Politically Conservative Preservice Teachers and the Spiral of Silence

Implications for Teacher Education

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A common perception within politically conservative circles is that American colleges and universities are bastions of liberal thought led by left-leaning faculty who seek to indoctrinate their students into adopting progressive views of the world (Gross, 2013; Maranto, Redding, & Hess, 2009).[1] In recent years, this perception has been fueled by a handful of high-profile cases of faculty aligning with student-led campus protests, such as the 2015 demonstrations at the University of Missouri regarding racial tension on campus (Rutz, 2015) or assigning course readings that appear to push a liberal slant on contemporary or historical issues, as was the charge leveled by conservative critics of a Literature of 9/11 course at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 2015 (Chiaramonte, 2015; Sperry, 2015).[2] These cases then become fodder for conservative politicians and news outlets, and they serve to perpetuate the narrative of college liberalism.

In many ways, however, the perception of American universities as liberal institutions is rooted in fact. According to the most recent profile of college freshmen

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published annually by the Higher Education Research Institute, college students are growing increasingly liberal. Although nearly half of students surveyed identified their political ideologies as moderate, their answers to questions related to politics and public policy indicated that most held liberal or "far left" positions on social issues (Egan et al., 2014). Moreover, liberal faculty members tend to outnumber conservatives within most academic departments, oftentimes by wide margins (Klein & Stern, 2009).

In their analysis of political ideologies across university departments, Klein and Stern (2009) found that departments of teacher education tend to be among the most liberal on any given university campus, and a quick perusal of the major teacher education journals does little to refute that assertion. Many educators have argued that this progressive focus is necessary given the neoliberal assault on both the teaching profession and traditional pathways to teacher licensure in the United States over the past three decades (e.g., Kumashiro, 2010; Sleeter, 2008). Moreover, raising issues of social justice, calling attention to diversity, and engaging in critical analyses of American society—all of which are often derided by conservatives as pushing a liberal agenda (Applebaum, 2009)—are essential to preparing preservice teachers for 21st-century classrooms (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004).

The purpose of this study is not to debate or justify a progressive vision of teacher education. Rather, this article explores a topic that has received little attention within the teacher education literature: how politically conservative preservice teachers respond to their teacher education programs, particularly programs they perceive to be ideologically liberal. The findings from this narrative inquiry of seven politically conservative teachers reflecting on their teacher education program offer implications for a philosophically liberal conception of teacher education that values multiple perspectives and open deliberations of ideas.

Literature Review

Progressive teacher education is often justified as necessary to combat the effects of an American society that continues to privilege the perspectives of affluent, Christian, heterosexual, White men. In doing so, much of what is advocated in programs that profess to adhere to a social justice mission often runs counter to positions that are commonly viewed as conservative in the American political arena. Scholars have attempted to address concerns related to the perceived "liberal bias" in social justice education by arguing for "engagement but not necessarily agreement" (Applebaum, 2009, p. 399) and stating that blatant attempts at indoctrination represent an undemocratic approach to education (Bialystok, 2014; Freedman, 2007).

Even beyond discussions of privilege and power, teacher education is inherently political. If one asks preservice teachers to engage in discussions of how to make classrooms safe for LGBTQ students, for example, it is likely that the discussion will extend to broader issues of LGBTQ rights. Similarly, there exist many content-

specific concepts—controversial issues and world religions within social studies or evolution in science, for example—that inherently require preservice teachers to grapple with social issues and differing worldviews. Even discussions of teaching as a profession are likely to broach topics that fundamentally separate liberals and conservatives, such as unions, government spending, and taxes (Journell & Buchanan, 2013).

Few studies have attempted to understand how politically conservative preservice teachers respond to this type of instruction. One exception can be found in James's (2010) study of socially conservative preservice teachers in a social studies methods course. She found that these preservice teachers refused to participate, often on religious grounds, in critical discussions of social issues such as climate change. When these preservice teachers were forced to participate, they often felt ostracized by their liberal classmates and, as a result, withdrew from the conversations.

In this study, I build on this work by presenting findings from a narrative inquiry of politically conservative teachers reflecting upon their experiences in a teacher education program they perceived as ideologically liberal. The following research question guided the study: How did these politically conservative teachers feel their political beliefs affected their university experience, specifically their experience in the teacher education program? Although the findings from this study are not generalizable beyond the seven participants I interviewed, it is possible that, given the statistics cited in the introduction to this article, their experiences are similar to those of many politically conservative preservice teachers across the United States and, thus, offer implications for teacher education broadly.

Theoretical Framework

Two contradictory theories frame this study. The first is deliberative democracy, which has roots in, among others, Rawls's (1993) political liberalism and Habermas's (1984) notion of democratic decision making within the public sphere. According to Rawls, people will inherently disagree about how best to live, and any dissenting conceptions of the good life should be viewed as reasonable, provided they do not violate basic principles of justice. Of course, determining the reasonableness of a disagreement requires defining these basic principles of justice, or what Rawls terms *public values*. One limitation of Rawls's argument is that he assumed societal agreement of both "justice" and, by extension, what is considered "reasonable" (Miller, 2012; Spragens, 1999). Even the most cursory glance over the American political landscape will attest that few public values are universally agreed upon within society.

Habermas (1984) has argued, then, that public reason needs to be determined by collective recognition of the strongest argument on any given issue. For Habermas, deliberations should be made in the public sphere with as many divergent viewpoints as possible. Assuming, perhaps naively, that individuals can engage in

discussions in a way that transcends their own interests, Habermas believed that rational individuals will eventually debunk irrational or poorly argued positions and ultimately arrive at a course of action that improves society.

There are, of course, philosophical arguments that challenge various tenets of political liberalism and deliberative democracy (e.g., Pellizzoni, 2001), but it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss them here. Rather, the point I wish to make is that advocates of deliberative democracy believe that the democratic process is best served when people engage in "reasonable disagreements" with each other, which allow for better understanding of and tolerance for divergent opinions, as well as opportunities for compromise (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Mutz, 2006). Reasonable disagreements, however, can only exist if individuals are given safe outlets in which they can voice their beliefs, which is why Rawls (1993) argued that as long as the private values of citizens do not infringe on the public values of the polity, the state should neither endorse nor prohibit any definition of the good life.

