

***The Only White Guy in the Room***

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On September 11, 2001, I was at work when a colleague informed me of the events in New York and Washington, DC. Like many of us, I sat riveted in my office waiting for information and growing frustrated that Web sites were too jammed to load on my computer. As we learned more about what had happened, I thought about what would happen in class. I knew we would need to discuss the day’s events and how my students were feeling; I also hoped to relate the tragedy to course material. As a social psychologist who specializes in person perception and stereotypes, I anticipated a response similar to what was occurring in other parts of the country—elevated anti-Arab prejudice and harassment. I steeled myself to tolerate some mild expressions of hostility, but I planned to channel that frustration into a greater understanding of the psychology of aggression and vengeance. Instead, what I heard from many of my students caught me off guard. They showed a surprising level of understanding about the motives and actions of the terrorists, suggesting that when a powerful country asserts its will around the world, apparently without regard for the consequences to others, it should expect some angry and violent response.

Despite my years of education at integrated schools and teaching at historically Black universities, I failed to anticipate the degree to which my students could empathize with those who view the U.S. government as a persecutor. Although I am hardly the flag waver that many people became after 9/11, my students exceeded me in their level of cynicism about the true motives of our government. To them, many of whom had experienced racism on a regular basis and, almost unanimously, had seen evidence of systematic discrimination first-hand, the possibility that the U.S. could act more for self-interest than for the greater good was not only plausible, but likely. Like most teachers, I have learned a lot from my students, and their responses to 9/11 taught me that I had not been paying enough attention; had I been, I would have anticipated their response and been prepared for the class I met on September 12.

**Despite Our Best Intentions...**

I would not be happy in my position at a historically Black college/university if I were a modern racist who felt that prejudice is a thing of the past and that the playing field is level. Rather, I take some pride in knowing that I am working with many students whose families have historically been disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunities. I see myself as a partner in the struggle toward equality, helping to diversify future work forces and open closed minds. Yet I am continually surprised at the frequency with which my students encounter outright racism. One of my in-class activities involves asking students to identify ambiguous pieces of evidence that may lead us to label some people as racist

and assess the plausibility of other explanations for their behavior. In response, one student described an instance when a customer at the restaurant where she worked told her manager, “That n\*\*\*\*\* screwed up my order.” So much for ambiguity. My students tell me that such overt examples of blatant racism are noteworthy but hardly rare. When I once asked my students what would help White professors better identify with Black students, one told me that we should have a “day in the life,” where White professors shadow Black students. Although most of us certainly pride ourselves on egalitarian norms, the resulting revelations would probably preach to the choir. Still they would certainly be enlightening—disturbing, but enlightening.

I occasionally expressed to a former colleague of mine—an African American woman at a school where about 75% of our students are also African American women—jealousy at her ability to identify with students on a level I am unable to attain, no matter how sensitive and empathic I might be. We frequently discussed issues of race, and she, like my students, educated me about issues I had not always recognized. For example, she expressed frustration at frequently having to move out of the way of White people approaching her on the sidewalk. However, she is still a critical thinker who evaluates such experiences through a scientific lens. Apparently, her education and status do not convince others that she has as much a right to the sidewalk as they do. It’s an annoyance to her—certainly not on par with job discrimination or physical harassment—but one that most White people will not encounter on a regular basis.

When my colleague announced that she was leaving our university, I asked her what she thought of me teaching her Black Psychology class. I had, after all, taught Stereotyping and Prejudice to an all-Black class. In response, she graciously shot down that possibility; she had promised her students that, if she could help it, only an African American would teach the course. I was surprised by her reaction, because I believe one of my strengths is identifying with students, even though we don’t share a racial category or similar life experiences. Still, I understood that although our courses share many common characteristics (e.g., focus on the scientific method), a Black Psychology course involves coverage of important and sensitive issues, and my daily presence likely would inhibit discussion. Although students generally respond favorably to my teaching and probably would appreciate my occasional contribution to Black Psychology, a course that addresses the struggles of Black students requires consideration I cannot regularly provide.

