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No Parece

The Privilege and Prejudice Inherent in Being a Light-Skinned Latino Without an Accent

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INTRODUCTION

I am a light-skinned Latino with no (Spanish) accent. My parents were born in Colombia, South America, and I was born in the United States. I am 100 percent Colombian, a Latino, a Hispanic, and a person of color. However, because my appearance and speech do not meet the stereotypical expectations of other people, I am often exempt from the prejudice and oppression that other people of color face. Worse, at times people will try to confide and involve me in their racist thoughts and beliefs. I am not quite invisible, nor am I a chameleon. Struggling with privilege and prejudice inclusion and exclusion has given me insight into the complex nature of the intersections of privilege, ethnicity, race, and oppression.

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

I am a licensed psychologist; my doctorate is in Counseling Psychology. I am an assistant professor in Counseling Psychology at Indiana University, Bloomington, after having worked at the University of Florida Counseling Center for five

years. I consider myself a "self-taught" multicultural Counseling Psychologist, given that my doctoral program offered only a 6-week seminar on multicultural issues. I am indebted to Dr. Beverly Vandiver (who was then a counseling-center psychologist) and the pre-doctoral internship at Michigan State University, especially the Multi-Ethnic Counseling Center Alliance (MECCA), for helping to advance my training in multicultural issues.

PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND CRITICAL INCIDENTS

My skin is not really that light. My son, who is half-Colombian and half a Dutch/Irish/English/Russian/Norwegian mix, has skin so fair that it seems translucent. His eyes are blue, as were mine when I was born and before they changed to brown. My skin is light brown, darker than White but not quite brown or black. My parents, whose strong Spanish accents subject them to prejudice to this day, drummed any trace of a Spanish accent out of me. My parents saw their accents as a source of shame, and they made certain that their children would not stand out as "different." Thus, visibly and audibly, people do not often identify me as being Latino or Colombian. This perception is not limited to White people; many times, other Latinos and even other Colombians do not think I look Latino. This hurts the most.

> I was walking around the streets of downtown South Bend, Indiana, during the international festival, wearing my Colombia T-shirt that symbolized my newfound pride in my heritage. A young Latina woman approached me and asked, "*¿Colombiano?*" I eagerly answered, "*¡Si!*" She looked at me, wrinkled her nose, and said, "*No parece*" (you don't look like it). And then she faded into the crowd, leaving me alone with my shame and anger.

Often people will mistaken me for Italian or Arabic, if anything, but mostly it seems my ethnicity is invisible, often leaving me feeling left out of both majority White and Latino cultures. I have often been so distressed by this cultural invisibility that I have asked my mother whether I was adopted, whether she is "sure" that I am Colombian. She is offended every time I ask her. Being ethnically ambiguous (in my case being able to pass for White) has its privileges. I can go where I want without the fear many people of color have regarding how they might be treated.

Although I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, my exposure to other people of color (outside of my immediate family) was limited. I lived in a predominantly White suburb and attended predominantly White (middle-class) Catholic schools. The nuns who taught me in grade school were socially progressive and they taught me to desire social justice. We learned about the Civil Rights movement and were taught not to hate others based on the color of their skin. When we left the safety of our suburban school to visit the Martin Luther King Center

in downtown Atlanta, we had to pass through poor neighborhoods to get there. Everyone in those neighborhoods was African American, and they stared at me in my new school bus, full of White nuns and priests, White teachers, and White friends in their Catholic school uniforms. I began to feel guilty; this was not Martin Luther King's dream.

My hardworking mother kept me anchored in reality. We did not have much money because my father would spend money faster than he could make it. I knew that attending Catholic school was tenuously dependent on my mother being able to earn enough money babysitting, sewing, and cleaning other people's houses. My father would have sent me to the dreaded public schools in an instant. My father firmly believed that his children should assimilate to United States culture, and to him that meant we should be White. He also encouraged me to turn down minority scholarships for college (including a letter from Harvard inviting me to apply based on my PSAT scores and minority status). Instead I took out more than $50,000 in student loans to attend a prestigious institution where elite southern families sent their children. His perspective mirrored that of others.

> "Ed, you don't want to go to this college; it's not very good," my guidance counselor said. I knew "not very good" meant too many blacks went there and therefore the college was second rate. Southerners have a secret, coded language to avoid the appearance of being racist. "Plus, you want to get into college on your own merits, not due to some minority scholarship." I wondered whether she told that to athletes, or to children of alumnae? I knew the answer.

