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Jennifer Q. McCary
Gettysburg College

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A Developmental Approach to Civility and Bystander Intervention

Abstract
The students of color in your classroom experience discrimination every day, in small and large ways. They don’t often see themselves represented in their textbooks, and encounter hostility in school, and outside. For them race is a constant reality, and an issue they need, and want, to discuss. Failure to do so can inhibit their academic performance.

Failure to discuss race prevents White students from getting a real, critical and deep understanding of our society and their place in it. It is essential for the well-being of all students that they learn to have constructive conversations about the history of race in this country, the impact of racism on different ethnic communities, and how those communities and cultures contribute to society.

Keywords
racism, Bystander Intervention, bullying, racial discrimination, race education, minority students

Disciplines
Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education | Education | Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Ethnicity in Communication | Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology
A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH TO CIVILITY AND BYSTANDER INTERVENTION

Jennifer McCary

Nikki tried to sit and breathe inconspicuously as she gathered her thoughts around what she was hearing. While she sat at the shuttle stop, she was outraged as she overheard several students talking about the university becoming more lenient in their admissions process and allowing anyone in now. Nikki tried not to tune into this conversation until she heard one young man say that he has noticed an increase in Latino and Black people on campus, and he was beginning to take extra precautions. Nikki was outraged; however, she remained silent as she was one of two students of color standing at the shuttle stop. The students were not being loud; in fact, it almost seemed that they were trying to be discreet because they were aware of their company. Nevertheless, Nikki could clearly hear their conversation and knew that other bystanders at the shuttle stop overheard this as well. As the shuttle approached, Nikki decided to walk back to her residence hall. One of the males from the group of students that she overheard noticed her change of heart and asked, “Are you boycotting?”

As Nikki walked, she began to reflect on her experiences on campus, wondering why she was becoming increasingly more aware of her race. Nikki decided that she was going to ask her friends if they felt race mattered on campus and what their experiences have been. As she sat around with her roommates, Lisa and Crystal, she casually mentioned what happened at the shuttle stop. Immediately, the room erupted.

“He said what?”
"Why didn’t you call us?"
"What did you say?"

Nikki said, "I didn’t say anything. What was I supposed to say? I was standing with a group of people who were expressing their clear frustration with me even being a student here. What would I look like saying something?"

"Well did anyone else standing around say something?"

Perplexed by this line of inquiry, Nikki responded to her friends—"There were a few people who looked uncomfortable with what they were hearing. Most of them were White too, but no one said anything. Although I was bothered, I can’t say that I was surprised. I deal with comments like this all the time on campus, including in the classroom. Just last week, one of my faculty members called me in to meet with her about one of my grades. She sat me down and told me that I did poorly on my midterm and wondered what was going on with my family. I questioned what she meant, and she asked me if there was something going on at home, such as my grandmother becoming ill, that might have been distracting me. Thoroughly confused, I asked her what my grandmother would have to do with my midterm grade. She explained that she was just curious if something was going on with my guardian or a family member that would be keeping me from my studies. I convinced myself that I was reading too much into that statement and simply replied no. I told her that I did not fully understand the material and that I should have taken more time to prepare for the exam. She told me that if I needed more time then I should register with disability services. Exhausted with the conversation, I took my exam and left her office."

As Nikki and her friends sat in silence for a few seconds, she continued by saying—"These examples are the reason that I brought up the shuttle incident in the first place. I have never felt like a minority, but these constant comments are becoming too much, and I’m considering transferring to a place where I don’t stand out as much. Are either of you experiencing this stuff, or am I being too sensitive?"

"No, I don’t think that you are being overly sensitive. I have undeniably had some of the same experiences. But Nikki, transferring is not the answer. No matter where you go, you are going to have to face comments that don’t sit well with you. We say things about other people sometimes in the privacy of our room that wouldn’t be so favorable either. Nikki, if you want to transfer, do it. But don’t leave without telling someone why. Last year, we had about four friends transfer after our first semester for the same reason."
How will this place change if we all keep leaving without challenging the culture?"

