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18. EBONY IN THE IVORY TOWER

Dismantling the Stronghold of Racial Inequality from the Inside Out

MYTH OF A POST-RACIAL SOCIETY

It is January 2012. In a discussion with psychology doctoral students and psychologists regarding President Obama, joy and pride, accompanied by the long-awaited ability to exhale, abounded. We finally had realized an American post-racial society.

As a psychology scholar, I wondered if perhaps this discussion was a social experiment on the rhetoric that can accumulate in groups that are ripe with hierarchies and steeped in tradition. After all, negative opinions toward Blacks have increased since President Obama was elected (Lybarger & Monteith, 2011). I chose to voice my viewpoint, not intending to speak for all Black Americans, but communicating that while Black, President Obama is upper class, light-skinned, educated, and Hawaiian, therefore, he did not elicit the same stereotypes that a darker-skinned, physically bigger, Black man who grew up in an inner-city would have. I was met with silence- the utter refusal to deal with the harsh realities of the effects commonly held stereotypes of Black men can have on a society. Bigoted beliefs, hate, racist ideology, and inequality are not harmless. They can be strong contributors to racially motivated murders, like that of teenager Trayvon Martin. Especially here within the elite circular confines of the ivory tower where education provides higher class and status, fighting for social justice means having change affect some of the country's most influential. I wonder then what it would take for scholars to openly and readily acknowledge that racism is still as strong as it has ever been, with denial of that reality feeding racism with strength, power, and, most frighteningly, immunity?

SOCIETAL EXPECTATIONS OF RACISM

The myth of the post-racial society pervades. The history of racism in the U.S. has dictated society's understanding of bigotry. Slavery, Jim Crow, and the backlash during the Civil Rights movement provided the societal backdrop for racial slurs, segregation, lynchings, police brutality, and white supremacy. That history remains the basis for society's understanding of racism. Overt racism is largely viewed as unacceptable (Dovidio, 2001); covert racism is often unnoticed or ignored.

Despite overt and covert racism, an extremely intelligent and qualified Black man was elected as President for two terms and has not suffered the fate of far too many high profile Black leaders of the past, including Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Harry and Harriette Moore, and Malcom X. These changes are *steps* towards success. Blacks in America are still subject to inequality (Gómez, forthcoming). Thus, it is not surprising that the same racist ideology that contributed to these assassinations is found, overtly or covertly, in the murder of Trayvon Martin. The challenge becomes how to retain the ground we have made, while fighting for the freedom we have yet to fully realize. We have not succeeded until we possess equality in all respects: access to high-quality education, jobs, and careers; pay that is comparable to whites; ability to live and work in neighborhoods that are not overrun with violence; access to quality physical and mental health care; self-esteem, without the necessity of double-consciousness (DuBois, 1903); absence of internalized self-hatred; true equality that *embraces* differences. In short, to live in a world without bigotry, where racially motivated murders, like that of Martin, no longer exist.

CURRENT RACIST MANIFESTATIONS

Systemic: The Structure of Racism in Academia

In many ways, academia mirrors societal inequality, with Black scholars and viewpoints often subjugated. For instance, psychological research determines the lens through which we examine psychological processes, such as conceptualizing human distress as biologically rather than contextually caused. Further, the peer review process in publication reinforces mainstream views, which inhibits the dissemination of theoretical and empirical work that challenges, contradicts, or simply differs from the dominant frame.

Additionally, systemic racism has been infused in some classrooms beginning with desegregation (hooks, 1994). In academia, systemic racism takes the form of classroom dynamics that: ignore the reality of groups who are and are not represented in academia; ignore the reality of the history of American racial oppression; ignore the reality of the current state of American racial oppression; and ignore the reality of the benefit of white and/or class privilege that professors themselves hold.

Interpersonal: Minoritizing Minority Voices

Voices of Black scholars are often muted as a result of two frameworks, microaggressions and chilly climate. Microaggressions (e.g., Sue, 2010) are perpetrated by members of the dominant culture who have the power to impose their reality (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, & Torino, 2008); interpersonal microaggressions include microinvalidations, such as *The Trayvon Martin case was not about race* (e.g., Sue, 2010). 'Chilly climate' refers to conscious or unconscious sexism in academia that impacts daily work, promotions, income, and status (Freyd & Johnson, 2010).

Though chilly climate references gender bias, it can explain the treatment that Blacks experience in the university—societally lowered status. Microaggressions and chilly climate can work in conjunction to undermine Blacks' success in academia.

Black students are faced with bigotry from colleagues and superiors in the academic setting. Phrases that reference the underlying assumption of Africa as the 'Dark Continent' oppress students who are already visibly and/or culturally different from the majority of their peers, resulting in a cultural, as opposed to intellectual, 'imposter syndrome' (Gómez, 2013). This common assumption of inferior intelligence (Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008) is personified here; a Black university student shared her career aspirations with her professor, who responded, "Do you really think people here want to listen to a Black woman judge?" This sentiment has similarities with the Zimmerman acquittal, portraying the dominant view that Blacks' viewpoints, leadership, and even lives are devalued.