Evety day I was confronted with the privilege that my college classmates felt was as natural as air. For example, my roommate was a descendent of one of the founding families of Atlanta, and he was literally a millionaire. The large iron gates that surrounded the school reminded me that not everyone was welcome on campus. I began to wonder what I had done to deserve this privilege. What was so special about me that I deserved to be at this overwhelmingly White private university while literally steps from the university gates, was a city that was 60 percent African American? Furthermore, surrounding this urban, African American city were small farming communities that were stringently segregated by race. I felt guilty for living in my privileged world while people beyond the gates, including my mother (my father had finally left us when I went away to college), struggled to make enough money for food to eat. The following is an incident I experienced while attending the private university.

> My college girlfriend took me to her small hometown to introduce me to her family. When she introduced me to her grandmother, the matriarch of her family, she said, "This is Ed; his family is Spanish, from Spain." Her grandmother nodded in approval and later I found out that she was pleased that I was not Mexican and thus not a migrant worker. I was Spanish, therefore European, therefore White, and therefore acceptable.

I went from a small private school to a large private Catholic school for my graduate studies. Despite qualifications that were equal to or better than my classmates, I was viewed by many people as a either an "affirmative action" admission (not qualified but a minority), a Spanish/European (academically qualified but not a "real" minority), or my ethnicity was ignored altogether (a White guy with a Spanish surname). Consequently, many people would "trust" me enough to share their real opinions regarding racial matters. I do not think that people were trying to be offensive or malicious in telling me their real opinions. Rather, I think that they were so comfortable with me that they considered me a person with whom they did not have to be politically correct. For me, part of my privilege was hearing what some White people "really" thought.

> A colleague congratulated me on my graduate minority fellowship. "Good for you," she said. "You aren't even a real minority! I mean, you don't speak broken English or have an accent!" I think she genuinely meant to congratulate me on what she saw as a way for me to manipulate the system.

> While I was shopping for fruit at my local grocery store, an elderly White employee giving out samples of kiwi struck up a conversation with me. She noticed that I was looking at the avocados and stated, "Those are from Mexico." She then looked around to make sure no one else could hear her. "A lot of things in the U.S. are from Mexico, if you know what I mean. I feel sorry for those poor Mexicans. I used to live on the border of Texas and Mexico and I tell you, it's sad. Plus most of those Mexicans are on dope."

This knowledge often made me suspicious about the motives of Whites, especially as I sensed that it was only a matter of time before I became a target.

In graduate school, I was taught about social justice, feminism, and equity. My clinical training motivated me to take a closer look at myself and at the themes in my life. I realized that I needed to come to understand myself as a person of color, because for many years I had let others define me and be the judge of whether or not I was a "real" person of color. However, this was a painful process. For example, at a local conference, I was invited to a "students of color only" meeting and I went begrudgingly and left as soon as possible. The leader of this meeting was an African American student who seemed ready to take on the world. She talked about the need to unify and our common destiny as people of color. I was scared of her words, but the things she said continued to echo in my mind for quite some time.

As I continued my clinical training and continued to read about race, oppression, and multiculturalism, I began to make connections in my life, and I began to notice injustice and prejudice that surrounded me. As hard as it was to realize, I had to go no further than my graduate program to notice inequity. We had no professors of color, few graduate students of color, and limited training in multiculturalism. As a graduate student, noticing these things was difficult. I lacked the power to make any real change and my status in the program was dependent on the very faculty I was criticizing. Around this time, I read

The Autobiography of Malcolm X (Haley, 1964) and I began to understand institutional racism and was able to center my feelings about race within a broader context. I became inspired to reclaim my Latino heritage and asked my mother to take me to Colombia. I put a great deal of energy into consciously being Latino, and I devoted my free time to outreach and retention efforts with minority students. As Janet Helms (1990; 1995) might say, I immersed myself in being Latino.

By a fortunate twist of fate, the graduate student who had inspired me at the "students of color only" meeting accepted a job as a Counseling Psychologist at my university during my third year, and we became instant friends and colleagues. My fervor and energy for multicultural issues were amazing, but my friend could see some of the holes in my identity. Although I was connecting with Latino heritage, I was still very prejudiced, privileged, and homophobic.

> "Ed, just because you are Hispanic doesn't preclude you from being prejudiced. Did you know that Hispanics owned slaves too? You can't exempt yourself from the legacy of slavery by saying you are Hispanic. I mean, Colombia had some of the biggest ports for slave ships. Brother, you have to get yourself together."

She was right. I had too easily identified with the oppressed. In my zeal to appease my guilt for having privilege, I had assumed an identity that was not authentic. "Getting myself together" was, and is, a continual process of acknowledging my privilege, of not negating having received unearned assets due to privilege, of not so easily identifying with those who are oppressed, of critically examining my authenticity as a person of color, and of ferreting out the more subtle impacts of racism and oppression that linger in my subconscious.

