage scholars to understand their disciplinary history, the type of college experience that most White students tend to have, and the pervasive racial discourses that our students have been exposed to (before, during, and after college). Next, in order to encourage our students to be open with us about their own experiences and their own perspectives on concepts like color-blind racism, we can expose them to role-models who share their own stories with respect to race and the environment (Verduzco-Baker, 2018; Harbin et al., 2019). A difficult but arguably necessary component of this storytelling is a discussion of privilege, i.e., the advantages that dominant groups gain from the disadvantages of other groups (McIntosh, 1989). Here, White instructors can play an incredibly valuable role by stepping forward to model self-disclosure and transparency with respect to their own lived experience with race for their students (Akamine et al., 2019; Pelak, 2019; Stapleton, 2020). They can do this by openly reflecting on their own White and/or fair-skinned privilege, i.e., the "invisible package of unearned assets (McIntosh, 1989:10)" that is inherited by Whites. Moreover, they can discuss how the racist values instilled in the American social structure provided them with opportunities that individuals from different racial and ethnic groups did not have (see Mueller, 2012; Jason and Epplen, 2016). A classic

reading to consider assigning here is McIntosh (1989). This process can help students understand that recognizing White privilege does not devalue their (or their relatives') achievements (Mueller, 2012). It does require, however, that all people with privilege have a moral responsibility to recognize injustice and to help alleviate it on whatever social and spatial scale where they can personally effect change.

Perhaps the most important point to be made here is that instructors have unique opportunities and vulnerabilities when engaging in this type of self-disclosure. For example, according to in-depth interview data, Women faculty of color have reported numerous instances of White male students "challenging their authority, teaching competency, and scholarly expertise, as well as offering subtle and not so subtle threats to their persons and their careers (Pittman, 2010:183)." While some faculty of color may elect to engage in self-disclosure when teaching about race and racism (see Lykes et al., 2018; Santellano et al., 2021), it is unfair and potentially harmful to expect them to do so, given that many of them already face unique vulnerabilities in the classroom and higher burdens of informal mentoring and other forms of emotion work outside of the classroom (Rockquemore and Laszloffy, 2008; Valiente-Neighbours, 2015; Verduzco-Baker, 2018; Harbin et al., 2019). (The first author of this paper, an interracial (Black/White) man, eventually decided to engage in more self-disclosure about his racial identity development with his students, but only when he was in a more advanced stage of his academic career.) If individual instructors prefer not to engage in this type of self-disclosure, an alternative approach is to bring in an outside facilitator to lead this type of discussion (see Lykes et al., 2018; Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018). Another option is co-teaching. Cramer et al. (2021) had a positive student reception when they co-taught their food justice course as an interracial team, but when Cramer solo-taught the course, she ran into more student opposition.

Our main point here is that it is not enough for those who seek to confront environmental injustice to simply "expose and oppose" corporate power, environmental inequality, and racist ideologies. Concerned citizens must also cultivate personal awareness and reflexivity about their own privilege as well as their personal contribution to global problems. Another way to model this important work for students is to expand one's own "circle of compassion" by continuously seeking out and exploring new horizons of injustice, e.g., gentrification, "binge flying" (Cohen et al., 2011), e-waste, sweatshop labor, heteronormativity, able-bodied normativity, and anthropocentrism. Additionally, environmental justice scholars have recently drawn attention to the concept of "environmental privilege"—cleaner air, cleaner water, and/or other environmental qualities that are disproportionately experienced by socioeconomically privileged populations (Park and Pellow, 2011; Leiserowitz and Akerlof, 2010; Norgaard, 2012).

In sharing our stories of inner concern, contradiction, and conflict, we show our students that we are not perfect, and that we also lead morally complicated and fallible lives. In so doing, we invite others to recognize our shared humanity. Doing this creates breathing room and opens up a space for constructive dialogue by diminishing the atmosphere of accusation, judgment, and condemnation that oftentimes poisons our shared conversations about racial oppression, social inequality, and the environment. As we seek to inculcate, cultivate, and disseminate environmental

justice consciousness from the inside-out, both within ourselves and in our broader communities, self-disclosure about our own personal struggles with these issues signals openness and a willingness to listen to others that can be nothing less than transformational (see Verduzco-Baker, 2018; Harbin et al., 2019; Akamine et al., 2019; Pelak, 2019; Santellano, Higuera, Arriaga, 2021).

