Using a Young Adult Novel to Promote Critical Thinking and Engage Students in Issues of Race and Diversity

Assignment purpose/learning objectives:

This assignment, designed for an undergraduate Social Psychology course, utilizes the young adult novel *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas to provide students the opportunity to 1) find, evaluate, and think critically about examples of social psychological constructs at play in the story; 2) demonstrate an understanding for the complexity and importance of diversity; and 3) practice communicating about complex social issues in speech and in writing.

Assignment description:

Throughout the semester, students learn social psychological concepts relevant to race and racism and engage in student-led discussions based on published research on these topics. After these discussions, students read *The Hate U Give*, a novel that revolves around Starr Carter, a Black, female teenager who straddles two worlds—one that encompasses her mostly White and wealthy school, and the other that includes her home in an impoverished Black neighborhood. In the opening scenes of the book, Starr witnesses the murder of her childhood friend, Khalil, by a White police officer. Through the rest of the book, Starr grapples with how to bring justice to Khalil while maintaining her safety and balancing her two identities.

Assignment details:

After reading the book, students write a brief (2-4 page) paper, take a reading comprehension quiz, and participate in an instructor-led discussion. Students receive the following instructions regarding the paper assignment.

This semester we will read *The Hate U Give*, a young adult novel that follows a character whose witnessing of a police shooting of her friend drives her to activism. This book highlights important social justice issues of modern America while also illustrating many key social psychological constructs. After reading the book, write a brief (1-3 paragraph) reaction to the book (E.g. Did you like it? Why or why not? What did you identify (or not) with? What did you learn?) In this second portion of the paper, identify three social psychological concepts that the novel illustrates. Define the constructs in your own words and describe the relevant scene(s). You should cite at least four scholarly sources throughout your paper, which may include your textbook and other sources assigned as readings for the class.

Papers are graded based on completeness, clarity and accuracy of the concepts described, appropriateness of the examples used, writing style and organization, as well as scientific integrity.

On the day that papers are due, students come to class prepared to take a brief reading quiz and to discuss the novel. The reading quiz consists of basic questions that assess reading comprehension (e.g., What happened to Natasha? What was Starr’s weapon? Who in Starr’s family was the last to know about Chris? Etc.) These are questions that are easily answered by anyone who read the book. Psychological concepts that can be discussed in the context of the book include but are not limited to confirmation bias, hostile and benevolent stereotypes, implicit

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1 In addition to the textbook, articles that students read and discuss include Black and Blue: Exploring Racial Bias and Law Enforcement in the Killings of Unarmed Black Male Civilians (Hall et al., 2016), Action Alters Object Identification: Wielding a Gun Increases the Bias to See Guns (Witt et al., 2012), and Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural Psychological Perspective (Salter et al., 2018).
and explicit racism/sexism/classism etc., self-fulfilling prophecies, stereotype threat, code switching, outgroup homogeneity bias, and the contact hypothesis. There are many book club guides published online that provide excellent questions for further discussion and that can be used in the context of the previously listed concepts.

**Student engagement:**

I have used this course unit three times since I developed it, and students consistently say that this is not only one of their favorite parts of the course, but also one of the most eye-opening. In an end-of-course evaluation, one student wrote “I loved the The Hate U Give assignment and would suggest doing it again in any future classes as it was 1) an enjoyable book and 2) a perfect example of social psych in action.” Many other course evaluations corroborate this attitude.

Student papers also highlighted the degree to which this assignment engaged students with the social issues around racism and police brutality, and allowed students the opportunity to exhibit the learning goals of thinking critically about social psychological concepts and of demonstrating their understanding for the complexity and importance of diversity. Example excerpts from student papers that illustrate the effectiveness of this assignment in engaging students with social issues are below. (Shared with permission.)

The novel leaves you not relieve at the end, but makes you feel for Starr and understand the Black Lives Matter movement a lot more than prior […] The book did a wonderful job of creating a situation that all readers can relate to especially during these times of increased systemic racism and police brutality.

I was not blind to the fact people were and continue to be treated very poorly because of their race but I was not aware of how extreme it is even in day-to-day life. The book educated me a lot on this topic, about things I wish I knew sooner.

I think that this novel does a great job of describing the complexities of systemic racism, especially in regard to an individual’s feelings. As a white individual, this book made me realize that I must do better at acknowledging the experiences of those of color, as they could be experiencing anxiety, frustration, stress, or fear over having to navigate between two worlds, like Starr has to, due to their race. Overall, I truly enjoyed this novel and feel as though Thomas brilliantly captured all the dimensions of the aftermath of a police shooting, such as the destruction, chaos, media manipulation, racism, prejudice, and other things that often result from these events.

**Scaling the assignment:**

I used this assignment in both face-to-face and online versions of the course by adapting the reading quiz to the appropriate modality (i.e., pencil and paper or online quizzing platform). Discussions took place either in the classroom or via Zoom. The assignment can be expanded by assigning students to watch the film and compare-and-contrast the film and the book (many of my students did this voluntarily and came to interesting, socially relevant conclusions!), or pared down by only requiring students to watch the film (and not read the book) or by not requiring a paper. In short, there are many ways to adapt this assignment to various modalities and different student and course needs.

Contact Information: Dietlinde Heilmayr, Assistant Professor of Psychology, Moravian University, HeilmayrD@moravian.edu