EVERYDAY ANTIRACISM

Getting Real About Race in School

EDITED BY MICA POLLOCK

THE NEW PRESS

NEW YORK
LONDON

Racial Incidents as Teachable Moments

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In a class on "race" and racism I teach for high school seniors at a racially diverse school, I ask students to brainstorm together, as a class, "racial incidents" that individuals among them have experienced or witnessed. The exercise prompts deeper analysis of what racism is, what it looks like in students' daily lives, and what students experiencing or witnessing such incidents might do about them. It encourages students to move toward taking some responsibility for addressing race-related wrongs. This exercise is part of antiracist practice, broadly construed. Students confront such incidents all the time but seldom have an opportunity to think them through in an academic setting. Like adults, they often have oversimplified views of what racism is; they seldom have the opportunity to unpack and examine this question in a facilitated group discussion.

I first ask my students individually to write about a single "racial incident" to which they were either a party or a bystander. I ask them to focus on an incident within their peer group or involving adults and peers, in order to make the discussion about intervening in the incident more compelling. I purposefully leave open what is to count as a "racial incident" because I want to let the students define it. However, I specify that it has to be a situation in which "race" was involved in someone feeling harm. I mention that the incident can be "minor," such as someone saying something racial that someone else objects to, or "heavier," such as a fight or excluding someone from something important. The question of what is minor or heavy is debated in our discussion. This take-home assignment asks students to describe the "racial incident" in detail and consider how a particular party or bystander to the incident "might have reacted in a constructive way" to the situation.

I pick four or five incidents that raise a range of distinct and interesting issues for discussion. If the teacher has sufficient time, it is probably best to analyze all of the students' incidents. I rewrite these incidents so as to mask the identity of the student providing the incident. Sometimes, when anonymity seems impossible, I ask the student privately if she minds my using her incident even though other students may be able to identify her. I rewrite the incident in

the second person, both to encourage the student reader to identify with the subject of the incident and to enable us to discuss the incidents more freely. Here are some examples of incidents that my students have offered.

1. You are a Black teenager vacationing in a beach town with very few Blacks. Drinking a Fresca, you and a friend, who is also Black, enter a convenience store looking for something to eat, but you do not find anything to your liking there. As you and your friend look around the store, you feel people looking at you in a hostile manner. The clerk asks if you have paid for the Fresca; you say you brought it from another store. You add that you have not taken anything from the store, but the clerk will not let you leave until he has ascertained that the store does not carry the item that you have on you.
2. You are a White teenager working in a store. You consider your White manager racist. One day you make an "attitudey" remark to the manager, and she snaps back at you to "leave the n°gg°r attitude with the n°gg°rs."
3. At a Latino-centered school dance, with mostly Latino students participating, you are among a group of White students who are dancing. Some Latino students tease you and the other White students for the way you dance, saying you have "stiff White people hips." You and your friends are hurt and offended.
4. You are an Asian student. In an English class, the teacher has students read and discuss an article about Bill Cosby criticizing lower-class Blacks. In the discussion, you say that you agree with Cosby. You agree that many Black students are more concerned about their looks than their education, and that it is partly their parents' fault for buying their kids $50 shoes and then saying they are poor. Your Black friend tells you that you have no right to have any opinion on this subject because you are not Black. You get mad and say, "Just because I am not Black, I cannot have an opinion on that subject? Now who is discriminating?"

In the discussion about racial incidents, I have some general goals. One is to make the students pinpoint what exactly has gone wrong in the incident described. Often they initially offer a reductive and simplistic analysis: for example, they simply say that someone has been "racist." I prod them to push that analysis further. What exactly do they mean when they say that something or someone is racist? Just saying an act or a person is racist does not tell us much. For example, sometimes students mean that the perpetrator is a racially prejudiced individual; sometimes they mean that the perpetrator hurts someone else even if he is not prejudiced. Some of the students have been introduced to a power analysis of racism; they say that since White people have power and Blacks and Latinos do not, hurtful remarks made to

White students, as in example 3, are not racist and not a serious matter that merits attention.

I criticize overuse and misuse of the word "racist" in my book, *"I'm Not a Racist, but . . .": The Moral Quandary of Race*.[1] I argue that racism should be understood either as race-based hostility or as treating racial others as inferior. However, in the class, I do not force this view on the conversation. My goal is for the students to articulate at a deeper level what exactly is going wrong in the incidents, rather than to arrive at an assessment of whether the behavior in question is appropriately called racist.

Some students argue that it is enough to say that someone is offended by a remark to call that remark "racist." I push them to consider two things that are often difficult to discuss: first, whether the person was justified in taking offense, and second, whether there was something inherently wrong with saying the thing that caused the offense. For example, even if the Black student in example 4 had a good reason to be offended by her Asian friend's agreeing with Bill Cosby, it may nevertheless not have been wrong for the Asian student to say what she believed.

As students grapple with these issues, I press them to get beyond simple and imprecise terms like "racist" and "offended." Students then typically offer more nuanced words, including "ignorant," "insensitive," "thoughtless," "hurtful," "not being recognized" for your specific racial identity and what it means to you, and other ways to express racial wrongfulness. I encourage them to consider whether and in what ways some incidents involve greater hurt or greater insensitivity than others. For example, while it is generally wrong to think in broadly generalized ways about racial and ethnic groups (and thus to stereotype White people as having stiff hips while dancing, as in example 3), the White manager's use of the much more vicious and damaging "n°gg°r°" (in example 2) is to most a more troubling moral infraction, both because Blacks are more socially vulnerable than Whites and also because the n-word has much more cultural power to insult.