Gutmann (1999) applied that belief to public education and argued that a democratic education should be nonrepressive in that it "secures freedom from interference only to the extent that it forbids using education to restrict *rational* deliberation or consideration of different ways of life" (p. 44, emphasis original). It appears clear that the operative word in her definition is "rational"; however, Gutmann never offered explicit guidelines for what constitutes rational thought. Other educational theorists, however, have posited litmus tests for determining the rationality of views (e.g., Bailey, 1971; Dearden, 1981; Hand, 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2015), each of which has pedagogical strengths and limitations. Assuming that an issue meets the criteria for rationality used by the teacher, then the theory of nonrepression calls for the teacher to treat it as an open issue in which all perspectives are equally welcomed and considered.

One limitation of deliberative democracy is that it assumes people are willing and able to speak freely about their beliefs. Similarly, nonrepressive education assumes that schools and classrooms are safe places for the open exchange of ideas. Neither assumption is always accurate. Noelle-Neumann's (1974, 1993) spiral of silence theory, the other framework guiding this study, explains how communication is altered when individuals perceive themselves to be in ideologically hostile environments, the implications of which limit their ability to engage in true deliberative discourse.

In the more than 40 years since Noelle-Neumann conceptualized the spiral of silence, the theory has been the subject of extensive empirical and theoretical critique. Yet, as Donsbach, Tsfati, and Salmon (2014) noted, "there is certainly accordance, even among the most ferocious critics of this theory, that it has been one of the most influential of all theories developed in communication research and political communication over the last half century" (p. 1). Space constraints prohibit an exhaustive discussion of the theory, but the crux of the spiral of silence is that individuals' willingness to express their opinions about a particular issue

is determined by their perceptions of the political climate of their audience. If individuals' opinions are aligned with the opinions of their audience, they are more willing to share those opinions; if not, they will remain silent or wait until they are within the company of like-minded people to share their views.

Fundamental to the spiral of silence is the belief that public opinion is a mechanism for creating consensus within social spaces. Those who break from that consensus are threatened with isolation from the group. These "political deviants" (Finifter, 1974) will often remain silent when political issues are discussed, and if they are pressed to contribute, they may lie or misrepresent their positions to avoid being ostracized (Scheufele & Moy, 2000). Either option limits the deliberative process because the group will not be exposed to all rational views on any given issue.

Although the spiral of silence has been applied to a wide range of disciplines, it has received scant attention within educational research broadly, and I could find no applications of the theory within the teacher education literature specifically.[3] Yet, teacher education programs are spaces inhabited by a variety of voices, and if we seek a philosophically liberal approach to teacher preparation that allows for those voices to be shared in thoughtful and tolerant ways, we must be cognizant of how those in the ideological minority can be removed from the deliberative process. This study of politically conservative preservice teachers provides an example of how the spiral of silence can manifest itself within a teacher education program and offers implications for preservice teachers and teacher educators in similar contexts.

Methodology

In this study, I use narrative inquiry methods to better understand the experiences of politically conservative preservice teachers in a program they perceived to be ideologically liberal. Clandinin (2013) has described narrative inquiry as "an approach to the study of human lives conceived as a way of honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (p. 17). Beyond the mere sharing of stories, narrative inquiries analyze "the individual's experience in the world" by exploring the "social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences were, and are, constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted" (p. 18).

Context is essential to making sense of individuals' narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr (2007) identified three elements that must be used to contextualize any narrative inquiry: *temporality*, which is the understanding that individuals and, by extension, their narratives are always in a state of transition; *sociality*, which are the personal (e.g., feelings, moral dispositions) and social (the relationships of individuals to their environments and other individuals) conditions that affect individuals' lived experiences and their retelling of those experiences; and *place*, which is the physical environment where individuals' lived experiences occurred.

Although narrative inquiry is a powerful form of qualitative research, it also has a few inherent limitations that must be acknowledged. Because the method relies on participants sharing their interpretations of their experiences, it may be the case that a participant's recollection differs from what actually happened. Such disconnects between perception and reality may be due to a variety of causes: incomplete information, purposeful or nonpurposeful embellishment, a fading memory, a desire to please the researcher, or outright deception (Larson, 1997; Polkinghorne, 2007). Therefore, I acknowledge that the stories shared in this article, particularly the ones that I cannot corroborate as a shared participant, may not be completely accurate.

That said, I am more concerned with how each of the participants in this study perceived his or her teacher education experience as opposed to capturing precise illustrations of particular events. As Thomas (2012) noted, "in narrative inquiry . . . validity relates specifically to personal meaning drawn from stories, not to an observable, measurable truth" (p. 216). Moreover, I purposely chose to analyze the narratives of multiple conservative preservice teachers to provide a certain level of reliability to the data. The fact that all seven participants shared similar stories of ideological marginalization despite being interviewed separately and attending the teacher education program at different times suggests that the narratives, collectively, offer a plausible glimpse (Polkinghorne, 2007) into what occurred within the context of these participants' teacher education experiences.

Positionality

As Clandinin et al. (2007) noted, the relationship between the inquirer and his participants is an important dimension of sociality. The seven participants who took part in this study graduated and received licensure from the secondary social studies program at my institution, and I was their methods professor and student teaching supervisor. I am a White man who identifies as politically liberal on most issues, and I often disclose my political beliefs during class discussions of social and political issues. In other words, it would have been unlikely for any potential participants not to know my political leanings prior to agreeing to participate in the study.

On one hand, the fact that the participants were my former students is a limitation. It is entirely possible, for example, that former students who could have been potential participants in this study may have chosen not to volunteer because of a poor relationship they had with me when they were in my classes. Also, it is possible that some former students may have declined to participate because they may have been afraid that I would have disapproved of their political views. It is also possible that the participants who volunteered may not have been completely honest with me during their interviews, particularly with respect to their experiences in my classes. It is for this reason that I make no claims in this article about my own instruction, even though the participants provided few examples of perceived feelings of ideological marginalization in my teaching.

