

JustSpeak: Unlearning racism requires taking positive (affirmative) action

Written by Irma McClaurin, PhD, Culture and Education Editor with Dr. Kesho Scott (Grinnell College)
Monday, 25 February 2013 13:30



The recent racist incident at Washburn High School of Minneapolis, in which a black doll was hung (lynched), is disturbing. We are living in the 21st century. And yet, not too long ago in 2003 Duluth, MN built a memorial to commemorate the unlawful and unjustified lynching of three young Black men in 1920. Despite this example of racial reconciliation, in 2008 an effigy of Presidential candidate Barrack Obama was found hanging from the Duluth memorial. Whether playing video games, watching movies set in the "wild" West, reading about suicide or violence in general, a reasonable child and adult knows that placing a noose around anything is no laughing matter. The "lynching" of a Black doll at Washburn High in Minneapolis, given Minnesota's recent history, is NOT a matter to be taken lightly or to gloss over as "kids will be kids" or "they had no idea how bad this was."

This incident points to the hidden side of "Minnesota Nice," behavior that masks social segregation and exclusion. As one (white) Minnesotan once described it to me: "Minnesotans are so nice, so nice, they'll stop and give you the directions to anywhere....except their homes." My personal experience confirmed this. In three years of living in Minneapolis, only one person invited me to their home. Social segregation is real; thus opportunities for knowing people different from family and close friends are extremely limited. Unfortunately, many African

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Americans in Minnesota have taken to practicing "Minnesota Nice."

Racism and White Skin Privilege

Acts of racism are manifestations of the contradictions of American democracy—we profess everyone is equal under the law, but we don't treat people as such. Minneapolis is simply a microcosm filled with its own contradictions: an excellent educational system yet a large achievement gap among non-whites; some of the most cutting-edge medical and health research facilities in the world, yet increasing health disparities among non-whites; and economic underdevelopment in non-white communities. Sad, but true, Minneapolis, and by extension American society, is a far distance from being "a post-racial society."

Peggy McIntosh's seminal 1988 essay "White Skin Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (<http://www.amptoons.com/blog/files/mcintosh.html>) can provide some important lessons to the students, the principal, and the parents of Washburn High School, which both my niece and nephew attended, as well as the state. The world is watching. McIntosh speaks about white privilege as an invisible system that confers dominance upon a group. On a daily level, the privilege is buried within discrete events that appear innocuous: being served first when non-whites were seated before you; assumed to be the leader, when your non-white boss is standing next you; being heard when others (non-whites) are ignored. For many whites, the dilemma of white privilege is that you don't have to do anything to earn it, promote it, or enjoy it.

Consider white privilege a monopoly card that you have in your wallet; it always gives you a free turn or allows you to "pass to GO" simply by virtue of your skin color. Conversely, non-whites, especially historical minorities (Blacks, American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Pacific Islanders and Alaskan Natives), are left holding the "go directly to jail" card and are confronted with consistently missing (economic, employment, same pay, equal justice, and wealth) turns. The outcomes are determined by whether opportunity is given or withdrawn, and have little to do with merit, persistence, or aptitude.

Whites are rarely told "you are so articulate," while myself and other non-white colleagues with PhDs hear this frequently. Trust me, the statement is not a compliment. Given that we hold advanced degrees, why would we not be articulate, and why is it a matter for comment? How many times have you (white or non-white) walked into an office looking for the person in charge, and just assumed that the non-white standing before you couldn't be that person? White privilege is most frequently expressed through such behavior and attitudes that over time have become so ingrained, that they appear "natural." White privilege also informs structures of racism.

My co-author, Dr. Kesho Scott, Associate Professor of American Studies and Sociology at Grinnell College and a diversity trainer for over twenty-five years employs the concept of "Unlearning Racism." This is a methodology that gained prominence in the 1980s by the late West Coast (white) activist, Ricky Sherover-Marcuse (<http://www.unlearningracism.org/>). She defined racism and all "ISMs" as "...the systematic mistreatment of one group of people by another group of people for a purpose or advantage." According to Scott, these systems of mistreatment are learned, approved, rewarded, and develop a life of their own because they are

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internalized by people and practiced (and perpetuated) in institutions.

Says Scott, "you can change the people," as she has observed after conducting hundreds of "Unlearning Racism" and Diversity workshops nationally and internationally. However, she notes, unequal *systems* persists because they are part of the structure and the organizational behavior. The net result of structural racism and structural systems of inequality is that even when non-whites hold leadership positions, the structures can still be racist. This presents non-whites with a dilemma; they feel powerless to protest or challenge the perpetuation of inequality. "And when policies and goals of diversity are 'so-called' institutionalized," says Scott, "non-white attitudes might change, but power is not shared by all."

To further complicate how inequality and all forms of "ISMs" play out in real life, scholars have begun to speak about the practice of "microaggressions" or "microinequities." It is not unlike McIntosh's description of white skin privilege, but focuses on behavior that targets and is hurtful, but not in overt ways. The most troubling application of the term is by Dr. Marcia Allen Owens who writes about what it's like to be a Black woman faculty member at Historically Black institutions. Borrowing from the work of Derald Wing Sue, author of *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Wiley, 2010), Allen Owen writes, "The term *microinequities*

describe the 'pattern of being overlooked, under respected, and devalued because of one's race or gender.'" In her case, she experiences gender microaggressions (<http://thefeministwire.com/2012/11/is-that-healthy-experiences-of-microaggressions-by-black-women-at-historically-black-institutions/>). This description, when viewed in tandem with McIntosh's analysis of white skin privilege point to non-whites, non-males, and non-heterosexuals having to wake up every morning and enter into toxic environments in which they are directly and indirectly assaulted, often with the perpetrators totally unaware.