With a sense of outrage emerging in the room, Mary suggested, "We need to report what that boy said to you tonight. As a matter of fact, I think that we should go and talk to some of the people that we know in Multicultural Affairs, Residence Life, and Student Activities to see if we can do a program on how bystanders can report things on campus. People need to know that bystanders have the power to intervene and change things. Nikki, you shouldn’t have to walk home because you felt intimidated by the crowd on the shuttle. We shouldn’t have to watch the cleaning staff, which happens to all be Black, be treated like crap because they are seen as ‘the help’ by the students. We should not feel like we are battling stereotypes in the classroom or seen as the exception when we succeed in the classroom rather than it being the expectation of us.”

Emerging Issues

The feelings that Nikki expressed are not all that atypical of a student of color at a predominantly White institution (PWI). Smedley, Myers, and Harrell (1993) found that students of color at PWIs, unlike their White peers, experience stress in five areas—social climate, within-group stresses, interracial stresses, racism and discrimination, and higher levels of achievement stresses for females. Furthermore, Swail (2007) suggested students of color face additional challenges at PWIs:

- Not having enough professors of their own race
- Noticing few students of their race on campus
- Racist institutional policies and practices
- Difficulty having friendships with nonminority students
- Rude and unfair treatment because of race
- Discrimination
- Being accused of “acting White”
- Doubts about their ability to succeed in college

Despite our “best” efforts, students of color still feel unwelcomed or like they never really have a place on PWI campuses. Could this be because our focus has been on diversity and not civility? Colleges and universities search for solutions to help students become more actively engaged in diversity, inclusion, and creating a positive campus environment. However, it seems
that students need to be hearing more messages about civility, morality, and how their ability to intervene is actually the key to more inclusive and diverse communities.

The challenge of fostering an atmosphere of civility on college campuses has been largely framed by levels of incivility that has become more evident on college campuses, especially in residence halls (Tiberius & Flak, 1999). As such, Tiberius and Flak have suggested that college campuses have become places where speech or action is disrespectful or rude and ranges from insulting remarks and verbal abuse to explosive, violent behavior, as opposed to a level of civility framed by being polite, respectful, and decent (Clark & Springer, 2007). Nevertheless, if we redirect our efforts to remind students that they control more than just their own college experiences, we may be able to change some of the bias-related incidents that happen on our campuses.

Increasing Awareness

As we begin to discuss what civility and bystander intervention is all about, we first must recognize that everyone is a bystander, every day, in one way or another, to a wide range of events that contribute to the marginalization of certain groups on campus. All students have the right to feel safe and respected when they are on their college campuses. It is everyone’s obligation to stop discrimination or harmful behaviors that hurt the community or its members. Taking basic steps on reminding students of the importance of being polite, respectful, and decent are the beginnings to facilitating conversations around race or intervening when uncomfortable situations occur.

Much like Nikki’s roommates in the case study at the beginning of the chapter, people find themselves passionately engaged in conversations around race. A part of this passion stems from the fact that race, whether we realize it or not, makes up a large part of our identity. Many students of color usually identify with race before identifying with gender or any other categorizing quality. Therefore, when something is said in a classroom setting or in passing that alludes to a problem with someone’s racial identity, people can grow defensive. Both students of color and White students may find themselves equally motivated to speak up when it comes to conversations around race based on their identity development or lack thereof. Contrariwise, students can sometimes find themselves silenced during conversations about race for fear of feeling ignorant, isolated, or ignored.
Students must begin to understand reasons why they don’t intervene. In
Nikki’s situation, there were several people standing at the shuttle stop who
overheard this conversation. Undoubtedly, someone besides Nikki was
uncomfortable. We must explore what disables our students from being the
person to challenge such harmful behaviors on campus. In those few intense
moments at the shuttle stop, bystanders overheard someone expressing his
opinions about students of color on campus. Every bystander may have gone
through a different series of emotions; however, each one in that short time
processed at least two of the following thoughts:

- What is the risk of me speaking up?
- Could someone potentially be hurt in this situation?
- Am I in the mood to intervene?
- Will this bring up a past experience or bad memory for me?
- Am I able to defend myself?
- Will someone else say something? If so, it would save me the hassle.