Again, when we talk about these issues with students, it is vitally important to consider our audience. Among many student populations, hearing words like "privilege" and "critical race theory" will be an immediate turn-off. For example, when doing food policy work in rural communities, Mike Winne noted that "We don't say the word 'environment'…If we have to bring it up, we talk about 'clean air' and 'clean water' (Winne, quoted in Grillo, 2017:1)." Winne—who also serves as Senior Advisor to the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future—"has a litany of words he won't use when he's working in these regions: 'justice' and 'equity' are two of them. If he absolutely must discuss labor laws or workers' rights, the word 'fairness' lands better (Grillo (2017:1)."

This type of thoughtful and targeted engagement with one's audience can help to create a more welcoming environment for different types of classroom participation activities, wherein students can identify and share their own racialized experiences. Here, one way to help students envision themselves in others' shoes is by keeping a journal of their daily activities, whereby participants are asked to examine how and why they make certain types of choices (Picca et al., 2013). Choices are not made in a vacuum—they are deeply embedded within a complex human geography of location, policy, education, and culture. The choices of the individual and the choices of a community are not separate; they feed into one another.

Storytelling is another means by which to contextualize personal choices and cultivate empathy across racial lines (Akula, 2016). The personal stories of Black farmers, for example, can be used to identify shared values with White students from rural and agricultural backgrounds, many of whom might value hard-work, independence, and tradition:

> An insight into the African-American experience in the Southern countryside during the first half of the 20th century is provided by *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*… In their love for and knowledge of the land, their dedication to hard work, their self-reliance, their aspiration to independent freehold ownership, and their willingness to stand up to oppression to defend that aspiration, [Shaw] and his family exemplified the yeoman ideal (Hagenstein et al., 2011:256).

From there, educators might point to the macro-level obstacles that tilted the playing field against Black farmers like Shaw: facing discrimination when applying for loans, receiving unequal access to federal support for farmers (e.g., farm serial numbers from USDA), and lacking access to legal resources that can secure farm titles (Sewell, 2019).

There are also many other new and emerging engagement resources and tools that can help expand the interracial dialogue in a way that does not alienate students. Using non-traditional teaching media—including podcasts, videos, documentaries, and speeches—can allow students to recognize and bridge toward understanding

different viewpoints that may not be represented by their immediate peers in the classroom. Other techniques for cultivating open dialogue include small-group-facilitated discussions (Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018), playing interactive games (Brunson and Cartright, 2022), writing self-reflection papers (Valiente-Neighbours, 2015), and analyzing the way that race is portrayed in comic books and fictional television shows (Stout et al. 2020). The key point here, again, is that there is no silver bullet when talking about race in the classroom (Sue, 2016; Brookfield, 2018). Educators absolutely must understand their target audience in order to craft an effective curriculum, particularly when dealing with difficult topics like environmental justice. We also need to be in touch with our own beliefs and emotions if we are to come across as sincere, and we must be prepared to accept that we will make mistakes along the way.

Using social theory

If scholars can effectively acknowledge and discuss the raw emotions of race and racism, more space will have been cleared to then talk about different theoretical explanations for environmental injustice. At this stage, many students run the risk of getting "caught in the weeds," either by gravitating toward the theory that fits most comfortably with their own prior worldviews (Galef, 2021) or by dismissing social theory altogether as an "academic" (i.e., frivolous) exercise. Other students may feel alienated from the practice of theorizing altogether, particularly if non-White theorists are excluded from the curriculum (see Collins, 2019; Go, 2020; Romero, 2020; Morris, 2022). By presenting theories that articulate the causes of racial and environmental inequality as complimentary than competing ideas, we invite students to remain critically engaged with these issues. Another approach is to define social theory "as a scholarly conversation" between theorists (Reyes and Johnson, 2020:565). When presented in this light, three theories that can help to explain environmental inequality to students include (1) the rational choice model, (2) the sociopolitical model, and (3) the racial discrimination model (Mohai et al., 2009).

