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IES Dialogues on Differences

Journal Entry 5

24 May 2017

**Apartheid-era categories remain salient in South Africa today; for example, in regards to affirmative action policies at the university. Consider the impact of the continued use of race categories.**

On one hand, race is undeniable. It is our roots, one of our most basic identities, and reminds us of our history. Instead of pretending race isn’t a thing and that it’s not there, we should avoid colour-blindness, see the disparity, address it, make it real, and resolve it. On the other hand, using race classifications is means for wide-spread institutional segregation. Rather than coming together as one large melting pot of peoples, categorization creates a divide and feeds the “Us vs. Them” mentality.

I’d rather believe that skin color is a real phenomena in our society that needs to be addressed rather than ignored. There are very real consequences when race isn’t acknowledged. For example, the evil that race can cause is obvious “in January 2004, Nelson Chisale, a black farm worker, was tied to a tree, beaten unconscious and then fed to a pride of lions by his former white employer, Mark Scott-Crossley (Zimitri Erasmus 182). In this instance, the violence that is created by race is blatant; a wealthy white man abuses his power over his black employees. And a less extreme, but still very real example, Salusbury and Foster note that “’white’ people are constructed as ‘just normal’. While ‘white’ ideology and culture thus becomes normative, those others who are constructed as ‘ethnic’ become increasingly marginalized” (Salusbury & Foster 96). Such is an example of how race creates undeniable power disparity that needs to be addressed. Denying that race has social implications has led to a lack of collective persecution, weak social bonding, and therefore marginalization by the group in power (Salusbury & Foster 95).

**What is it like labeling all of the different ways you identify? Share another experience like you did with the testimonial activity in class. But this time, write about an experience where multiple identities were affected, or write about one where you were either part of an advantaged or targeted group.**

I identify as an upper-middle class, privileged young-adult, and well-educated white male. I’m a blonde-hair, blue-eyed American from St. Louis, Missouri. I’m a Case Western Reserve University computer science nerd and computer whiz. I’m a swammer (a term for ex-swimmer) who has a love/hate relationship for the water and I’m a brother of the Delta Sigma Phi fraternity. There are many ways that I identify, but from my own understanding and personal experience I feel like I live the average life of a white American. I honestly can’t complain about many of the aspects of my identities because they are mostly advantageous. Some of my identities carry with them this sort of institutional expectation that I’m guaranteed to succeed starting at birth. For example, if one is born into an upper-class household, then the resources that are available to them give them an advantage to extended education, extracurricular, better job opportunities, etc.. Because of my personal background, I haven’t had to work as hard as others to get to where I am.

There’s just one way that I identify that made me out as a target and created a daily struggle in my life. It started when I was in second grade when I went from a thin child to obesity over the course of a year. I was that “fat kid” for a few years in school. I hit triple digits on the scale by 3rd grade. Oh, and did I mention that I was also the new kid in school because my family moved that summer. I was the “fat new kid.” What a great combination. That is not a part in my life that I like to relive, but I strongly consider obesity, or rather past obesity, a strong part of my identity. I incorporate it because it was my daily struggle. I got teased, of course, but I also couldn’t run as fast as the other kids, I couldn’t jump as high, and I sweated a lot more (ew, gross). Even though I’m much thinner than I once was, I’m conscious of my weight because being a target for everyone left a prevailing emotional scare. Though I choose not to forget about those bad childhood memories because I use the past as motivation to continue staying healthier. I saw that there was a problem, it became real, and I resolved it instead of pretending it wasn’t there.

**Where are you with your comfort zones and learning edges up to this point in class? What’s been intellectually/emotionally/socially challenging or easy, and why?**

I believe this question was previously asked. Talking about race is still emotionally and socially challenging because the truth is that we are not living in a color-blind, post-racial era. Even today, racial inequalities are still a reality. Just because you’re not a racist, doesn’t mean that others in the society we live in are not.

I had mentioned that there is no humility is being part of the privileged group, which I still strongly believe. Your response to my journal entry, as I understood it, was that my “white guilt” isn’t warranted because I didn’t chose the advantageous parts of my identity. I agree that we are often given our an identities through no effort or fault of our own and that there's situations, places and times that make them either very visible or rather transparent. There's no use or reason to feel guilty, especially as we as individuals did not set up this system that confers privilege or discrimination. It just really unfortunate that people pervert aspects of their identities that I happen to share. Take white-supremacists, for instance. It makes you feel gross and wronged when they take your “whiteness” and corrupt it for their own agenda.

However, I think my “white guilt” has gotten worse since the last time this question was asked. “Whiteness” is in a way demonized in South Africa because many see it as a root cause of the country’s post-colonial problems, such as Apartheid and rampant inequality. Even though I’m not South African per se, living for a short time in this country has made me much more aware of the WESSA aspect of my identity. I agree with Tess Salusbury and Don Foster that “’whiteness’ in South Africa differs from Western contexts in that it is more obvious in its potency” (Salusbury & Foster 93). I believe the reason that I’ve become self-conscious of my “whiteness” is that I’ve become a minority by skin color. Before my stay in South Africa, I’ve never really been a minority for such an extended amount of time. But my residence in South Africa gives me insight for seeing how it feels to be targeted for an aspect of your identity that is out of your control.