We must teach our students how to move from a place where they are proc-
essing these thoughts to a place where they are deciding to act.

Confronting Uncomfortable Conversations

Moving from thoughts to action is hard whenever faced with a dilemma. Intervening on someone else’s behalf means that you are assuming some
responsibility for the situation. To do that, you have to exhibit respect for
someone whom you may not know. In some cases, respect has nothing to
do with it; instead, your personal morals are telling you that speaking up is
the proper thing to do. In order to act responsibly, people have to reason
with themselves to come up with at least one thought telling them that they
have to intervene.

To consider

1. How will I balance my concern for this individual with my own welfare?

A critical moment for people when trying to decide if they should
intervene is if they are jeopardizing their own welfare in any way.
Students will consider if their decision will affect them academically
or physically, but most importantly, if their actions will be socially
acceptable to their peers. If students fear rejection, retaliation, or any consequence for intervening, then they won’t. Even if they are concerned about another person, they will always put themselves first.

2. If I remain silent, will someone get hurt as a result of my unwillingness to help?

For students to intervene despite any perceived risks for their own welfare, they must feel that someone can be physically, mentally, or emotionally harmed if they remain silent. Students will evaluate the situation and decide if this is a clear emergency. Any ambiguity could result in them deciding to steer clear. Latané and Darley (1970) suggest that if a group of bystanders are witnessing an emergency, it is less likely that any of them will help. Their theory, the bystander effect, assumes that the more people witness an emergency, the less likely it is that someone will intervene because people convince themselves that nothing is wrong because no one else is responding. However, if a person is alone and witnesses an emergency, he or she is more likely to intervene by at least calling authorities for help. In Nikki’s case, there were several students at the shuttle stop. Therefore, others may have felt that nothing was wrong since no one else spoke up. They may have also assumed that someone else would help.

3. Do I feel like being bothered with this?

As strange as it may seem to include this question, people are more likely to help others when they are in a good mood. If you are already having a bad day, why would you willingly engage in a situation that can make your day worse? If someone is in a bad mood, this is not the person that we want intervening because his or her emotional state could potentially lead to a more harmful situation. If a person is in a bad mood, he or she should simply identify someone else who can assist.

4. How do I even begin to confront racist behaviors on campus?

This is the most difficult question. It is the moment that takes you from thoughts to action. When dealing with race, people should be careful that they are confronting the behavior and not the character
of the person. As mentioned early, people get defensive about their identities. The reality is that in some cases when bystanders are intervening, they won’t know the first thing about a person anyway. It is important to keep in mind that you can call people out for their actions without accusing them of being bad people. You want them to understand that what they did had an effect on others and that it will not be tolerated in the community. This goes along with any example of intervention in both on- and off-campus situations. In any conversation, you just want to address the behavior and allow that person to ponder his or her responsibility in the situation.

Follow Up

1. If you were a student at the shuttle stop and overheard this conversation, what would your response be?
2. Do you feel that Nikki (or any other student) should transfer because of an incident like this?
3. If you received a report from Nikki outlining the details of this event, how would you respond? Keep in mind that Nikki does not know the young man’s name.
4. What are some things that you could do to educate students on the concept of civility?
5. How do you promote the concept of bystander intervention?

Commentary

In response to question three, you will want to be certain to consider who will be designated to respond to this incident. Does your institution already have a bias or harassment policy in place, and will it require some form of adjudication if the young man is later identified? Additionally, you want to keep Nikki’s feelings in mind throughout this process.

Some institutions notify the entire campus community that an incident has occurred and is being investigated. This is a good way to send a message that bias behaviors will not be tolerated on campus. Nevertheless, if Nikki could potentially be singled out by this form of communication, you may want to consider alternative methods in getting this information out to the campus.

You want to take these types of incidents as an opportunity to educate the entire campus. This allows everyone to have a developmental moment
around sensitive topics. It also helps in reaffirming the mission and values of an institution, while promoting larger lessons on civility.

References