On the other hand, my prior relationship with the participants allowed for greater depth within the interviews due to my familiarity with both the place in which their lived experiences occurred and the sociality of their teacher education program. Without having taught these participants, I may not have recognized the need to conduct this study, nor would I have been able to delve as deeply into the retelling of their experiences. Their familiarity with me may also have allowed them to feel more comfortable during the interview, and given that I was no longer in control of their course grade or licensure status, I hoped that they felt they could be honest about their experiences.

Participants and Research Context

I recruited the seven participants by sending an e-mail to all of the former students with whom I maintain contact via e-mail and social media. Once a cohort of student teachers graduates, I allow them to friend me on social media if they so choose. I never send friend requests to them, however. I also encourage students to send me their contact information after landing a job, but again, the choice is theirs. Ultimately, most of my former students choose to keep in touch with me; therefore I was able to recruit from a fairly large pool (more than 60 former students). However, the fact that I did not have contact information for some of my former students is a limitation to this study.

The only condition for participation in the study was self-identification as politically conservative, although any combination of fiscal, social, and foreign policy conservatism was accepted. Eight former students responded to my inquiry; however, one told me that he had no qualms with his experience in the teacher education program and never scheduled an interview. Table 1 lists the seven participants who agreed to be interviewed, along with demographic data and other information relevant to the study.[4] All were White, and all received licensure through a traditional undergraduate teacher education program. Other than Peter, who was

Table 1
Participant Information

Name	Race	Traditional or nontraditional	Graduation year undergraduate	Self-described conservative beliefs
Sarah	White	traditional	2011	fiscal, social, and foreign policy
Craig	White	traditional	2013	libertarian
Bill	White	traditional	2013	fiscal and foreign policy
Mike	White	traditional	2014	fiscal, social, and foreign policy
Peter	White	nontraditional	2015	fiscal and foreign policy
Amanda	White	traditional	2015	fiscal, social, and foreign policy
Erin	White	traditional	2015	fiscal, social, and foreign policy

a second degree student in his mid-30s at the time of graduation, the participants all matriculated through the program as traditional undergraduates.

The participants' temporality is illustrated by the range of time away from the program and the varying levels of teaching experience among the participants. The interviews took place in summer 2015; three of the participants had graduated just 2 months earlier, and the others had graduated anywhere from 1 to 4 years prior. All of the pre-2015 graduates had landed teaching jobs upon graduating and were still employed at the time of the study. The three May 2015 graduates had all accepted teaching positions and were set to start in August.

All of the participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences within the same general places—the campus broadly and the teacher education program specifically. Although subtle changes in both places may have occurred from when Sarah, the earliest graduate, attended the university to when the interviews took place, the size and political climate of the campus as well as the structure of the teacher education program remained similar. The university is located in an urban area, and in any given year, its enrollment is approximately 17,000 students. The university also has one of the most diverse campuses in the state with respect to race and ethnicity, although the School of Education is not as diverse as the overall campus. Both the School of Education and the Teacher Education department include teaching for social justice as part of their mission statements. All of the participants were former students in the secondary social studies teacher education program, which meant that they majored in a relevant content area (e.g., history, political science) and then took education courses starting their junior year. A detailed description of the program can be found in Journell and Tolbert (2016).

Data Collection and Analysis

I interviewed each participant once, and each of the interviews lasted approximately 1 hour. All of the interviews were audiotaped and transcribed for accuracy. The interviews were semistructured (Merriam, 1998) in that I asked all participants a predetermined set of common questions, but I also gave them space to tell stories about their experiences, which led to further questions that were different for each participant.

I engaged in an issue-focused analysis (Weiss, 1994) of the interview data by reading each transcript multiple times and developing codes for each of the specific events participants raised in their narratives. Examples of codes included events such as "perceived marginalization in non–teacher education courses," "perceived marginalization by a professor," and "perceived marginalization by classmates." Occasionally, an event would garner more than one code.

With any narrative inquiry, one must be aware of "the distinction between life as narrated and life as lived" and realize that "the formations of results are always of a provisional character; they are only valid 'until further information is

available'" (Rosenthal & Fischer-Rosenthal, 2004, p. 261). Therefore, I sought to strengthen the validity of each participant's narrative by looking for patterns across the seven narratives. As patterns emerged, I was able to develop relevant themes about the participants' collective experiences. Finally, I sent earlier drafts of this article to the participants to determine whether I had reconstructed their narratives accurately. Several offered comments, and I made changes according to their feedback (Clandinin, 2013).

Findings

Despite differences in age, gender, and time away from the university, the narratives of each of the seven participants were strikingly similar. Nearly all of them traced their conservative roots to growing up in politically conservative, religious households and living in ideologically homogeneous rural or suburban communities. Mike, for example, described his upbringing in the following way:

> My dad was a Methodist minister, so obviously, I had the religious background that most conservatives have. You know, I came from an upper-middle-class family. Dad made, you know, over one hundred thousand [dollars] a year. Big church. Yeah, pretty typical conservative, really.

Another familial influence for both Peter and Amanda was the military. Both of Peter's parents were lieutenant colonels in the U.S. Air Force, and he described himself as a "military brat" who grew up in military towns. Similarly, Amanda described her family as "basically comprising people who have served in the military and teachers."

Only Craig's upbringing broke from this narrative. He grew up in a single-parent household, which he described in the following way:

> My mom was on all sorts of unemployment, food stamps, things like that. I grew up with her being pretty liberal on just about everything, and the way it shaped me is it made me kind of resent welfare and resent handouts because she took advantage of the system. Like we would sell our food stamps and things like that.

According to Craig, these observations contributed to his disdain for "big government" and were instrumental in shaping his libertarian beliefs.