"Unlearning Racism" Requires Taking Positive (Affirmative) Action

So what's a Washburn High or a city like Minneapolis, or this entire country, to do to eradicate structural racism and white privilege? The first step is to acknowledge that racism, prejudice, microaggressions, and microinequities exist; the second step is to name them when they occur; and the final step is put in place positive (**affirmative**) **actions** that will begin to dismantle the system of exclusion and make the practice of microaggression and white skin privilege unacceptable. For those who belong to the dominant groups (whites, males, heterosexuals) practicing positive (affirmative) action also means acceptance of the fact that you must give up some of your seemingly "natural" privilege, which some have come to enjoy a lot. For non-whites, women, non-heterosexuals who participate in the dominant culture and perpetuate the systems of structural inequality (intentionally or unintentionally), it means reflecting on the ways in which you may contribute to the perpetuation of such structures and systems. And, by the way, silence is the greatest form of consent.

At the Washburn High School level, the school (principal, faculty, staff, parents, and all students) has an opportunity to use the incident as an ongoing "teachable moment." Those students who participated in the incident should be required to do community service in an

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arena that allows them to socially interact with people who are different from themselves. They might be asked to design a play about lynching and its impact on the victims and the people who participated—teachable moments. These are just a few examples of that might provide information and exposure, while honing their critical thinking and analytical skills. Their parents should be involved as well since, frequently, such messages of inequality (or inferiority) and white privilege and approval of microaggressive behavior have been digested somewhere, and are often passed along close to home.

All schools in Minneapolis (which can become a model to the world) must look at ways in which it addresses the (mis) perceptions that whites hold about other cultures. Getting a diet of Black history, Hispanic History, Hmong or Laos History, Women's History, or Somali History one month out of twelve is insufficient and only emphasizes that they (non-whites, women, etc.) are different from us (dominant groups).

The principal of Washburn can mobilize parents and teachers to review the mandatory texts students are assigned to read to see what messages are buried within. Teachers can draw upon the resources from the exhibit built by their own Minnesota Science Museum, "RACE: Are We So Different?" (www.understandingrace.org) and incorporate into their curriculum (from art to STEM). This might be a good time to take frequent field trips to the Minnesota African American Museum, the Laos Cultural Center, etc. Without a doubt, it should be evident that Washburn must establish ongoing in-service cultural competency (diversity, "Unlearning Racism" or "Unlearning 'ISMs'") workshops for teachers and staff and incorporate into the evaluation process. Most of us harbor stereotypes and may be communicating some of this unconsciously or engaging in racial "microaggression" or "microassaults," like hanging a Black effigy doll.

The TPT documentary "North Star: Minnesota's Black Pioneers" should be mandatory viewing for all Minnesota principals, school boards, school staff, elected officials and all government staff throughout the state. Wish there was a way to test them on what they learned! Maybe a citizen's group can create a cultural competency report card. The purpose for all of this positive (affirmative) action should be self-evident. Any more than young girls should not have to attend school fearful of being raped, non-whites should not have to go school fearful of physical or psychological racial violence.

One thing we anthropologists do know about the human species is that despite surface (phenotypic) variation, people are pretty much the same (genes, organs, blood, etc.) underneath our skins. The definition of a species is its ability to reproduce with each other—we can do that despite the social concepts and boundaries of the idea of race. Do we want to do it, should we do it? These are social questions, not biological ones.

Anthropologists also agree that the social behavior often dividing one group from another is learned. Humans are not born racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, or religious-phobic; nor are they born slaves—people can be born within an institution called slavery. We create these cultural institutions and then operationalize them. That doesn't make them real or "natural." They are cultural inventions that allow us to privilege some groups by disadvantaging others. Systems of inequality (political, racial, gender, religious) emerge out of such cultural behavior.

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Americans have spent decades dismantling a system that classified some groups as "slaves" or "unequal." We created a restorative justice remedy (affirmative action), and then eradicated it. Now, we must put as much effort into dismantling the beliefs that benefit the idea of white privilege, support structures of racism, and perpetuate inequality.

We are a smart species—after all, we learned to walk upright. If we have learned these maladaptive behaviors, they can be unlearned, along with other "isms." Washburn High School is a good place to start for Minneapolis, but it's only the beginning.

To Read More:

<http://www.tpt.org/?a=programs&id=15741>

http://discovery.mnhs.org/MN150/index.php?title=Duluth_Lynchings

<http://www.claytonjacksonmcghie.org/>

<http://www.claytonjacksonmcghie.org/Community>

<http://people.duke.edu/~ldbaker/classes/AAIH/caaih/ibwells/ibwbkgrd.html>

<http://hunniebrown.wordpress.com/lynching-in-america/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJL2P0JsAS4>

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