Maybe I'm the Problem

Chelsea E. Broe
Gettysburg College

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Maybe I'm the Problem

Abstract
Being raised in the United States, I internalized racist, sexist, transphobic, heterosexist, classist, ableist, and faithist ways of thinking. And by this, I do not simply mean that I was taught to hate people of color, queer individuals, working class people, or people of different religions. This indoctrination runs much deeper than that. [excerpt]

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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.

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MAYBE I’M THE PROBLEM

January 22, 2014

Being raised in the United States, I internalized racist, sexist, transphobic, heterosexist, classist, ableist, and faithist ways of thinking. And by this, I do not simply mean that I was taught to hate people of color, queer individuals, working class people, or people of different religions. This indoctrination runs much deeper than that.

Even as a female-bodied, gender-non-conforming polysexual, I sometimes lapse into negative or biased thoughts about these and other identities. I have used the words “gay” and “fag” as insults and, even though I trained myself years ago not to say them aloud, I still catch myself thinking them from time to time. I have misgendered people both accidentally and intentionally. I have called other women “bitch,” “cunt,” and “whore” despite vowing that I would stop using gendered insults.

I know other people have internalized these biases, too. It manifests itself when you look at a picture of yourself and say you don’t like it because you “look like a tr*nny.” And when you ask a man if he has a girlfriend. And when you tell a person of color that they speak well. And when you say that the LGBTQAAIP+ acronym is too long, so you’ll just remember gay, straight, and (maybe) bi as the only options for sexual orientation and gender identities. And when you ask your Arab classmate if she’s ever been involved in a political demonstration, since this, not racial profiling, must be the reason why she is searched every time she goes through airport security.

When people point out these biases in our own speech or actions, it’s easy to accuse them of being overly sensitive or just plain wrong in their accusations. As someone who has been on both sides of this interaction, I know all of the tricks. I’ve denied that my actions could be biased on account of my oppressed identities as well as my status as a Diversity Peer Educator. I’ve dismissed accusations entirely because, well, I know I’m not racist/sexist/heterosexist/etc. so you must be wrong.

And I’m sure others have thought this when I’ve told them that they sound racist/sexist/heterosexist, too. Some apologize immediately for not knowing that what they said was wrong, some use their own identity (as I did) or personal connections (“I have a black friend”), some use statistics, and some use the law as ways of supporting the notion that their comment was not actually biased.
I believe that if given the chance, most people would want to be rid of these biases entirely. But in reality, we cannot wave a magic wand and purge ourselves of these attitudes, and merely wishing they would go away neither excuses them nor works to eliminate them. We can, however, choose to question our deep-seated assumptions.

I don’t think I really believed I had any biases until I took an online implicit bias test. I don’t remember my exact result, but it was something along the lines of strongly favoring white people. Bullshit, I thought. I’m not a racist!

But seeing the results made me hyper-aware of any and all racial thoughts I had. Was I clutching my bag when I passed a black man at night? Was I impressed when a person of color spoke well? Did I ever question if students of color had earned the same opportunities on campus as I had?

Over and over, the answer was yes, and I became aware of the ingrained biases that had influenced my thinking throughout my life up until that point. Prior to this realization, I had known that the “-isms” were socially unacceptable, so I tried desperately to dissociate myself from them.

This fear of being thought of as biased is absolutely detrimental to social change. Until a person can admit that their way of thinking is controlled by the biases that they have been taught—and make a commitment to overcome them—nothing will ever change.

I am glad to know that I am surrounded by people who I know will call me out on any biased comments I may make. Knowing that I am the problem is the only way that I can work towards changing myself and, hopefully, becoming less of the problem every day. If you’re reading this and you want to see progress made in the realm of social justice, I hope you can say, “Maybe I’m the problem,” too.

Chelsea Broe ’14
Editor

http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/01/22/maybe-im-the-problem/