The first step was to realize that consciously giving up my privilege was not the same thing as never having had privilege in the first place. For example, my mother had come to this country with nothing, but her light skin and family connections allowed her to quickly make something of herself in the United States. People in projects such as Chicago's Cabrini-Green, or migrant farm workers picking fruit in Michigan would likely never have the opportunities I had, no matter how hard they worked. This process of self-examination has turned out to be a life-long process. A friend mentioned to me that I have an easier time dealing with the White, Spanish, and oppressive side of me than I do accepting the indigenous, racially mixed, and oppressed side of me. This seems to be my growth edge.

PROFESSIONALLY ORIENTED PERSONAL STRUGGLES AND TRIUMPHS

After internship I took at job at the counseling center at the University of Florida where I worked from 1997 until 2002. Moving to Florida from the Midwest was another lesson in privilege for me. Although Florida has a large Latino population, Cubans and South Americans predominate while Mexican Americans are a small minority, all of which is a stark contrast to many other areas of the United

States. Consequently, there exists a hierarchy of Latino heritage with Mexican Americans consistently being at the bottom. Earl Shorris (1992) referred to this racism within Latino culture as *racismo*. As a result, I had to confront anti-Mexican prejudice and educate students about the political activism of the Chicano movement as a model for Latino activism.

I was not prepared for the tension that existed between African Americans and Latinos in Florida, especially amongst faculty and administrators. It seemed that Latinos were viewed as competing for traditionally African American resources and African Americans were viewed as wanting exclusive rights to diversity and multiculturalism. The rise in numbers and power of Latinos is a growing political reality, and it seemed to me common sense to build coalitions between minority groups, but many disagreed with me. In the politicized battles over rapidly diminishing diversity resources, it seems that no one emerges victorious.

I became the faculty advisor for the Colombian Student Association (COLSA), and my work with these students gave me a chance to connect with both Colombian and other Latino cultures. I attended Latino cultural events, gave Latino music and dancing a chance (and grew to love it), improved my Spanish, read Latino literature, and watched Latino movies. I learned to insist that people use both of my surnames, which surprisingly forces people to view me differently. These things helped me feel more authentic as a Latino, regardless of what others thought. More often than not, people now identify me as a Latino, if not always a Colombian. Having other Latino friends to share my struggles and to compare notes also has helped me a great deal.

A main part of my work at the University of Florida Counseling Center was outreach with Latino students. I found that the multicultural literature does not offer much guidance in understanding and working with Latino clients, especially with those who are not from the demographically dominant groups (that is, Mexican American, Puerto Rican, or Cuban). In particular, I was unsatisfied with Latino racial/ethnic identity models (Delgado-Romero, 2001) that seemed to be too general to be of much use. Similarly, there is relatively little known about bilingual therapy and few programs that offer training to bilingual therapists. I believe there is much more to be learned about Latino people and the way that we are being changed by (and changing) mainstream American culture. The multicultural literature needs to move beyond generalities and deal with the specifics of each Latino culture. For example, I can verify from personal experience that Colombians often differ more from each other than they do from other Latinos. Colombia is an immense country with many ethnic, racial, and cultural variations within its borders, and it is only one of the Latino countries.

CONCLUSION

> "NO SPICKS FOR PRESIDENT"—Graffiti painted on the side of the Institute of Hispanic/Latino Cultures on the morning of student-government elections in response to the first Latino presidential candidate, who was also one of my students.

The misspelled racial slur caught me by surprise. I had grown comfortable within my enclave of Latino friends and the small but powerful Latino student community. There was a sense of excitement as my student ran for student-body president. He was the first Latino candidate for the influential student-body-president position (the president directly controlled an eight million dollar budget), and there was hope that he could win.

The result of the slur was emotional and political upheaval. For the first time in their lives, many of the Latino students felt unsafe and singled out because of their ethnicity. Many people became "minorities" for the first time that day, especially those who had lived all their lives in predominantly Latino cities such as Miami. It seemed that because of recent numerical and political gains, Latinos were the new targets for backlash.

I wondered whether I had made the right choice in choosing to identify so strongly with my Latino heritage. I wondered whether my life and that of my half-Colombian son would have been easier if I had just continued to "pass" for White and lived a life wherein my Colombian heritage was an interesting factoid, but otherwise not important.

As I prepared to speak at the student-led rally in response to the racial slur, I looked out into the crowd. There were faces of every color and race, there were gay men and lesbians, and there were White people. All were united in a sense of common outrage and purpose. At that moment, I knew I had made the right choice and that, through examining my deep-seated prejudices, internalized racism, and homophobia, I was providing an example for others. Then I spoke....