

PROVOKING DISCOMFORT: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF  
RACISM AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

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*Triggered by differing responses of Columbia University School of Social Work students to a recent hate crime at neighboring Teachers College, this paper explores evidence that parts of the student body may, through lacking awareness of its own prejudiced tendencies, be acting out subtle racism and perpetuating the very ethnic divides that fuel racist aggression. The paper argues that fear and an underrepresentation of minority students impede the real dialogue necessary to overcome such aversive racism - but contends that the introspective and emotionally honest debate which has followed in the wake of the hate crime offers a window of opportunity for change. Steps need to be taken to build the self-reflection witnessed in ensuing forums into the school curriculum and ensure that all graduating students are similarly provoked to the necessary understanding of our individual role in sustaining or combating prejudice and segregation. Only in this manner can we hope to overcome racism as a whole and become the social work practitioners we aspire to be - capable of resolving the conflicts and tensions within us, as well as around us.*

The recent hate crime at Columbia University Teachers College, in which a noose was found outside the door of a black professor (O'Connor, 2007), sparked an outpouring of responses from the university community to what most considered a deplorable act of racism. At the Columbia University School of Social Work (CUSSW), a series of forums was arranged in the ensuing days to allow for students and teachers to come together and discuss the event and how it impacted them. As a participant in one of these meetings, I was simultaneously delighted and surprised at the content and form of the dialogue. Roughly half of the participants in the forum were "non-white," a large overrepresentation compared to the number in the school as a whole. I took this to mean that the people present at the forum were those most affected by or interested in the issues of prejudice and racism.

While it was quickly evident that everybody present deplored the incident, two diverging responses manifested among participants in the dialogue. On the one hand, a group of people felt strongly that a public response was needed to

outwardly express to the community our school's condemnation of the racist act. This group's response apparently echoed similar sentiments evident in other parts of the university, as students in the following days received a number of emails in which administrative university leaders expressed their denunciation of the hate crime. Although students at the forum planned to go further than writing an additional email – they planned for a rally – their response was similarly focused on publicly distancing themselves from the racist act.

The second, and in my view more interesting, response from forum participants argued against focusing on this particular incident and seemed to consider the rally somewhat of an overreaction. This group, consisting largely of people of color, argued that the noose incident was neither surprising nor new, and that such incidents happen all the time. They argued that instead of focusing on one overt act of racism, which everybody agrees to condemn anyway, we should address the many slighter acts of racism that go undetected every single day, even here at our own school. Some participants of this group suggested a more introspective approach to addressing racism, which focused on training students in racism awareness. Different models of awareness training were suggested, ranging from voluntary workshops for those most interested to mandatory training for all first-year students.

Interestingly, it was the “public condemnation” model of the first group that seemed to win the most popular support. Having argued in favor of the introspective approach of the second group, I considered whether the lack of support for this approach reflects eagerness to point out the faults of others, and hesitance to look at our own. From previous exposure to anti-racist teaching, and from readings in my professional identity class, I realize that the diverging views of the two groups are not new. Laymen and scholars alike have suggested for some time that racism is much more than the overt and hateful acts of skinheads, Ku Klux Klan members, or angered youth. It is tempting to focus on the violent and aggressive acts such as noose-hangings, since the majority of us can agree that they are wrong and the blame is so conveniently located outside ourselves. Many anti-racist authors ask us to look in our own hearts, however, to see how our inner biases and understandings of the world help to perpetuate a racist thinking and agenda.

I believe we must turn to such authors in order to critically evaluate the first group's view of racism as something located outside CUSSW, something that we must distance ourselves from through public displays of condemnation. These authors remind us that framing racism in this manner – as blatant and overt acts

of aggression – and defining ourselves in opposition hereto as “anti-racists,” represents an overly simplistic understanding of the nature of racist influence on society. Distancing ourselves in this manner not only disregards the importance of addressing the many minor acts of racism that go unchecked every day, but also undermines the possibility of overcoming racism as a whole by failing to address our own inner biases and prejudicial actions, thus ignoring our role as system-actors in maintaining the status quo. They posit that racism must be understood more generally – as any individual act, intentional or not, and as any institutional policy or practice which has the effect of excluding or disadvantaging a particular ethnic group. It is when we accept this broader understanding of racism that it becomes clear how we ourselves, through our actions or words, may be inadvertently perpetuating perceptions and stereotypes that sustain racist, societal practices.