The *rational choice model*, as informed by rational choice theory writ large (Bowen, 2017), holds that it is economically rational for industry actors to establish locally unwanted la nd uses in areas that have cheaper land values, which are often in predominately minority and low-income communities (Bullard et al., 2007). Conversely, it would be rational for individuals who value cheap land to move in to these areas, and for those that value a cleaner environment to move out. Studies find mixed-support for this "vote with your feet" theory. For example, Crowder and Downey (2010) analyzed panel data and found that African American and Latino householders were more likely to move into polluted areas than comparable Whites. However, Pastor et al.'s (2001) analysis of Los Angeles County found that census tracts where Treatment, Storage, and Disposal Facilities (TSDF) were sited did not see more minority residents move into the area after siting. Again, it is important for students on all sides of the political spectrum to consider the rational choice model as one of many important voices within the broader conversation on environmental

justice issues (rather than a post-racial "escape hatch" that would enable us to downplay race and instead focus on economic struggles).

The *sociopolitical model* holds that the path of least political and economic resistance is taken in environmentally degraded siting decisions. This argument is premised on the racialized assumption that low income and minorities are more politically and economically vulnerable and are thus the least likely to successfully resist siting proposals. The sociopolitical model has been further informed by insights from critical race theory. Here, Omi and Winant observe that in everyday interaction and other domains of social life, "we utilize race to provide clues about who a person is (Omi and Winant, 2014:16)." Among the most important of these cultural clues is "racial etiquette," i.e., "a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings which operate in the interactions of everyday life (Omi and Winant, 2014:16)." These informal rules and expectations about how people in different racial groups are supposed to behave include, but are not excluded to, assumptions about innate differences in "temperament, sexuality [and sex appeal], intelligence, athletic ability, aesthetic preferences, trustworthiness… and our very ways of talking, walking, eating and dreaming (Omi and Winant, 2014:17)." This type of racialized thinking would thus produce ideological assumptions about which groups are more or less likely to fight back against environmental hazards.

Ambiguity in the concept of how these and other factors make minority residents vulnerable has led researchers to use several different variables as proxies for the concept of vulnerability. These proxies include a community's percentage of voters, renters, and ethnic population turn-over (Hamilton, 1993; 1995; Pastor et al., 2001). While there is clear upside in the diversification of approaches used to study vulnerability, it is important for students to recognize that the heterogeneity of these measures has made it difficult for researchers to compare results across studies. Several key studies have nonetheless reached the shared conclusion that communities of color are more vulnerable than White communities (Hamilton, 1993; 1995; Pastor et al., 2001). Notably, however, recent research has also found that communities located closer to toxic industrial facilities have showed signs of heightened political activity. Communicating this latter point to students is particularly important, as it demonstrates that communities of color can experience vulnerability while also exhibiting the potential for agency and resilience (Ard and Fairbrother, 2017).

The *racial discrimination model* focuses on the larger social system of inequality, of which environmental inequality is just one part. The racial discrimination model thus deals primarily with overt and institutional discrimination, whereby polluting communities intentionally target minority communities. Here, Bullard (1990:103) has argued that communities of color are targeted for locally unwanted land uses (LULUs) because they are considered "sacrifice zones." It is for this reason that Pulido (2000) asserts the need to re-emphasize the "racism" in environmental racism. She levels a strong critique against the argument(s) that racism can be statistically or theoretically disentangled from class, and she further argues that it matters whether or not toxic hazards or people of color were the first to arrive in a particular community. In her more recent works, Pulido and her colleagues argue that environmentally vulnerable communities have not improved through the environmental justice movement due to diverse forms of state-sanctioned racial violence and racial