When asked to describe the political climate of the university, all seven participants gave some variation of "very liberal" or "far to the left." However, when asked why they felt that way, they provided different examples. Erin and Craig, for example, both cited the predominance of perceived liberal student groups on campus and the visibility of campus protests for politically liberal causes. Sarah and Mike described the diversity of the student body as contributing to the liberal feel of the campus, particularly the "big gay and lesbian community" on campus. Peter, Mike, and Bill also just chalked it up to higher education in general. As Peter said, "I think there is just a stereotype that most conservatives go into knowing that academia is generally a bastion of liberalism."

Interestingly, all of the traditional undergraduates stated that they embraced the liberal nature of the university, at least initially. For many of them, college was their first exposure to different schools of thought, and it provided them the opportunity to critically assess their conservative beliefs. Mike, for example, told a story of attending a Democratic campus organization:

> When you go to a university, I think a lot of people kind of go through a change. I was out of the house, and so, I definitely went with different groups. Like [the university] had a liberal group, a Democratic group. So, I attended a few of those meetings simply because I wanted to, you know, see [what it was about]. I wanted to have all perspectives and made sure that I just wasn't molded to what my parents wanted me to be. I kind of wanted to see who I wanted to be. But after I looked at that, I just kind of remained a conservative. I was like, OK, I really do believe this because I believe this and not because mom and dad told me.

Amanda told of a similar awakening:

> When I came to [the university], I was like mind blown in the fact that there were actually people in the world who didn't agree with me and so I was challenged a lot in the beginning, which was a good thing for me at first. . . . It solidified that it wasn't just like my parents, my grandparents telling me that I should believe [what I believed]. It was me figuring out why I should believe this kind of thing. So, yeah, it challenged what I believed, and then I really held on to those beliefs.

For Bill, Sarah, and Craig, exposure to liberal ideology made lasting impacts; each described becoming moderate to liberal on social issues due to their experiences at the university, prompting Sarah to describe her conservatism as a "modernist perspective."

Yet, all of them indicated a shift from initial curiosity with the liberal campus environment to feeling marginalized for holding true to their conservative beliefs. Amanda recollected,

> It changed from being challenging to being like a put-down kind of thing. Like people didn't respect my point of view as much, and I think it was mostly because I was in the minority. . . . It's like people assume that just because you are Republican you have a lower IQ [and] you're not as capable of forming an opinion.

Although the participants' experiences in the teacher education program are the primary focus of this article, all of them indicated instances of perceived marginalization prior to entering the School of Education. For many of the participants, these experiences were significant and directly impacted their willingness and ability to engage in their subsequent education courses.

Non–Teacher Education Experiences

Nonacademic interactions. Most of the participants reported feeling marginalized and, in some cases, even attacked within the campus community based on

their political beliefs. In some cases, this marginalization was subtle; for example, Erin recalled being on campus during the 2012 presidential election. She noted, "I would be walking to class and get a Democratic voting guide. You know, no one was ever giving me a conservative [one]." Another example can be found in Mike's description of student organization day:

> I guess it's just the clubs. It almost seems like you have the liberal—I mean, I even saw a communist/socialist table one time. You have like six or seven tables of groups that—they may not be [affiliated with] politics, but you could identify them as leftist groups. Like the lesbian/gay tables and stuff like that. Whereas you might only have one or two tables that you could associate with the right.

He continued by saying, "I definitely think there is kind of a backlash between the students. . . . You [can] kind of tell the groups are almost kind of—I don't want to say hostile—but you can kind of feel it a little bit."

Perhaps the most illustrative example of this perceived hostility can be found in Peter and Erin's description of the university's Confessions Facebook page. This forum was designed for members of the campus community to post anonymous "confessions" that could then be seen by anyone who had "liked" that page. Although perhaps not its original intent, the page had become a place for airing grievances about political issues of the day. After looking at the page myself, I can corroborate Peter's description that it is "very dominated by liberal thought and the second that someone comes in with a conservative ideal or idea they are immediately ganged up on and are impugned and lampooned."

Erin told the following story about her interaction with the page:

> Somebody posted something one time, and I can't even remember what it was. I never reply to those just because I know you are just waiting on a battle [but] I put one thing, a response. I can't remember what it was but it was basically like what a conservative Republican would say, something about Obama or something. I probably had on my one comment 150-something replies. To my one comment. Whereas, like all these other people had said whatever agreeing with the status and nobody even touched that. But I literally had like 150 replies to that one little comment. So, I was like "wow, that just really goes to show you how liberal this school is."

Of course, posting on a Facebook page and participating in campus organizations are personal choices that can be avoided. Classes cannot, however, and nearly all of the participants indicated the same feelings of hostility and marginalization in their content and general-education courses.

Academic interactions. Each of the participants was able to share a story of being in a class in which he or she was aware of being in the ideological minority. In some instances, as in the case of Mike's history class, the ideological mismatch did not lead to any feelings of ill will on either side. Mike recollected,

> Every now and then [the professor] would kind of give [me] a smirk or a chuckle.

> You know, because we read a book about Reagan, and he really presented Reagan in a different light. He and I got into some friendly debates. A couple of times, I kind of felt he would dismiss me, but I mean, it's his class. I respected that.

Yet, for most of the participants, being in the ideological minority led to frustration, feelings of harassment, and a general unwillingness to participate. Amanda, for example, expressed the following about a political science course:

> The professor was very liberal, and almost everyone in the political science department is liberal, and I was the only conservative person in the class. If there was another person, they didn't talk just like I didn't talk. So, I would sit there and get mad because I disagreed with everything they were saying, but I wasn't going to say anything because I was the only one who was going to feel that way.

Erin and Sarah both spoke broadly about their classes; Erin stated that "if there was one of me there were five others that had something else to say about what I said. . . . it probably kept me from talking a lot more than I would have . . . but if I was shy, I would have never spoken." Sarah concurred: "I would watch what I said; I didn't want to go offending anybody."

