3-14-2013

Lady Gaga, Racist Jokes, and Other Pet Peeves

Center for Public Service
Gettysburg College

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Keywords
Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, pet peeves, racist jokes

Abstract
When I was a kid, my sister would whistle whenever I entered a room because she knew that it bothered me. I picked up on this trick, and I use it even now that I’m older. I have a friend who gets Lady Gaga songs stuck in her head really easily, so of course I sing Lady Gaga songs at the top of my lungs so they get stuck in her head. I do this to annoy her. It’s what friends do. We poke fun at each other, and, knowing which buttons to push, we push them because it’s funny. It’s a game. To win, you have to show you are not annoyed so they’ll stop.

Comments
Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.
When I was a kid, my sister would whistle whenever I entered a room because she knew that it bothered me. I picked up on this trick, and I use it even now that I’m older. I have a friend who gets Lady Gaga songs stuck in her head really easily, so of course I sing Lady Gaga songs at the top of my lungs so they get stuck in her head. I do this to annoy her. It’s what friends do. We poke fun at each other, and, knowing which buttons to push, we push them because it’s funny. It’s a game. To win, you have to show you are not annoyed so they’ll stop.

But, recently my friends have taken to making racist comments with the stated purpose of annoying me. I think it’s important to add that they’re not making racial comments about white people. They’re saying them about other races and they’re saying them because I guess I’ve become the person in my group of friends who cares about those issues.

This leaves me wondering: are the racist jokes acceptable because my friends’ intentions are simply to annoy me?

More importantly, why are my friends comfortable telling racist jokes in the first place?

The most obvious reason is that we are all white and white culture is powerful. Though often unconscious and unintentional, our actions are influenced by a historically constructed culture in which white supremacy dominates.

When a friend says something stereotypical, it does more than just provoke me and make a room full of people laugh: it establishes that everyone in the room is white. The laughter bonds us together because of our whiteness, affirming there are “differences” between us and them.

My friends are not intentionally trying to maintain white dominance. We don’t need to bond over our whiteness. We’ve already connected about our schoolwork, club involvement, fun times, and future goals. But, that’s the point. White culture is so pervasive that the bonding behavior and exclusion of others is normative, often hidden. We strengthen the relationships of those in the “in-group” to maintain and perpetuate a sense of solidarity without
even realizing it. Reinforcing this is the fact that these jokes only makes us think about other races and not our own. They don’t call into question our own white privilege but instead allow us to exert our own dominance over other races.

I want to say that racist jokes shouldn’t have to be exempted from the play-fun between friends just because what annoys me happens to be racism, but I can’t. Telling racist jokes to annoy me feels like pressure. I should just laugh along and not get angry. I should not call them out. I should not break the bond of whiteness.

So I have two choices.

I can choose not to respond. Maybe they become frustrated that I don’t appear annoyed, and I win the game. Maybe they stop telling racist jokes. But not speaking up doesn’t sit well with me. I think I’ll be doing more harm than good. Racism depends on white people in order for it to continue. If I don’t speak up, I’m colluding with it.

Or, I can speak up, tell them how I feel, tell them that racist jokes are not in the same class as the other annoying things we do to each other. But will they miss the point and only see that they have annoyed me once again, thus ensuring that their racist-joke-telling will continue?

I feel like I’m stuck. And being stuck like this is way worse than being stuck with Lady Gaga in your head.

Anonymous Contributor

http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2013/03/14/lady-gaga-racist-jokes-and-other-pet-peeves/