The argument is aptly illustrated by the work of Constantine (2007), the African American, female professor at Teachers College targeted by the noose incident, who in her responses to the event has addressed what she calls the microaggressions that perpetuate a racial divide. Based on her studies of cross-cultural counseling, she defines microaggressions as the “subtle and commonplace exchanges that somehow convey insulting or demeaning messages to people of color” (Constantine, 2007, p. 2). As everyday examples of microaggressions against African Americans, she mentions being ignored by salesclerks in favor of white customers, and being mistaken for service personnel in stores. Professor Constantine prompts us to remember that when we fall into the role of micro aggressors, we are often blissfully unaware of the oppressive impact of our actions. Such aggressions are often the unintended, clumsy, but hurtful actions of people who do not consider themselves to be racist; actions characterized by “Whites’ harboring of unconscious or preconscious negative racial feelings and beliefs towards people of color, despite the fact that they may perceive themselves as egalitarian, fair, and nonracist”(Constantine, 2007, p. 2). Constantine defines this less obvious but no less harmful form of racism as aversive racism.

Exploring the diverging views of the two forum groups through the lens of Constantine’s research, I have to wonder whether it is a lack of awareness of our propensity to engage in microaggressions that lends the greatest support to the outward-oriented and condemning response of the first group. Everybody can agree that hanging a noose on someone’s door is deplorable, but not everyone agrees with the second group’s contention that we must also examine ourselves for microaggressions, in order to combat racism as a whole – probably because the very nature of microaggressions implies that we are unaware of their pres-

ence in our actions. Constantine's framework reminds us that, because we tend to be blind to our own prejudices, we often end up addressing the overt racism of others and leaving our own more subtle racism unexplored. Microaggressions may hardly register in the mind of a perpetrator – examples from daily life at CUSSW could include the unconscious tendency to overlook a particular ethnic group when choosing a partner for a class assignment, or the instinctive assumption that a student of color must be attending school on a scholarship. Small as such insults may seem in comparison to noose-hangings, Constantine cautions us not to ignore the accumulated impact of repeated and sustained prejudiced aggressions over a lifetime on the self-worth of a targeted individual. Without a devoted effort to scrutinizing ourselves, our tendencies to engage in microaggressions can be hard to self-correct. Ironically, our inability to address our own prejudice may be perpetuating the very racial divide that fuels the larger aggressions we leap to condemn, by implicitly sustaining the “them” and “us” mentality at the root of ethnically-based violence.

Building on such a framework of racist understanding, Favaro (2004) has written a provocative reflection paper on the presence of aversive racism at the School of Social Work. She suggests, based on her own experiences as a student there that CUSSW is infused with its own share of subtle, racist thinking. Building her argument on examples of prejudiced thinking at multiple levels in the school, Favaro argues that both students and faculty alike display tendencies of aversive racism. Among the student body, she points out the exaggerated fears of her fellow, white classmates when walking through minority neighborhoods as an example of a skewed perception of people of color. In the classroom, she puts forth an instructor's avoidance of meaningful discussion about racism when class content is challenged by students as “racist propaganda” to exemplify how instructors are unaware of and susceptible to subtle racism themselves. At a collective or administrative level, Favaro points to the lack of anti-racism workshops, classes, and field placements as evidence for the tacit acceptance of the status quo by the school, and challenges administrators to look to other schools of social work that have been more progressive in including anti-racism education in the curriculum. While I am left with little doubt that Favaro has a firm anti-racist mindset which may influence her perception and interpretation of events, the data that she presents us with is at least worth exploring. Moreover, Favaro's observations are similar to those that I have made during my time at CUSSW.