The most dramatic illustration of marginalization came from Peter, who told the following story from one of his first courses taken at the university:

> It's introduction to political theory . . . the first day of class, the professor basically came out and said, "I'm communist. You can Google my name and you'll see all the protests that I've been in and all the times I've been arrested." . . . I took that to mean that we could all be open with the way that we handled or conducted ourselves in the class. So, I would try to challenge things whenever there were liberal viewpoints brought up, but I was basically the lone conservative. . . . But I started to realize that it wasn't necessarily a level playing field in terms of the types of responses that I was getting back from my classmates and the professor. . . . The whole class [grade] was going to culminate in a final paper . . . where we had to put all of the authors [of the course readings] together and have them discuss using the tone that they wrote with and the positions they advocated for. . . . I chose to adopt [the professor's] teaching tone and style as the voice of my paper, and his tone and style were very crass. He would drop F-bombs; when he was talking about conservative ideals he would like, you know, flick off the air and say "go fuck you." So, I basically adopted that voice in my paper and I turned all the personalities of all of our authors up to eleven . . . with respect to Foucault, I played up his French background [and] I made some references to his sexual orientation; I didn't feel they were, it wasn't my intent [to be offensive]. I guess I can understand how it may have come across that I was, especially because I'm a conservative and I must feel XYZ about that particular aspect. . . . So, I turn the paper in and I get an e-mail from him a couple days later . . . and he basically said "this is, without a shadow of a doubt, the absolute worst paper that I've ever read in my entire life. I award you zero points."

After visiting the professor in his office, explaining himself, and begging for

the paper to be regraded, Peter ultimately ended up with a passing grade in the course, but not before the professor called him a "homophobe" and made him feel like a "worthless individual." Of greater interest to this study is the lesson that Peter took from this experience:

> After that particular class, [I had to] lasso everything in. . . . I had to basically be not who I really was; I had to be a fake person in order to succeed and move forward and get that little piece of paper that says I am qualified to do XYZ two and a half years from now. . . . I was either the minority that was [not expected] to voice his opinion, or if I did, I immediately become that token conservative, if you will . . . and while [others] have these deep conversations and snicker at all the things that they all collectively agree are ridiculous about the other side, I just kind of have to take it and laugh it off and not put myself out there as I normally would like to. . . . It sucked to [have] to do that; it would be nice to go in there and spout your opinion like anyone else on campus.

Teacher Education Experiences

These participants did not enter their teacher education programs as blank slates; they brought with them these prior experiences and the lessons learned from them. They also become part of a cohort of peers with whom they would spend the next 2 years. This section describes the challenges that these participants faced within the teacher education program.

Intersection of diversity and politics. When asked to compare the instruction received in the School of Education with that received in the College of Arts and Sciences, all of the participants indicated that the former was more ideologically balanced. Outside of a few examples of professors pushing the Common Core, which was a politicized issue within the state, or showing clips from *The Daily Show* or MSNBC as opposed to more conservative outlets, the participants generally had few complaints about their professors or the instruction they received within the education program. The one exception, however, was the feeling that the program's focus on diversity and social justice too often crossed into the political arena without providing equal opportunity for both sides of any given issue.

Specifically, each participant expressed frustration with the course on diversity, which was the first course that they took in the program. All of the participants believed that the course was valuable for their professional development and that it made them aware of issues that they had never considered before; Amanda stated, "Yeah, there were definitely liberal leanings to the way that we were taught, especially in [diversity] class, but I think that was good, especially for me because I don't think I would have thought about it like that [otherwise]."

They began to feel marginalized, however, when the diversity focus took a political turn. Craig and Peter, who took the course 2 years apart, both gave the example of immigration. Peter recollected,

> We were talking about the immigration issue in the United States, so we were watching videos on how undocumented or illegal—whatever word you use—are affected by . . . their limitations within the United States. You know, they can't get IDs, they can't work legally, they have all these problems and it is a result of these people on the right [who] are either patrolling the border or enacting legislation that is preventing them from doing XYZ or whatnot. So, I always felt that particular class was unfair to the right. Not necessarily because of the professor, but because of the subsequent conversations that went on after those clips were shown. Here we are all trying to become teachers. We are all supposed to be going into our class with open minds and teaching methods that are supposed to be, you know, teaching both sides, but immediately after those videos were shown everyone was snickering at the way the people on the right were presented.

Craig described a similar experience:

> [The teaching assistant] was just really hitting on things like topics and issues like the Dream Act and [how] it is so unfair that immigrants are treated this way or illegal immigrants are treated this way, tears apart families, does this and that . . . and you know, yes of course, she left out any counterarguments. . . . Maybe they could have offered those.

Mike offered a similar critique with respect to discussions of poverty:

> I would say [diversity class] was more liberal from an economic standpoint because we would look at different groups of people that would definitely not be middle class—like lower class. Then [the professor] would definitely give her opinion that they are in poverty because of this [reason], you know, from a political standpoint. I almost kind of felt like if I think they are in poverty because of a different reason [I] almost felt like we couldn't say that because we would offend her or, you know, paint a target on our back. Even though she presented her facts and evidence, it might not be fully why I think 100% the reason why a certain group of people are in poverty.

In all of the examples given, the issue for these participants was not that more progressive positions were presented; rather, it was that they did not feel comfortable offering counterperspectives. Mike stated, "I felt that if I spoke up, I could be viewed as a bigot." When Peter actually wrote a critical response to the immigration videos on the course discussion board, he "got a lot of negative feedback from [classmates]. A couple of people that I was Facebook friends with dropped me as a Facebook friend because of that. It was just kind of perpetual awkwardness for the next year and a half." Several of the participants also attributed their unwillingness to speak up to witnessing the harassment of more outspoken conservatives, like Peter, during class. Erin described,

> One guy [in class] who anytime he said something would get shot down. He was really poor when he was young, and he basically made himself into who he is, and so when he would disagree with the readings, it was like you know, how dare he? I could just tell by the discussions, the eye rolling . . . if I say something, somebody else is going to shoot their hand up and disagree with me.