As they are pushed to think and speak in more complex ways about these racial incidents, students come up with increasingly insightful analyses. For example, in discussing example 1, in one class most students agreed quickly that the store owner was making unjustified assumptions based on stereotypes of young Black males. Pushed further, students then debated whether this was due to ignorance on the owner's part, overgeneralization from a few Black males he had encountered, or racial hostility. According to one Black student, the youth should not have come into the store with an open drink, given his knowledge that store owners are often suspicious of Black youth. Others strongly disputed this cautiousness.

After analyzing the incident, I ask students to reflect on whether and how the wrong involved in the incident relates to the racial identities of the perpetrator, the target, and the bystander. For example, I ask whether it is more

wrong for a White person to call someone a "n°gg°r" than for a Latino or Asian to do so. When a Black person uses the n-word, does its meaning differ? If a Black manager views Black youth who enter his store with suspicion, is this worse than a White manager's doing so? How about a situation, often brought up spontaneously by students in these discussions, in which the youth eyed with suspicion is dressed in baggy pants and possibly a hooded sweatshirt but is not Black?

These questions have no simple answers. I am asking my students to appreciate the real-life complexity embedded within an overall commitment to racial equality. In my own classroom, I try to make students question two conflicting popular views about racism. One is the view that "only those with power can be racist" and that racism is only enacted by White people. The other is the "colorblind" notion that the racial identity of the perpetrator and target of the act is not relevant to how wrong or bad it is. In my view as a scholar, which I do not push on the students but throw into the debate, different racial groups have differential power to hurt others and are differentially vulnerable to hurt. However, vulnerability is also affected by local power relations as well as White dominance in the overall society. In a school in which Whites are a minority, whites are more vulnerable to exclusion. Assessments of vulnerability have to take into account all relevant contexts, from local to societal.

After analyzing the incidents, I try to move the students toward the idea that they should consider intervening. I ask what they think they would do, and then what they should do or would do if they thought about it more. In discussing possible interventions, we all realize that we have come to naturalize some racially problematic behaviors. Once, in discussing a manager following Black youth around stores (example 1), many of the Black and Hispanic students noted that they found this behavior so ubiquitous that they had learned to think that they were not bothered by it. They regarded it as just part of the way the world operated. Others argued that this behavior is wrong and not inevitable, and that there are things one can do to try to interrupt racial profiling and make the perpetrator recognize a potential cost to themselves in continuing to engage in it, such as saying "Are you following me?" "Why are you following me?" or "So, do you follow every Black kid who comes into your store?"

In these discussions, I ask students to think about whether the racial identities of the participants in the incident do, or should, affect what the antiracist person should do. Once, we discussed whether bystanders of various racial groups should intervene if a Black student racially insulted a Latino student. Both Black and non-Black students said that only Black students should intervene to stop or criticize the Black student. Other students argued that someone of any group should act to stop the action, or protect the target of the action, but that they would not in fact do so if they were not Black.

Personally, I argue in these debates against the view that racism is an appropriate concern only of the members of the targeted group in the incident. That point of view is, unfortunately, not common, and leads many White students to think that racial issues concern groups other than themselves. But it also leads some non-White students to think that if a member of another group is victimized, that is no concern of theirs. However, we also discuss how sometimes a member of a group is able to resolve a situation constructively in a way that a nonmember could not easily do. For example, in the discussion of the "stiff White people hips" incident, it would have been far easier for a Latino student to convey a message of inclusion rather than exclusion. One Latina in the class said she would just go over to the White kids and start dancing with them, which struck me as a particularly effective solution.

Some teachers might be wary of this exercise. Nevertheless, some guidelines make the exercise accessible to teachers who would like to try it. First, we should not dismiss any student-generated incident as "not really significant." The student may see something in the incident that we teachers do not initially see; exploring the incident and articulating what students see as significant in it is the goal of the exercise. Second, the exercise does not require the teacher to be an expert on how to understand or judge racial incidents and interactions. It requires her only to guide students in exploring them, to keep asking whether other students see things differently or whether they agree with what has been said. Of course, the more we know about the world in which these incidents take place the better, and a teacher planning the exercise might benefit from discussing some of the students' incidents with colleagues of different racial groups. In the discussions, I find myself often saying, "I'm not sure what to do in that situation, but what do you think of this (a proposed intervention)?" Giving some thought beforehand to the situations we plan to discuss with students might be helpful.

Given an opportunity to generate and discuss "racial incidents" as well as constructive responses to those incidents, most students will benefit from in-depth discussion of both racism and antiracism.

RESOURCES

Mark Lukasiewicz and Eugenia Harvey. 1991. *True Colors* [Television Documentary]. Libertyville, IL: CorVision Media. TV documentary in which two young men, one black and one white but with the same level of education, job qualifications, and class standing shop and seek jobs and apartments, and are treated very differently.

Francis Ried. 1996. *Skin Deep* [Motion Picture]. Berkeley, CA: Iris Films. College students of different races and from different campuses around the country are taken to a retreat for a weekend, where they work through racial issues with one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** Why might debating real-world incidents of racism and antiracism be beneficial to students?
2. **Strategy:** What general issues would you need to consider in starting such a conversation and managing it successfully in your own classroom? How would you personally start to prepare?
3. **Try tomorrow:** How would you respond if some of the incidents students raised occurred in your own classroom or involved interactions with you? How could a critical discussion of "racial incidents" between school adults and students be useful to get you and your colleagues talking about how best to assist students?

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