Most visibly, consider why there is a Black Caucus, a Latino Caucus, and an Asian Caucus at the school – but no White Caucus. Most students would probably respond that we do not need a White Caucus, but wherein then lies

the need for a Black, Latino, and an Asian Caucus? It can be argued that their purposes are to serve the ethnic communities, in principal leaving them open to students of all colors, and yet they tend to be predominantly made up of students of one particular ethnicity. In a society continually struggling with racism, such self-segregation must inevitably prompt us to question the extent to which we are successful in bridging our ethnic divides. Do some Black, Latino, and Asian students at our school feel the need to consolidate in ethnic groups above and beyond their desire to serve a particular ethnic community and, if so, why? Does their consolidation result from a desire to immerse themselves in their culture and learn from and be inspired by other like-minded individuals – or is consolidation a result of external pressure, such as microaggression from the surrounding community? Tatum’s insightful analysis, aptly entitled “Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?”, reminds us that the self-segregation of minority students commonly observed in school settings is a product of students defining themselves first and foremost in terms of their race or ethnic background. Further, Tatum suggests from years of clinical experience with bridging racial divides that ethnic consolidation may be the outcome of an oppositional response born from consistent exposure to perceptions of stereotyping and racist behavior, an oppositional stance which “both protects one’s identity from the psychological assault of racism and keeps the dominant group at a distance” (Tatum, 1997, p. 60). Tatum’s analysis urges us to bear in mind that the self-segregation observable at the school may also be a response to perceived racism or lack of understanding and congruence with the residual community. It is my impression, from the conversations I have had to date, that Tatum’s analysis may well be applicable to CUSSW. If so, what does this tell us about our supposed social work ability to be all-inclusive? Are we successfully role modeling the non-judgmental and non-aggressive behavior we purpose to inspire in our clients – or does our own interaction reflect the very same patterns of fear, prejudice, and microaggression that characterizes society around us?

More than the evident racial and ethnic segregation among students in the school, I remain dumbfounded that nobody seems to talk about it. Debates on racism at the school seem to be impeded by a combination of high-sensitivity and raw emotion on the minority side, and a combination of insensitivity and a fear of stepping on toes on the white side – as a recent example from class illustrates. In a class discussion of racial identity, an African American friend of mine was asked by a white classmate why African American people were allowed to use the “N word” when white people were not. My friend’s response, presumably fueled by a perception of provocative intent and insensitivity on the

part of the classmate, was a clever and not too friendly retort, which effectively closed the conversation. Sadly, such non-conductive exchanges are not unusual at the school, and often fail to provide the more profound dialogue on racism which may mutually enrich both parties. Even moderated class discussions tend to run awry, as Favaro's example and my own experiences testament to. All too often, discussions that touch upon race and racism are avoided in the classroom setting by instructors and students alike, rather than openly explored.

Sue's (2006) model of racial and cultural identity development provides a theoretical underpinning that may explain self-segregation and students' problems discussing it. Based on his work with cross-cultural counseling, Sue developed his model of racial and cultural identity development to describe how people of color and whites come to terms with their own inner racism or exposure to discrimination. Briefly, people tend to go through five stages in dealing with their inner racism before they transgress on to a state of introspection and comprehensive awareness. The first stage is one of denial; white people refuse to acknowledge their active role in racism and explain it away for example with reference to "natural" tendencies for some races to be more hard-working, while minority groups deny that they are subjects of racism and subordinate themselves to the believed superiority of the dominant culture by taking on its values and perceptions, thus giving rise to derogatory terms such as "oreo" – black on the outside, white on the inside. This is the stage in which microaggressions are most prevalent as both whites and minority groups deny or denigrate the stereotyping and hurtful impact of prejudiced words and behavior.

Stage two begins when an event or a person challenges the individual's belief system and prompts them to begin questioning their racial understanding and perceptions of racial groups. Both whites and minorities are confronted with identity confusion at this stage, as they begin to see their active role in, or subjection to, racism. People who laugh along at the stereotyping jokes made by others, for example, start to see how their passive acceptance of racist behavior can be as harmful as active participation. In the third stage, the turning point, those who do not digress from confusion back into denial are now presented with feelings of anger and guilt as they come to an increasingly fuller understanding of their past participation in culturally sanctioned racism. For both minorities and whites, this anger tends to manifest itself as a fierce and sometimes generalizing rejection of white, "racist" society, coupled with a desire to be immersed in or learn more of minority culture. Minorities tend to experience this as an almost global anti-white distrust or dislike, which often leads to a strong consolidation in ethnically based groups. Whites on the other hand experience this as self-anger and

guilt and tend to seek out minority cultures with which to identify – efforts which are often rejected as paternalistic or over identifying by minority cultures. The subsequent stage four involves a more introspective role, in which minority and white individuals develop a more balanced appreciation for the strengths of all cultures alongside a maturing awareness of racism and oppressive social structures. Finally, stage five comes to a state of integrative awareness, which involves acceptance of one-self as a cultural being and a deep commitment to eradicating oppression of all forms.