Bill shared a similar story about

> this one guy in our class who was very conservative. . . . He would bring up really good points that personally I thought needed to be addressed and the students in the class wrote him off, the teachers in the class, the professor and teacher's assistant, wrote him off consistently. Rather than answering his questions, they would get on him for not framing it in a politically correct way . . . so that was sort of understandable, but they would get on him for that and then never get around to answering the question, which always grated on my nerves. I mean, clearly I am still thinking about that.

Spiraling into silence. These experiences from the diversity class set the stage for the remainder of the teacher education program. Each participant felt that the professors in the program were generally welcoming of their beliefs but that their classmates were not. A specific example was referenced by Peter, Erin, and Amanda, all members of the same cohort. The event occurred in my class, and I also have a vivid recollection of it. I had created a four corners exercise to discuss the issue of teacher political disclosure. Peter took the position of nondisclosure and defended it by telling an abbreviated version of the aforementioned story from his political science class. As he was telling the story, several of the more liberal members of the class began snickering and rolling their eyes, which led to a brief confrontation between Peter and the other students.

All three participants referenced that specific example as illustrative of the marginalization they felt in their teacher education program and how the words and actions of their classmates often pushed them toward silence. Amanda noted that she "sympathize[d] a lot" with Peter and commended him for being brave enough to tell his story in class. She then added, "Would I have [told a similar story]? Probably not . . . because I feel like people are going to judge what I say." Erin described her classmates' behavior as "typical" and recounted the event in the following way:

> Literally people were back there rolling their eyes and snickering while [Peter] was talking about being [marginalized], and he was like "right there is the reason I don't talk." I was back there with him, and [the people snickering] are all my friends, but I was like "exactly." That is typical. That is what I am talking about.

Erin continued by saying, "I really felt like 'oh my gosh'; in that [four corners] exercise I knew it would be like me and maybe one other person [with conservative opinions] and everyone else would be in [the other positions]," and as a result, she chose to remain quiet instead of coming to Peter's defense. For his part, Peter recalled "leaving that class thinking, well this is not going to help me [become more open in class]."

For this particular cohort, this ideological tension even extended beyond the classroom. The cohort had created a Facebook group that was designed for informal conversations and reminders about course assignments. Over the course of the

program, however, political differences had led to heated confrontations and people "unfriending" those who articulated conservative beliefs.

Overall, the perceived hostility toward those holding conservative beliefs ultimately led to a general silencing of opposing viewpoints. Each participant admitted to either not participating fully in class for fear of being ostracized or being dishonest in his or her portrayal of personal beliefs to avoid confrontation with classmates. Sarah recalled not sharing her opinion in certain classes because "people would have ganged up, and what I would think is that other conservatives [in the class] would not have spoken up to back me up. They were like you dug yourself a hole, and they would have let me go." This assertion is supported by Amanda's admission; she described conservatives as being "hammered" in her education courses and continued by saying that

> Peter was really the only one who would speak out . . . and I think it is because he has such a strong personality . . . and he is not our age; he doesn't really care what 20-somethings think about him. So, he would speak out often, and I mean I would sit over there and agree with him but not say anything because I didn't want people to hate me like they hate him.

When silence was not an option, all of the participants admitted to watering down or outright lying about their beliefs to avoid confrontations. Peter believed his responses in class were "more favorable to the left than I probably was in reality," and Amanda admitted that she was "more vague than I probably would [have been] if I knew that I was surrounded by Republicans." Bill was more direct; he admitted, "I definitely held some things back. . . . I knew exactly what the teachers wanted to hear and I wrote that. I would put my own spin on it . . . but I pretty much just did it for the grade." Erin provided a similar assessment when she said, "I found myself aiming to please more so than wanting to actually say [what I believed]. . . . I almost felt like I might get, and maybe this was wrong, but I almost felt like I could get docked for saying something [conservative]." Mike, a year removed from the program, appeared remorseful when reflecting on his decision to be less than forthright while in the program:

> You don't want to marginalize yourself and, you know, it is kind of the coward's route. I am kind of ashamed of myself. I probably should have spoke out a bit more. . . . I would not ever—and I get this from my dad—I would not ever com- promise my beliefs. I would not agree to something that I don't. I wouldn't lie. But I would disagree tactfully. Maybe on certain issues, not as much as I would like. So, I guess I was dishonest in that sense. I wasn't laying all my cards on the table. I am not sure you would call that honest or not.

Seeking refuge. In response to the backlash from their liberal peers, many of the participants admitted to seeking refuge with fellow conservatives outside of class. Given these individuals' propensity to hide their beliefs, the first step was identifying potential allies. Sometimes all it took was something as subtle as a

sticker. Amanda told the following story about what occurred after she placed a Republican sticker on her laptop:

> That laptop was with me everywhere, and when I bought the Republican sticker, my dad looked at me and said, you sure you want to put that on your laptop? He was like you are going to get [harassed], and I was like I don't state my opinion elsewhere so I might as well do it on my laptop. . . . So, even when [a conservative classmate] was still in the program he said something about it, and Peter messaged me on Facebook [and said] "I didn't know you were a Republican," and I was like "yeah I am," and he was like "OK good, glad to know I am not the only one."

Erin recalled reaching out to a student in the diversity course who she felt was unfairly belittled for his views on poverty. She said, "I didn't know him well. We were just in that class together, and I think I went up to him afterwards and [said] 'I want you to know I really do agree with what you were saying.'"

Once those connections were made, they became a support mechanism throughout the program. As Peter said,

> you would identify the people and then you would generally sit with them . . . and they would be the ones that you would prefer to exchange e-mail address and work in small groups with and whatnot, which is, you know, the antithesis of how college works. It is supposed to be this open-minded community where everyone shares ideas and thoughts and discourse back and forth, and so it is unfortunate that it kind of worked out that way. But yeah, it is kind of not hard to find the other people that you feel are kind of in the same boat as you, because you are the token conservative. It is like flipping the script on the real world.

Others talked about more informal interactions, such as discussions before and after class. Sarah described the conservatives talking "under their breath" and congregating in "small groups" after class, and Mike recalled walking out of classes with his fellow conservatives saying, "Wow, that was an interesting way of looking at [the topic discussed in class]."