After developing a reputation from professors and peers as being intelligent and insightful, one instructor degraded a Black psychology doctoral student, describing her as 'attacking and aggressive," loosely referencing—and prejudicially misinterpreting—her engagement in typical academic discourse as justification. This is an example of the use of coded language that conveyed the instructor's underlying prejudice, as they are synonyms to stereotypes of Blacks being violent and criminal (Sue et al., 2008). The power of these stereotypes, along with their ability to transcend contexts, influences not only academic feedback, but racially-motivated violence as well, such as in the murder of Martin.

JUSTICE IN THE IVORY TOWER

The moral dilemma of fighting for racial justice within academia is that by virtue of membership, we are in collusion with a system that is knowingly and unknowingly problematic in its systemic and interpersonal practices of inequality. This association can be perceived as approval of the system and could perhaps be used to mask the problems within the system (e.g., a Black professor, like a Black U.S. President, can be distorted as evidence of a post-racial environment).

The elitism in the ivory tower makes less possible change that is sought from the outside; further, higher education, particularly in psychology and related disciplines, is ostensibly a place where examination of the world in which we live dominates our thinking. Thus, while a self-aggrandizing culture can develop and be super-imposed upon the learning culture, academia is fundamentally an institution of learning that encourages and awards investigative, critical questioning of societal dynamics that condone murder of youth like Martin, for example.

Academia is populated with avenues in which we can fight to change the status quo within a culture that is fraught with white, male, heteronormative assumptions of normality and success (Gutierrez y Muhs, et al., 2012). The changes made in academia can engender change in society more broadly—through research, pedagogy, and community building.

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The lens in which research is conducted can be limiting when the culture around the research is itself narrow. Nevertheless, the underlying tenet of psychological research is the pursuit for understanding the truth of the human condition. Being faithful to our experience of truth, while incorporating the sociocultural context into our research, etches a new reality in the field that aligns closer to the reality for many underrepresented groups. By conducting research that documents inequality and/or is culturally relevant, such as Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory (Gómez, 2012), our work creates a bridge between the state of the field and the experience of people from diverse social locations and cultural categories. This knowledge can provide fuel for the broader societal fight for social justice.

Along with research, pedagogy offers a way to effect tangible change. By teaching students how to think, creating classrooms where the totality of students' identities are encouraged, and fostering the genuine belief that students' viewpoints do matter despite racially-motivated negative feedback, we can create a next generation of scholars who will fight for social justice during an era where violent and nonviolent discrimination prevails. Teaching in culturally informed ways, such as utilizing media that contradicts stereotypes, and addressing the inequality ever-present in what students are taught in psychology and society, can encourage inclusion of underrepresented students. This means actively challenging students' perceptions of Blacks, students' perceptions of minorities, and the common assumptions that many privileged whites adhere to and impose upon others as reality. This engendering of critical thinking is beneficial to Black and non-Black students, as internalized, interpersonal, and institutional racist ideology prevails. Thus, classrooms can serve as havens for mutual intellectual and spiritual growth that transforms education into freedom (hooks, 1994).

Fostering this sense of belonging is one way to engender change from the inside, but is not enough given the oppression within the academy. Through aligning ourselves with committed Black scholars, scholars of color, and white allies both within and across institutions, community building is beneficial for our success, our longevity, our given department, our chosen field, academy, the society, and us. Though fighting for racial justice within academia can be very isolating, there is an ever-growing community of scholars who have been or are currently battling the same war for social and racial justice. Volumes like the current one create a virtual dialogue of understanding, goals, strategies, and hope that engender self-care and motivation to continue. By actively challenging and dismantling the inequality present in academia, we are joining a community of professionals who are making lasting change.

Gaining critical mass on small scales (e.g., within departments) and larger scales (e.g., within the field) means that the ability to ignore dismisses or minimizes the magnitude of the enduring academic, and societal inequality is greatly diminished. Most importantly, acculturation into the academic milieu, when it costs us our souls, our integrity, our spirit, our motivation, and our will is not only not worth it, but is antithetical to creating the kind of inclusive community for which we are striving.

Retaining our souls, remaining grounded outside the academy, and actively striving for self-empathy in the struggles we are facing is vital to the collective health of change. Within this transcendent community, we act as runners in a social justice relay race: through research, pedagogy, and community-building, reaching the finish line cannot be the goal; we race throughout our lives, then pass the baton along to the next generation of fighters.

CONCLUSION

There is an abundance of evidence that documents the oppression of Blacks in America (Gómez, forthcoming). Blacks continue to be subject to unique, unquestionably severe, and long-lasting oppression that once justified slavery and currently maintains the status quo, as exemplified by the murder of Martin, and the subsequent acquittal of the murderer. Nevertheless, it is important to have the fight for racial justice be intertwined with the fight for broader social justice (e.g., racism towards other groups; anti-gay legislation; able-ism) because the underlying sickness is the same: belief in superiority justifies the belief in domination (Lorde, 1983); together, we dismantle a system that capitalizes on inequality. In this way, fighting for racial and social justice in academia engenders change: not hierarchically, from the top down; not grassroots, from the bottom up; but rather horizontally, from the inside out.

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