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That Awkward Moment When I Accidentally Internalized Racism

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That Awkward Moment When I Accidentally Internalized Racism

Abstract

I recently attended a conference about the importance of Africana Studies (AFS) and it had a panel of visiting professors that consisted of mostly black men and women. I was beyond impressed by their achievements and found myself engaged and excited by their discussions. My admiration for these scholars only grew exponentially when I learned that one of the female professors was from Sierra Leone, just like me! [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, racism, internalized racism, dominant society, racial profiling

Disciplines

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

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.

SURGE

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

THAT AWKWARD MOMENT WHEN I ACCIDENTALLY INTERNALIZED RACISM

March 4, 2013

I recently attended a conference about the importance of Africana Studies (AFS) and it had a panel of visiting professors that consisted of mostly black men and women. I was beyond impressed by their achievements and found myself engaged and excited by their discussions. My admiration for these scholars only grew exponentially when I learned that one of the female professors was from Sierra Leone, just like me!



But why was this such a big deal to me? As I sat on my bed the next day, I still couldn't get them out of my head. Why did they leave such an impression on me?

And then it hit me.

I realized that I bought into our society's definition of who an intellectual should be, and that individual wasn't black. Our society's stereotyped image of an individual with a Ph.D is a graying male, decorated with metal-framed glasses and a sweater vest. When I think of a professor, a 20-something-year-old black male or female with a doctorate degree is the last place my mind goes.

There is a term for what I describe here. It's called **internalized racism**, the internalization and acceptance of the dominant society's racist attitudes towards members of their own group, including themselves.

It is internalized racism that often leads me to attribute my tardiness to the fact that I am black. It is internalized racism that makes me conclude that I am not good at math because I am not a male or an Asian, never mind the fact that I've never failed any math course. And, sadly, the list goes on.

From early on, young black kids often look at their academic abilities with a cloud of doubt. Comments like "you're pretty smart, for a black person" are commonplace. Black people's accomplishments and achievements in academia are not as widely celebrated or recognized as their white counterparts. We do not hear of the Ramatu

Banguras, or Jonathan Fendersons, young black individuals who have earned some of the highest possible degrees. Instead, we are reminded of the shortcomings and failures of the black community. These images and ideas are reinforced and ingrained in black youth from an early age, leaving many of them, including myself, to come to the conclusion that there is no place for black people in higher education.

The only way I can reconcile these conflicted feelings is to acknowledge my biases. When I reacted with surprise to the accomplishments of these panelists (a reaction I would not have had if they had been white), I trivialized their achievements through my subconscious belief that they have exceeded expectations for their race. I had fallen victim to the unspoken notion that black people in higher education is a rarity. This internalized racism doesn't only hurt the panelists – if I don't acknowledge and then reject these subconscious biases, I hurt myself by lowering my expectations of what I can accomplish. My first step to rebelling against the limitations that society places on me is to see the role that I play in it.

In what ways has internalized oppression affected you?

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