Double standards. The final theme that ran through these narratives was disdain for perceived hypocrisy within the mission of the teacher education program. Many of the participants viewed the social justice focus of the program as, in Erin's words, "teaching about equality or respecting everybody except for the people [who] disagree with you." Bill echoed this sentiment when he said that a lesson he learned from the teacher education program was "that the ones [who] claim to be the most open-minded generally were the most close-minded, which is something that . . . surprised me."

Many of the participants viewed this discrepancy as a double standard. They believed the liberals in the program could take any public stance they wished without reproach, whereas conservative students had to bite their tongues. Mike noted,

> If I say anything about Islam or another religion, or even atheists, I am labeled a

bigot. I am labeled as, you know, a Tea Party nut. But if they say something about Christianity, they want to, you know, take the Ten Commandments away [because] it offends them [or] that cross on the road or whatever. Typically, they get that done.[5]

Peter was surprised to find that this double standard even extended beyond the classroom. In my class, one of the first discussions I have with my preservice teachers is the need to be aware of one's digital footprint in preparation for student teaching. Peter said that he "took that to heart" and started deleting "years' worth" of conservative posts on Facebook. Yet, he began to

resent the fact that I am monitoring my own [account] but I have these classmates that are doing stuff on Facebook that I can't believe they would feel comfortable doing, like saying how big of a communist they are and showing themselves wearing Russian military outfits and standing next to Stalin and a hammer and sickle in the profile picture.[6] I am saying, "how are they not worried about potential [employers]?" Well, of course they are not worried because they are going into an area that is a bastion of liberalism, so they can do the hammer and sickle profile pic and not be looked down upon as if I had a picture of the "Don't Tread on Me" flag or something like that. I did kind of resent . . . that even outside of the university system, I am still having to monitor my own beliefs.

Peter continued by relating the hypocrisy he felt within the program to McIntosh's (2008) invisible knapsack metaphor:

Out in the real world, yes the males do have the privilege and the White privilege and the invisible knapsack, but the ironic thing is when you are in the university setting, you are the token individual. You are the one [and] everyone else is wearing the invisible knapsack because they are the ones [who] can go freely and have discourse with people without the worry or concern of being seen as an outcast.

Collectively, these feelings of hypocrisy and the experiences that created them should be concerning for teacher educators who adhere to a philosophically liberal conception of education. The remainder of this article will discuss the implications of these findings for teacher education.

Discussion

Within the teacher education literature, notions of silencing have typically focused on students of color in predominately White educational contexts (e.g., Amos, 2010; Haviland, 2008; Montecinos, 2004). While these studies are certainly important, the findings from the present study offer another perspective on silencing for teacher educators to consider. These participants' experiences attest that the spiral of silence, as defined by Noelle-Neumann (1974, 1993), can manifest itself within teacher education programs, and given the political leanings of most professors and college students, it is possible that these participants' experiences are representative of what happens to many politically conservative preservice

teachers in teacher education programs throughout the United States. It is striking how each of these participants, despite having attended the university at different times with different cohorts of peers, described all of the classic tenets of the theory: they realized that they were in the ideological minority, they experienced marginalization of their political beliefs, they then repressed or altered their beliefs to keep from being ostracized by those in the ideological majority, and they sought refuge with those of like-minded opinion. For each of the participants, the spiral started before he or she entered the teacher education program, but the program did nothing to address or halt the descent.

Recognizing that the spiral exists is the first step, but how, then, are teacher educators to respond? One option would be to do nothing. Although these seven students felt marginalized within their teacher education program, one could easily make the argument that they—as White, heterosexual, Christian, middle-class individuals—wielded positions of power in almost every other facet of their lives. Moreover, they were being prepared to enter a profession that remains strongly influenced by socially conservative traditions (Burke & Segall, 2015). There remains a disconnect between the growing racial and socioeconomic diversity present in American classrooms and both the K–12 teaching force, which is predominately White and hailing from middle-class households, and the formal curriculum, which perpetuates dominant narratives (Goldenberg, 2014; Pennington, Brock, & Ndura, 2012). Minimizing politically conservative voices within teacher education programs could offer balance to the social and economic conservativism that is pervasive within society and, in turn, better prepare these White, middle-class teachers for the diverse classrooms they will face as professionals.

However, repressing views, even in an attempt to give a greater voice to marginalized groups, does little to prepare preservice teachers to handle ideological disagreements in their future classrooms. In this sense, the findings of this study have implications for both conservative *and* liberal preservice teachers. Having any subset of peers fall into a spiral of silence does not allow preservice teachers to tolerantly consider and respond to divergent opinions, nor does it allow teacher educators the opportunity to model the facilitation of controversial issue discussions. If we want nonrepressive K–12 classrooms, then we need nonrepressive teacher education programs that model how to cultivate divergent opinions and tolerantly deliberate reasonable disagreements (Kunzman, 2006). Therefore, I believe that teacher educators can respond to the spiral of silence by taking steps to reduce its influence.

Of course, many of the conditions that lead to the spiral are out of our control; teacher educators cannot change the ideological composition of college campuses, the polarization of society, or what occurs in their students' general-education and content courses. The curriculum, of course, is within our purview, but I would not recommend that teacher education programs abandon their social justice missions for the reasons outlined herein. Raising issues of diversity and inequity remains es-

sential to preparing teachers for 21st-century classrooms, and all of the participants in this study acknowledged that they benefited from engaging with these issues.

I believe, then, that combating this spiral of silence for politically conservative teachers requires changes to *how* teacher educators broach issues of social justice, particularly when these issues encroach into the political arena. None of the participants described their education professors as repressive, at least in the traditional sense of forcefully or explicitly prohibiting a certain ideology in their courses. At what point, though, does inaction or failure to seek alternative viewpoints constitute repression? All of the education professors described in the participants' experiences, myself included, were likely aware of the ideological marginalization that was occurring within their cohort, but they did little to address it.