capitalism (Pulido, 2017; Pulido et al, 2016). This institutional perspective asserts that government policies, which may appear to be race neutral, can have results that are unequal by race. Quite often, for example, even those policies and practices that keep an area "green" are at the detriment of those who cannot afford or are barred from living in or visiting these areas when they are not performing the menial labor necessary to maintain them (Park and Pellow, 2011; Freudenburg, 2005; Pulido, 2000). Proponents of the racial discrimination model thus argue for the need to confront racist and nativist discourses that too often blame excluded people for the deteriorated environments in which they are forced to live. Here, educators may need to pay particularly close attention to students' personal reactions to these arguments, be they either defensive or overly welcoming. If this does occur, it is important to encourage students to suspend judgment, consider this perspective as one among many in the broader environmental justice literature, and focus on evaluating the quality and cogency of the research itself (see Sue, 2016; Brookfield et al., 2018).

These three explanatory models hold different engagement opportunities, which allows for multiple entry points for deeper conversations with students. The first two models allow for discussions on the role of the individual, while the third model expands to include broader systems of inequality that exist throughout society. The pedagogical advantage in juxtaposing micro/individual vs macro/societal level theories is coherence and parsimony (Abrutyn, 2013). These theories moreover form a broad base for self-reflection and empowerment, thus providing students from different racial, economic, and social backgrounds with the opportunity to better relate to the academic literature.

The pedagogical literature on sociological theory provides additional helpful strategies, grounded in active learning, that can be used to further articulate the complementary relationships between environmental justice theories to students. This includes (but is not limited to) encouraging students to combine their own existing knowledge with course readings to "develop their own theory-based solutions for a specific social issue or problem (McDuff, 2012:169)," teaching theory and research methods as an integrated whole rather than treating them as distinctive entities (Garner and Hancock, 2018); and combining field site visits with group discussions to show "how theoretical concepts apply to observable events and settings (Pedersen, 2010:205)."Lastly, while we have primarily emphasized the social sciences approach to theorizing in this section (as influenced by our own academic training), humanities-based approaches to theory (i.e., ethical theory) are also critically important to a comprehensive understanding of environmental justice. The need to include humanities-based approaches in environmental justice theorizing is particularly evident with respect to the rational choice model:

> Formal rational choice theory does not include any standards of fairness or equity in its model of decision-making, and these are the core values of interest in environmental justice. Rather, rational choice theory treats fairness and equity as if they can be captured and represented completely in terms of the decision-makers' utility. Rational choice theory thus does not distinguish what is from what ought to be, a fatal oversight in any decision theory useful for purposes of guiding decisions toward improvements in conditions of

environmental justice… The creation of improvements in environmental justice requires improvements in moral decision-making, not utility maximization (Bowen, 2017:57).

A comprehensive strategy for integrating social science and humanities theorizing in environmental justice can be found in Patricia Hill Collins' work on intersectionality, as it concerns the interconnectedness of social inequality (see also Ergas, McKinney, and Bell, 2021). As noted by Collins (2019:52–53), "Intersectionality can easily become polarized around these different understandings of social theory…. [but] coexistence can be a strength for intersectional theorizing. Because intersectionality draws on both the search for truth that underpins the social sciences and the search for meaning that characterizes the humanities, preserving the existing creative tension between these two understandings of social theory is important."

Cultivating empathy by acknowledging different standpoints

Theoretical explanations for environmental injustice can be further enriched by putting them into conversation with different voices, particularly with respect to historically marginalized standpoints (Lykes et al., 2018; Stapleton, 2020; Collins, 2019; Reyes and Johnson, 2020). This type of pedagogical practice can help students learn to weigh different types of empirical evidence, appreciate methodological diversity, identify ethical dilemmas, examine different policy options, and cultivate a deeper sense of empathy for others (Yoder et al. 2013). While this type of pedagogical work can generate friction, it is not in vain: students who enrolled in introductory-level sociology and social problems courses have scored more highly on positive empathy change as compared to students who did not take these courses (Rockwell et al., 2019).