Using Sue’s model as a framework for analyzing racism at CUSSW, several of the above discussed observations seem to indicate that we have quite a way to go yet as we seek to increase our racial and cultural self-awareness as a school. The split of the student caucuses along ethnic lines indicates the consolidation of minorities, which is characteristic of stage three in Sue’s model. The lack of open discussion on racism due to a combination of high-sensitivity and insensitivity points to a student body generally caught somewhere between the anger and dismissal of stage three and the denial and microaggression of stage one, respectively. Finally, the minor support for an inward-looking response to the noose-incident hints that only a small body of students are actively focused on an introspective approach representative of those in stage four or five of Sue’s model. Using this cursory analysis of student interaction at the school, the majority of students seem to be located in the early phases of racial identity development, somewhere between stages one and three, struggling with the accompanying sentiments of denial, confusion, and anger. While these struggles are a natural part of any student’s racial identity development, is it not surprising that Favaro (2004) experienced that racism is neither acknowledged nor dealt with appropriately at the school. A cocktail of such strong emotions hardly produces the most conducive environment for debate.

Admittedly, this analysis is based on cursory and potentially biased evidence obtained by Favaro (2004) and myself. Supposing that the analysis accurately captures the current state of affairs at CUSSW, what can we do to change this? Favaro challenges us to be proactively searching for the growth and self-awareness necessary to move beyond our aversive racism, and calls for debates and workshops on anti-racism to sensitize people to the impact of prejudice at the school. Referring to the instructor who neglected to explore a student-initiated discussion on racism, Favaro brings to our attention a critical barrier, however: “I sense that many students yearn to discuss context and impact, but without a catalyst or encouraging environment, conversations dealing honestly and frankly with race are not permitted to exist” (Favaro, 2004, p. 57). Her sentiments

closely mirror my own as well as those I have heard expressed from several other students. On some topics, open and honest discussion seems to be more the exception than the rule, as exemplified by my last professional identity class, in which our discussion of the then-recent noose-hanging incident sparked a debate somewhat beyond the usual level of intensity. Here, I recall students expressing pleasure at what they felt was an unusually honest and emotional expression of opinions, moving beyond what was often experienced as a superficial and politically correct dialogue. “Politically correct” is a term I often hear used to describe the in-class conversations that take place at CUSSW – and most instructors do not seem eager to push us further. Why are discussions on race and prejudice so hard to have?

Based on decades of work with overcoming racism, Tatum (1997) offers consolation that we are not unique in our struggle with bringing these sensitive topics to the table. Tatum identifies what she calls the “paralysis of fear” when it comes to speaking out on racial issues; a fear which affects all parties involved. Minority students still in the early stages of exploring their racial identity may be genuinely afraid of rejection if they release the anger that has been held back. Some white students may be unable to empathize with the pent-up anger that can emerge from minority students, and may react defensively or evasively to the sometimes sweeping criticism of racist, white society, leading to either explosive discussion or no discussion at all. Other white students may empathize, but be hesitant to engage in debate with minority students for fear of stepping on toes by inadvertently asking inappropriate questions. Feeling naïve in their questioning and ill-prepared to debate such a sensitive topic compared to minority students, who have often been exposed to these topics from an earlier age, white students may seek to steer around such debates altogether, despite a possibly genuine interest in bridging racial divides. Instructors and administrators, no less human, may feel obligated to protect students from discussions they fear can spiral out of control and damage relationships beyond repair, or they may feel ill-equipped to moderate such challenging dialogues and tend to avoid them altogether. Tatum’s response is unmistakable, however. To combat racism, we need to overcome our fear of openly addressing the issue: “In order for there to be meaningful dialogue, fear, whether of anger or isolation, must eventually give way to risk and trust” (Tatum, 1997, p. 200). She adds from her work with one woman:

