

Understanding Racial Identity in Trump's Era

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During the time of Trump's campaign, one concern that rang loud and clear was the issue of discrimination and the recognition of white supremacy as it reared its head on a national level. Now, taking the political piece out of the discussion and merely looking at society and its opposing views, the primary issue that arose from the election indicated how privilege, specifically white privilege, continues to play a significant role in our society. With introspect, some questions arise in respect to higher education: How do we, as student affairs professionals, recognize this thing called white privilege? Do we recognize it in ourselves? How about in others? What does it look like and how does it impact our work?

Admittedly, I, as I bet many of us are, am capable of recognizing privilege in another's behavior. However, when it pertains to myself, white privilege is merely something I am aware of and can sometimes recognize only after a situation. I often fail to recognize it during instances within everyday life. Recognizing my own privilege is something I constantly strive for, yet my success can only be measured after an instance when failure to combat privilege becomes apparent. To best articulate what I mean, let me share with you a story:

Within the last few years, I started serving on a university hearing board as a means to contribute to the university. Soon after being trained, I was called to serve on my first appeal board, involving a noncompliant student. During the initial trial, information for the student's hearing was presented:

A student had been approached by a police officer after being accused of stealing merchandise at a local concert. When approached by the officer, the student refrained from speaking to, or otherwise engaging with the police officer in any way, which resulted in the officer verbally taunting the student in attempt to initiate conversation. After multiple witnessed accounts of verbal taunting, the student physically struck the officer and ran away with the merchandise. Later, the situation resulted with the student being called into the student conduct office for an investigation. However, after numerous attempts, both via email and physical delivery of a letter, the student failed to attend any investigative meetings and eventually the final hearing. As a result, the student was dismissed from the university on the basis of theft and failure to comply with direction of university officials, and this sanction was further upheld by the appeal board.

Now, what if I told you that the student in question was falsely accused of stealing. Does that change your view of the story? How about now, if I told you the student was African American, was falsely accused of stealing, and was taunted by the officer because of the false allegation? Although opinions may vary on what the outcome of the appeal board should have been with this additional information, I think a deeper perspective is needed and the issue of white privilege in our day-to-day work should be evaluated.



To this day, this particular case still haunts me. Although the student code of conduct was broken, a case like this could have been prevented from going too far and resulting in the student's dismissal from the university, especially when the ultimate mission of a student conduct office is to be educational. Ultimately, the student's education was impeded by the possible systematic failures of the institution to recognize the racial disparities between the student and university officials. And thus, the question remains... how do we, as student affairs professionals recognize white privilege? For me, this situation made me aware of my own blind spots of privilege and how I, as an administrator, can unknowingly contribute to the systematic failures that impede our students' education. As such, I ask you to examine yourself first and foremost. Take a look at your blind spots and attempt to recognize the perspective of others who may not be as privileged as you.

In psychology, there are two different racial identity models that indicate stages through which individuals progress in relation to race and race acceptance: The Cross Model (written in the perspective of African American racial identity specifically) and the Helms Model (written in the perspective of White racial identity). The Cross Model outlines five stages African Americans typically progress through during the racial identification process: Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion-Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment. In this model, stages range from the Pre-Encounter phase, where individuals most commonly identify with the dominant culture in attempt to move away from the native culture, through to the Internalization-Commitment stage where individuals accept their racial identity and eventually move out of a "Pro-Black" phase and away from an "Anti-White" attitude (Cross, 1991).

In contrast, the Helms Model outlines six stages White individuals typically progress through in the racial identity process: Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration, Pseudo-Independent, Immersion-Emersion, and Autonomy. In this model, stages range from the Contact stage, where a person is colorblind and naive about race, has little contact with persons of color, and does not acknowledge being white, through to the Autonomy stage where a nonracist perspective is assumed through the valuing of diversity without feeling guilty for being White (Helms, 1995).

With a better knowledge of racial identity and the varying stages through which individuals progress, we as educators can better examine at our own racial identity and recognize the stages where others may be. As such, much work can be done to combat the top-down pressures of a less racially aware administration. Undoubtedly, our nation's political agenda, as dictated by our leaders, will impact our work through policy. However, we must not let that diminish the work we do each day through the impression we can leave on our students.

In a time of Trump's presidency, we can only speculate if national white supremacy will continue to widen the gap between the races. However, we as educators and administrators can play our part in challenging the mindset of not only students, but of ourselves and our colleagues. In doing so, we are the ones to be held accountable to the daily micro-aggressions others might face, especially in the midst of those blind spots of our own privilege.

References

Cross & Helms (2013). White racial identity development: Therapeutic implications. In Sue, D. & Sue, D.W. (Eds.), *Counseling the culturally diverse: Theory and practice* (pp. 320-330). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.