Showcasing a plurality of standpoints is all the more important given the vast heterogeneity among environmental justice discourses, causes, and organizations. Indeed, the broader environmental movement as a whole has expanded to the point of fracture, and is now composed of loosely affiliated and often contradictory environmental *movements*—each with their own set of tactics and ideological affiliations (Dunlap and Mertig, 2014). The broad diversity of voices that come from these movements raises difficult ethical questions for concerned students, many of whom are overwhelmed by the scale and complexity of the environmental justice challenges that we collectively face.

When engaging with the standpoints of multiple actors, key questions to consider include who benefits from certain actions, who bears what costs, who reaps what rewards, who is being saddled with the most significant risks, and what are the short- intermediate-, and long-term outcomes associated with the proposed actions. Take, for example, industry actors establishing locally unwanted land uses in minority and low-income communities. From the standpoint of industry actors, it may be a rational choice to situate environmental hazards in communities with cheaper land values (Bullard et al., 2007). However, while the placement of environmental hazards in minority and low-income communities may result in reduced short-term economic benefits for industry actors and their local employees, these same actions may

also translate into adverse health outcomes and increased medical costs in the long-term for minority and low-income communities. Exposure to pollutants is associated with increased morbidity and premature death, and the health impacts associated with environmental hazards are cumulative over time. Social factors, such as race, ethnicity, and class, may further exacerbate the adverse effects of environmental hazards. Racial and ethnic minorities and people with low socioeconomic status may also have greater vulnerability to environmental hazards, thereby amplifying health disparities (Morello-Frosch et al., 2011). After we identify the short-, inter-mediate, and long-term outcomes of environmental actions, we can then encourage students to interrogate why certain outcomes and privileges have traditionally been prioritized over others. This question provides a point of departure for discussing the racial discrimination model, which addresses overt and institutional discrimination (Bullard 1990).

Solid empirical research is critical to informing students about the ethical considerations in these discussions. Here, embracing methodological diversity can provide new and unique insights for both research and teaching, e.g., that presumably "race neutral" government policies may have racially asymmetrical consequences (Pulido, 2000). Researchers and students can play a vitally important role in the political arena by providing policymakers with evidence of the cumulative impacts of environmental actions, especially among racial and ethnic minorities and low-income populations. In turn, policymakers can use these cumulative impact assessments as the basis for legislation that supports interventions for minority and low-income communities (Morello-Frosch et al., 2011). Cumulative impact assessment can also reduce communities' burden of proof to provide mutually recognized evidence of harm. This may be especially helpful in communities that showcase lower levels of political and economic resistance, which the sociopolitical model suggests may be particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards.

Working in partnerships

Integrating a "civic engagement" component to a social justice course can result in powerful takeaways for students (Ciplet et al., 2013; Barnum and Illara, 2016; Miller, 2018; Stapleton, 2020; Goldberg and Minkoff-Zern 2021), particularly if the coursework includes a dialogue component (Weinzimmer and Bergdahl, 2018). Acting in communities of justice requires multiple forms of recognition, including recognition of the individual, recognition of the group, and recognition of wider interconnected social, political, and economic systems. Doing this work further entails small "d" democratic action through participatory discourse and partnership. Participation in democratized dialogue not only empowers individual students, but also empowers the group as a whole by providing a mutual conduit for knowledge, learning, and action that is greater than the individual. Without listening to marginalized standpoints and engaging in partnerships, Western-based students, scholars, and practitioners can very easily perpetuate the White savior problem/complex (see for example Akamine et al., 2019; McFadden, 2020).

To this end, the scholarship of Pellow (2000) is particularly instructive. Pellow observes that much of the environmental justice literature frequently relies on an overly simplistic and one-dimensional ''perpetrator-victim'' narrative. Here, in addition to advocating for broader discourses over environmental inequalities, Pellow recommends that scholars identify the localized processes and histories through which environmental resource conflicts occur, the evolving and oftentimes contradictory roles of multiple stakeholder relationships, and the broader political-economic systems of production and consumption (Pellow, 2000). Through cultivating respectful dialogues and using language that resonates with their audience, students can help to illuminate the different possibilities for realizing environmental justice. To engage industry actors, for example, one might focus on long-term financial risks vs short-term cost savings. Locating environmental hazards in minority and low-income communities can result in a company having to pay significant restitution and environmental clean-up costs.