‘Yes, there is fear,’ one white woman writes, ‘the fear of speaking is overwhelming. I do not feel, for me, that it is fear of rejection from people of my race, but anger and disdain from people of



color. The ones who I am fighting for.” In my response to this woman’s comment, I explain that she needs to fight for herself, not for people of color. After all, she has been damaged by the cycle of racism, too, though perhaps this is less obvious. If she speaks because she needs to speak, perhaps then it would be less important whether the people of color are appreciative of her comments. She seems to understand my comment, but the fear remains (Tatum, 1997, p. 194).

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Tatum’s experience in bridging racial divides is central to understanding the importance of the crossroad we stand at now. I believe that it is the open dialogue she asks for that we must increasingly strive to sustain at our school in order to come to a deeper understanding of race, racism, and oppression. All of the authors discussed above implore us to recall that aversive racism by its very nature is elusive, and that the danger lies in our tendency to overlook or deny our own prejudiced thinking. Favaro (2004) and Tatum (1997) univocally call for the instigation of real and open-hearted discussions at the school as the single, direct measure to overcoming racism and prejudice, while simultaneously pointing to the danger that fear will restrain the emergence of any real dialogue. The noose-hanging incident, however – unpleasant as it was – may have provided us with the very catalyst necessary for students to move past their apprehension and fear to engage in an honest debate on these difficult issues. Although the subsequent forums showed us that we differ in our perceptions of the nature and cures of racism, they also allowed the participants the opportunity to wholeheartedly share these views and to grow in self-understanding from observing and reflecting upon their differences.

It is critical that we continue our progression along this path. If the forums inspired by the noose incident become a temporary high in our ability to talk openly about sensitive issues which then dies out, we will have failed to take advantage of an opportunity granted us to inspire our collective, personal growth and to address one of the fundamental and difficult challenges our school faces. We have to ensure that this event becomes the catalyst Favaro asked for, which inspires students to take self-awareness training, especially pertaining to their own stereotypical treatment of those who are different from themselves, to a new and sustainable level. Columbia already has a reputation for being a predominantly white university and we cannot, as a school of social work sending our students to work with mostly minority clients, afford to be seen as racially unaware or insensitive. It is the impression of Favaro, myself, and other students I



have spoken with that racism is not dead at CUSSW – it is alive, although subtle, and students sense this. The problem is unlikely to go away by itself.

We have to create forums in which white students are allowed to say the wrong thing, minority students are allowed to vent the anger that may emerge, and both sides may learn to forgive each other and move on, strengthened in a renewed and deepened understanding of each others needs and basic humanity. CUSSW faculty should understand the key role they can play here in submitting students to open and honest classroom discussions on racism, helping us to challenge our own prejudiced ways of thinking and bridging the divides. Because it is unawareness that fuels microaggression and aversive racism, faculty must recognize that students may need to be pushed to the level of confusion and discomfort necessary to induce growth. Importantly, this demands of instructors that they are not afraid to deal with the denial, confusion, and anger that may emerge, and that they place faith in students' ability to reflect, reconcile, and grow through the process. By staging in-class discussions on the issues of race and racism which students have trouble exploring, and playing devil's advocate if need be, faculty can uniquely contribute to identify unrecognized prejudices and provoke the discomfort necessary to bring about a change of perception. The Challenging Dialogues initiative to increase instructors' comfort in managing student discussions is an important step towards furthering in-class dialogues, which may be bearing fruit. I have witnessed some faculty members successfully conduct staged classroom debates on racism that were widely commended by attending students, and I sense other faculty members attempting the same. Despite the positive responses from students, however, such methods are inconsistently applied across classrooms, and many faculty members still seem uncomfortable moderating debates on racism.

