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Owning Up To The Age Old Excuse

Emily G. Hauck
Gettysburg College

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Owning Up To The Age Old Excuse

Abstract

A few days ago, I was having a conversation with an older gentleman. He was friendly and very interested in my studies, but every now and then he would interject some racist slur or joke. He insistently referred to undocumented individuals as illegals because, according to him, “that’s exactly what they are.” He also made a few comments about Aryan dominance yet claimed that he wasn’t racist because he discriminates against all non-Aryans equally. The man clearly expected me to laugh along with him, especially with those last remarks, as if it were completely normal to utter them in an everyday conversation. He justified his words by saying “that’s just how it used to be”, “I’m old-school”, and “everyone’s overly sensitive these days.” [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, race, racial slurs, generational differences

Disciplines

Race and Ethnicity | Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](https://cupola.gettysburg.edu) 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.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

OWNING UP TO THE AGE OLD EXCUSE

July 29, 2013

A few days ago, I was having a conversation with an older gentleman. He was friendly and very interested in my studies, but every now and then he would interject some racist slur or joke. He insistently referred to undocumented individuals as illegals because, according to him, "that's exactly what they are." He also made a few comments about Aryan dominance yet claimed that he wasn't racist because he discriminates against all non-Aryans equally. The man clearly expected me to laugh along with him, especially with those last remarks, as if it were completely normal to utter them in an everyday conversation. He justified his words by saying "that's just how it used to be", "I'm old-school", and "everyone's overly sensitive these days."



I'm embarrassed to admit that I did not confront this man who, regardless of his excuses, was very clearly racist. I attempted to awkwardly change the subject, justifying my choice by telling myself that he didn't know any better. After all, elderly people [lose their ability to censor](#) what they say as they grow older, and he did live through an era in which racism was not only present, but accepted.

In retrospect though, I'm annoyed with myself. That man knew exactly what he was saying and the implications of his words. He wasn't a 90 year old suffering from dementia, but a lucid, working individual no older than 70. Furthermore, I've had similarly uncomfortable conversations with even younger adults. I don't think it is *age* that gives people the confidence to make such unacceptable comments. If it weren't for [my white skin](#), I don't believe they would have said such things to me, no matter how old they were. Instead, the issue here is what happens to people who have grown up in a society where their skin color gives them a sense of superiority and a fair amount of privilege.

After all, people in the United States are conditioned by a society in which whiteness is normative. While many fight throughout their lives against stereotypes and work to recognize their biases, they gradually lose the ability to control their thoughts and behaviors as they grow older, [causing them to be outwardly racist](#).

We cannot continue to write off older adults as being uniquely biased compared to the rest of the population though because NEWS FLASH: this is not an issue exclusive to the generation that grew up in the early to mid-

twentieth century. [Racial conditioning](#), meaning the unexamined stereotypes and negative assumptions that we are taught, often subconsciously, to believe about people of different races, is still very much alive in the twenty-first century. The workplace, schools, families, and other agents of socialization drill racial stereotypes into our brains, and whether we mean to or not, we internalize the idea that the lightness of your skin determines your worth as a human being. This process begins at a shockingly early age, often through [the use of media](#). Harvard University has created various [implicit bias tests](#) in which we can all check our own subconscious prejudices. Try it. The results tend to be shocking. Racial conditioning is still very much a reality.

We will all become senior citizens one day; we'll lose our ability to hide our implicit biases. If societal norms don't change, fifty years from now, our children will be making excuses for *our* racist comments. They'll comfort themselves by insisting that we are merely a product of a different time, that racism in America is over and will die with us.

This refusal to admit that racism is still alive and well in our society though is exactly what will prevent us from ever truly ending it. Even [President Obama skirted around the root of the issues](#) behind the George Zimmerman trial verdict in the speech he made on July 19th. While touching on various issues that the African American community faces, including some of his own personal experiences, he did not once mention the core problem: the pervasiveness of white supremacy in our nation.

With all of this in mind, let's stop writing off racism as a "part of a culture," whether it be that of the past or the present, because *people* shape the values and norms of their society. We, the younger generation, live in a society where many of the same attitudes are present that made the man with whom I spoke racist in the first place. At the same time though, we have the power to *change* that. To truly eliminate racism in our society we must be willing to admit that it is still an issue and then take advantage of our power to reshape reality in order to eradicate bias rather than perpetuate it.

Emily Hauck '14
Editor

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