### **Active Efforts to Connect**

Although I will not be teaching Black Psychology, I try hard to understand fully my students’ experiences. I have studied much of the material that Black Psychology courses cover, because it inspires my research and because it helps me become a better teacher. I have also made a point of studying the literature on racial variability, which may inform my work with students. Although most people reading this essay probably have only a minority of African American students, I think we would all agree that giving our students equal levels of empathy, sympathy, and opportunity is essential. Below are a few key theories for understanding the experiences of many Black students.

*Racial Identity.* Through the study of racial identity, recent research has focused on diversity among African Americans. One of my students' most common statements is that, in situations where they were the only African American, they were expected to represent the "Black Perspective" on an issue. Just as White people may think about their race to varying degrees, Black people also differ in their emphasis on, and consideration of, race. Racial identity research has explored that variation. Whereas many White perceivers fail to distinguish among skin tones in Black targets, numerous researchers (e.g., Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992) have discussed "color complex" as a source of ingroup evaluation among African Americans. Many identity theorists (e.g., Parham & Helms, 1985) consider racial identity to be a developmental construct, such that Black people begin by adopting a Eurocentric worldview and adhering to negative stereotypes about their own race. Upon exposure to Black history and culture, they begin to question their existing worldviews and eventually immerse themselves in Afrocentric issues, essentially reversing their basic anti-Black perspective to one that is pro-Black and anti-White. Finally, according to the theory, people enter a more balanced and positive stage, where they value the good things about being Black, but not through adopting an anti-White perspective. More recently, the Multidimensional Model of Racial Identity (Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998) addressed racial identity less as a developmental process and more as a personality variable with relatively stable characteristics. Although each of the racial identity perspectives emphasizes the value in differentiating Black identity from White identity, they also emphasize that Black students may be at very different stages of identity development or hold different perspectives about being Black.

*Attributional Ambiguity.* As I mentioned above, many potential encounters with racism are ambiguous; many, however, are not. Some research in attributional ambiguity—the question of whether an action is motivated by racism—generally assumes that a person's intent is irrelevant; that is, racism's impact is in the mind of the target. Still other research has examined what occurs when people see racism as more or less prevalent in their world. Unfortunately, there is not a clear picture of which perspective is most adaptive. For some time, conventional wisdom held that attributing behavior to prejudice was a form of external attribution that was self-protective and beneficial to well-being (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, & Major, 1991). Other studies, however (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999), have questioned this assertion, suggesting that such attributions are maladaptive. Specifically, they perpetuate the belief that racism still pervades and that the system is hopeless. From both perspectives, racial identity appears to be a buffer against the harmful effects either of seeing an experience as the simple-minded action of a bigot or as a sign that the world hasn't learned to treat people fairly. Our students may implicitly or explicitly grapple with the question of when to confront questionable behavior and when to let it go—even if our behavior is unintentionally questionable.

*Other Group and Individual Difference Variables.* Additional constructs are especially relevant to Black populations and reveal a great deal about the experience of being Black. Most of us have read some of the compelling literature demonstrating stereotype threat as a partial explanation of race differences in test performance (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1995). Many psychologists outside of historically Black colleges/universities, however,

are unfamiliar with the notion of John Henryism (e.g., James, Hartnett, & Kalsbeek, 1983), whereby some African Americans engage in active coping by working especially hard to compensate for others' negative expectations. Still other research has focused on basic aspects of learning, showing that what may function as a reinforcer for many White children (e.g., "Nice job, son") may not function as a reinforcer for Black children. Just as many teaching experts advocate understanding students' learning styles, we all have a responsibility to understand Black students' thinking styles and perspectives.

### **Black Students are Different, but Black Students are the Same**

Although they may seem to be contradictory notions, the differences between Black students and others and the differences among Black students themselves are important to consider simultaneously. If our goal is to make sure that we treat our students of color with the same respect and consideration as we do our other students, then we must appreciate how their experiences have differed from White students' experiences and also how they differ from one another. Although the Afrocentric perspective is different from the Eurocentric perspective (it is more collectivistic and less dominant, among other things), not all Black students adopt the same perspective, and it is an insult to assume they do. As a White professor of Black students, I see my challenge as being aware of between-group variability and within-group variability and incorporating that awareness into my relationships with students. They have shown me the respect of not assuming that my experiences have been like theirs or that I am just like other White people they have known. I owe them the same respect.

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