In short, if scholars, practitioners, and students want to bring about change, rather than just point with alarm and set up antagonistic situations, it is important to institute strategies that build partnerships and allow others to change their actions. Here, the work of the Industrial Areas Foundation—an affiliate network of community activist schools—can be used to show students how "problems" can be transformed into new opportunities for engagement. Their strong track record of community organizing demonstrates that neo-liberal development efforts are not inevitable and that environmentally just outcomes are possible. For this organization, the critical first step toward coalition building involves cultivating a broad-based local organization dedicated to social justice issues. Often this is done by recruiting churches, labor unions, and voluntary organizations already involved in the community. House meetings are then held to determine the issues that are of the deepest concern. In the case of environmental injustice, it is critical to hold those meetings in areas that are experiencing the impacts of pollution, loss of land, etc. Once the problem is identified, a small group carries out research to determine the source of the pollution and which persons, agencies, and firms have the power to change the situation. Members of the group then set up one-on-one interviews with those persons, agencies, and firms to understand their perspective of the problem while at the same time sharing the deep concern of the larger group. Once the group shares the knowledge gained from these interviews and identifies a path to a solution, the group again visits the persons, agencies, and firms who can make a difference in order to identify their potential role and reach an agreement that they will act to improve the situation. Then the group organizes an action to address the issue, attended by as many members of each group as possible and members of the press. The group asks individuals with particularly moving stories to share them. Then the group asks potential actors who can improve the situation to come forward and commit to take the specific actions laid out. After the meeting, the group follows up to hold accountable those with power to improve the situation to do what they said they would do (Rogers, 1990; Shirley, 2010; Chambers, 2018; Warren, 2001).

While much of the environmental justice literature focuses on building partnerships in marginalized communities, this work is equally important—if not more so—in the elite communities where many college students have either grown up or

will eventually settle into. In these spaces, people of color and the poor are systematically excluded from ecologically sound living. This exclusion is based on the enforcement of "environmental privilege"—the perceived "right," (if not "obligation") of the affluent to exclude those who they deem as "environmental threats" from their communities through zoning, prohibiting cars that do not meet pollution standards (i.e., older cars), underinvesting in public transportation, and not installing sidewalks (Pellow and Brehm, 2013). Ironically, the environmentally privileged often expect the people who depend on affordable housing, affordable transportation, and the ability to walk to work to provide the basic services that the elite depend on in order to keep up their "green" lifestyles.

Conclusion

We close the paper by returning to the theme of privilege, educator standpoint, and the need to foster a sense of community. While personal reflexivity is important and helpful, it will all be for naught if environmental justice educators and practitioners do not also honor and respect the perspectives of those who see the world in a very different way—particularly those students who experience non-racial forms of social oppression. This can be accomplished by recognizing other's experiences, listening to their stories, acknowledging what they see as barriers to change, and sincerely valuing what is said.

More broad-based social change cannot take hold without collective action. Poverty, lack of opportunity, and environmental injustice are not isolated personal problems and they do not exist separately from one another—they are the combined result of social, political, and economic forces. To effectively counter and ameliorate environmental injustice, students must understand how to confront these issues holistically. Such systemic change can be overwhelming for the individual, but it is manageable through public partnerships. Through participating in something that is bigger than themselves, students can begin to experience a sense of empowerment and efficacy through mutual partnership, friendship, and democratic action. While additional data will be needed to validate the application of our approach within the context of the environmental justice classroom, the four strategies that we outlined in this paper are well grounded in previous scholarship and best practices in sustainability, food justice, and anti-racist pedagogies.

Environmental injustice is indeed a wicked problem. By facilitating open dialogues, using theory, acknowledging other standpoints, and working in partnerships, we can empower our students to go further, go farther, and set their own examples for us to follow.

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