Administration could take a stand on tackling these difficult issues by organizing an Anti-Racism Conference at the School of Social Work. A full-day event on anti-racism would unmistakably alert students and faculty to the significance of the topic and build a powerful foundation of interest, discussion, and inspiration from which to proceed. In light of the recent hate crimes at Columbia, a conference would also send a valuable and resolute signal to the outside community that CUSSW is committed to taking a lead role on anti-racism and cultural competence. Anti-racist pioneers, including any of the authors quoted in this article, could be invited to speak to students and faculty from CUSSW and affiliated schools such as Teacher's College on their perception of aversive racism and its cures. Ethnically-based student caucuses and coalitions should be encouraged to involve themselves by arranging events and raising awareness. In the days

following the conference, anti-racism educators such as The People's Institute for Survival and Beyond could arrange workshops for those students and faculty members passionate about anti-racism, specifically designed to challenge them to grow to a more complex understanding of their own prejudicial biases.

Sincere considerations should also be given to expanding the self-awareness training day from one day to three or four whole days, spread out on multiple workshops throughout the program. The current training day is a start towards instilling reflections on power, privilege, and racial identity in students but it cannot stand alone, particularly in light of the emphasis that the school places on self-awareness and cultural competence. While other initiatives such as community days and forums arranged throughout the year provide additional opportunities for reflection, these do not allow for the rigorous and incremental self-development that a repeated program of mandatory workshops would. Community days and forums are largely voluntary and will tend to attract the students who are already attuned to the topic, leaving those "unattuned" without consistent training. To live up to our ambitions on self-awareness, we need a mandatory program of repeated workshops which may build upon the seeds that were sown in the beginning of the year. The problem we face is designing a curriculum to encompass a body of students in widely different stages of racial identity development, but work is currently in progress on how to solve this problem and improve the training for next year.

Importantly, administration should take charge of conducting a comprehensive survey of the student body's experience with racism and prejudice. The arguments put forth in this paper are based on cursory and circumstantial evidence, yet coupled with Favaro's (2004) paper, a pattern emerges. Surprisingly, very little hard data exists and no consistent surveys have been undertaken to document the extent to which students echo the sentiments presented here. A truly informed debate on the issue – and any real acknowledgement or disapproval that subtle racism exists at CUSSW – would require a more complete understanding of the experiences of the student body, in particular students of color. We have the practitioners and know-how at the school to undertake such a study, so it should not be for lack of expertise that the data is not provided. The risk that embarrassing figures may emerge can only be reason to hasten the process, so any existing issues may be addressed sooner rather than later.

Care should be taken not to relegate responsibility for reform initiatives to student groups like the Black and Latino caucuses. As argued by the authors cited in this paper, racism is not a minority problem to be solved by minority champions but a communal problem, sustained by and affecting all parties and

resolved by all parties working together. Student groups such as Community Organizing Against Racism (COAR) and cross-caucus initiatives like Coalition for Action and Awareness on Race and Ethnicity (CAARE) that have emerged (and reemerged) in response to the noose-hanging incident are an important step towards a self-reflective and multi-ethnic student response to addressing school racism which deserve our attention and support – and yet without substantial like-minded effort from other parts of the school, these groups are hard pressed to create any lasting change. Student-led initiatives are inexorably prone to decline when the initial excitement wears off and interest shifts in favor of another topic, leaving often only a small core group to lift the burden. The responsibility for addressing racism at CUSSW is too great to leave to the fleeting support that a student initiative can muster.

In the end, what we need is a joint student, faculty, and administration-led reform initiative – charged with inventing and implementing the tools necessary to address racism at the school, and instituting anti-racism training as a core part of the social work curriculum. Faculty and administration need to bring further support to the burgeoning anti-racist movement, recognizing that they too may need training in order to deal with their own biases and microaggressions. We, as students, need to take individual responsibility for our role in acting out or perpetuating aversive racism and be willing to leave our comfort-zone and talk about race and racism. We need to deal with our discomfort on this issue, because if we leave the school and have not learned to address our own, inner prejudices, and then who are we to pretend that we can help other people live their lives? If we graduate without learning to honestly and fearlessly address the unspoken, ethnic tensions among our own student body, how can we hope to resolve the conflicts and heal the wounds of the communities around us? Only by engaging in the painstaking self-scrutiny and difficult dialogues can we hope to overcome these challenges and become the social work practitioners we aspire to be – capable of resolving the conflicts and tensions within us, as well as around us.

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