The findings from this study suggest that to promote a philosophically liberal conception of teacher education, teacher educators must attempt to break through the spiral of silence and actively encourage reasonable disagreements among their students. Given the hesitancy of politically conservative preservice teachers to voice their opinions within a perceived hostile environment, such an approach will likely require that teacher educators openly recognize *reasonable* conservative positions to open controversial issues. Then, during subsequent deliberations, teacher educators would take steps to ensure tolerant discourse given the adversarial response their politically conservative students may face.

This is not to say, however, that teacher educators must acknowledge all student views as equally valid. Dissenting opinions must be deemed reasonable, meaning that they do not infringe on widely agreed upon public values. For example, if a conservative student voiced opposition to interracial marriage, an issue that was once very much open in our nation's history but has since become settled, a teacher educator should not feel compelled to validate that opinion given that it contradicts a public value that is widely accepted and has been adjudicated by the U.S. Supreme Court. Just because someone may disagree with a public value does not mean that he or she should be given a forum to articulate that view in a public space.

The line between reasonable and unreasonable can be thin, however. Consider, for example, the issue of immigration policy that was raised by several participants as an example of when their conservative positions were marginalized within the context of their diversity course. Immigration policy and the secureness of our nation's borders are clearly open political issues in the United States. The vitriolic rhetoric proposed by Donald Trump, the 2016 Republican presidential nominee, during the course of the presidential campaign offered an illustrative example. Critics of Trump's proposals decry that building a wall on the Mexican border, temporarily banning all Muslims from entering the nation, and deporting the 11 million undocumented individuals living in the United States would be both racist and xenophobic. Trump's supporters, conversely, argue that such measures are necessary for national security and to enforce current immigration laws. In other words, one person's racism is another person's national security, and absent any defined

public value on either topic, I would argue that the political issue of immigration policy should be treated as an open issue within teacher education classrooms.

Yet, imagine if a preservice teacher were to state that he or she would not teach any undocumented students in his or her class because they were illegally in the United States or that the teacher would report any undocumented students and their families to the Immigration and Naturalization Service with the intent of having them deported. Should such statements be considered reasonable or legitimate? I would argue that they should not. Regardless of one's political persuasions, teachers should have a disposition toward diversity that provides an ethic of care and understanding for all of the students in their classes (Talbert-Johnson, 2006). In other words, I believe that the political issue of immigration policy and the disposition toward being affirming of diversity within one's classroom are two different issues and can be treated differently in teacher education classrooms. I would treat the former as an open issue in which both liberal and conservative positions are welcomed, but I would argue that the latter should be treated as a settled issue with positions that argue for not teaching or deporting undocumented students as unreasonable and illegitimate.

Unfortunately, there is no universal definition of how to determine the reasonableness of one's opinions, and teacher educators must make judgments based on both empirical evidence and the well-being of their preservice teachers and the students that they will eventually teach. While teacher educators often focus on the safety of the most vulnerable populations within both teacher education programs and K–12 schooling, the findings from this study also suggest that we need to be cognizant of how even those who identify with groups typically associated with privilege (e.g., White, upper middle class, straight, Christian) can be made uncomfortable, marginalized, or humiliated if they happen to be in the ideological minority of a university or teacher education setting.

As Margalit (1996) argued, a decent society does not allow institutions to humiliate or degrade people and instead insists on respect for all people, regardless of their beliefs, and I would argue that teacher education programs should have similar goals. However, as the findings from this study illustrate, the marginalization of those who fall within the spiral of silence can often be overlooked. Ensuring respect for all beliefs may require that teacher educators actively seek politically conservative viewpoints and encourage reasonable disagreements in their courses, particularly if politically liberal voices tend to dominate discussions.

Yet, as these findings show, the actions of teacher educators may not be enough to prevent the marginalization of those in the ideological minority. A final implication of this study is that the spiral of silence extends beyond the classroom. Even if teacher educators promote reasonable disagreements in their courses, there is no guarantee that political conservatives will avoid being unfriended on social media or attacked within other nonacademic contexts by their peers. It is uncertain, then, whether one's instruction can truly foster open participation among conservative

preservice teachers in an overwhelmingly liberal teacher education program. Future research needs to explore the extent to which explicit attempts at creating safe instructional spaces for politically conservative preservice teachers minimize the effects of the spiral of silence.

As educators who advocate for social justice, we have a responsibility to push all of our preservice teachers to consider ideas that challenge the status quo. However, when teacher educators implicitly force agreement to one particular worldview by failing to address an environment that is causing certain ideological beliefs to be silenced, we are, in effect, abandoning the democratic mission of education and treading dangerously close to indoctrination. Although the outcome may be a form of teacher education with which we personally agree, it is not one that prepares our preservice teachers to enact politically tolerant pedagogy in their own classrooms.

Notes

[1] There are, of course, colleges and universities throughout the United States that do not fit this description. Universities that are strongly affiliated with fundamental religious doctrine and military academies, for example, tend to be more conservative politically. It stands to reason that the teacher education programs at these universities would also be conservative.

[2] In the case of the Literature of 9/11 course, a student criticized the course and professor on a higher education blog, stating that the course readings presented a pro-Muslim perspective of 9/11. The blog post was subsequently covered by national conservative media outlets and shared widely via social media. Yet, it was soon discovered that the student making the complaint had never taken the course (Sweat, 2015). An examination of the full reading list showed that students were also required to explore texts that honored those who died in the attacks (Ahuja, 2015; Vogel, 2015).

[3] For two examples of how the spiral of silence has been applied to K–12 educational contexts, refer to Journell (2012) and Kielwasser and Wolf (1993).

[4] Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

[5] Of course, if these types of Christian symbols are placed on public property, then it becomes a constitutional issue, and the symbols must be removed if challenged. It was not clear, however, that Mike was specifically referencing those types of cases.

[6] Although Institutional Review Board restrictions prevented me from including the picture that Peter is referencing here, I happened to be Facebook friends with the classmates to whom he is referring, and I can attest that the pictures of them standing in front of Soviet flags exist.

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