

How Do I Talk To You, My White Sister?



Center for Gender in Organizations

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This commentary is drawn from a keynote address that Mary McRae, Associate Professor at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, delivered at Working Mother's Best Companies for Women of Color National Conference in July 2003.

When I initially chose the title for my talk "How do I talk to you my White sister?" I was filled with frustration over an attempt to talk openly about issues of race and ethnicity with a group of White women at an earlier conference entitled "Advancing Together: Feminism and Multiculturalism." I have used the term sister, which is used in the Black community. It is a term from the Sixties that implies a connection, a caring, and it is within this frame that I attempt to speak today.

Stereotyping and projecting allow White women and women of color to maintain their places in the status quo. It keeps us from initiating and managing systemic changes and prevents us from recognizing racial differences as having the same legitimacy as gender differences.

It is interesting that I am here at this conference five years later, again a conference sponsored predominantly by White women. But this time as an invited keynote speaker, my experience is very different from the one that I had five years ago. The purpose of the "Advancing Together" conference was to have women from a variety of racial ethnic groups, heterosexuals, lesbians, academics, and practitioners, come together and work on a series of casebooks geared toward advancing feminism and multiculturalism across several areas of counseling psychology. At first there was intense energy around the very idea that such a diverse group of women from different constituencies had come together. Of course, I needed to be clear about what we were doing and how we would work together. Boundaries, authority, roles, and tasks are important to me in group and organizational work. To

clarify the boundaries, I wanted to know how this group understood the interface between feminism and multiculturalism. In order to clarify roles and tasks, I asked, "When talking about oppression, how did White women deal with the fact that they were the daughters, lovers, wives, sisters and mothers of the White men that were identified as the oppressors?" And authority seemed implicated in how White women's relationships with White men would impact their work and relationships with women of color. My expectation was that we would engage in some conversations around the title of the conference, and that there would be openness to discussing racism and sexism that I had not experienced in other places. So I was excited, ready to talk about what seemed so unspeakable, so un-discussable, within most mixed groups and organizations.

My experience in the conference, however, was that all the White women heard was my anger about racism and discrimination, and that they were unable to take in and work with that anger. Because they could not work with my anger, they could not hear my pain. This breakdown in communication led me to turn, once again, to other women of color, who were not intimidated by my anger and could hear my pain. I needed to feel heard and understood. This is something that often happens when women of color engage in discussions with White women: we come out to talk, end up being frustrated and thus move back to our respective groups for solace and affirmation. What I hope to do here is to address this breakdown in communication, to share with you what I perceive as a problem that occurs in this process, and to make recommendations for addressing this problem.

Things Shared, Things Not Shared: Sexism and Stereotypes

As women we share the experience of sexism, of living in a society that is basically patriarchal in its hierarchical structure. White women and women of color experience sexism at work, in our communities, at home and in many of the policies that govern our lives. This common struggle, things shared, is easy to talk about and to join together in various activities.

There are two things that I believe create problems in our communication: 1) the stereotypes ascribed to White women

and particularly to Black women, which may be similar to those ascribed to other women of color, and 2) the experience of racism.

The early sex stereotype literature indicates that White women are perceived as passive, weak, fragile, and powerless.¹ In their book *Our Separate Ways*,² Ella Bell and Stella Nkomo identify images that Black women have of White women. In their view, White women use their fragile status to garner power by catering to White men—what Bell and Nkomo call “Miss Anne”—or they internalize and act out the behaviors often ascribed to White men, such as being cold, insensitive, controlling, and overly ambitious—the “Snow Queen.” Another archetype Bell and Nkomo discuss is that of the “Femme Fatale,” the flirtatious White woman who uses her sexuality to manipulate men. While “Miss Anne” and “Femme Fatale” comply with the weak and fragile stereotype for White women, the “Snow Queen” is just the opposite.

In contrast, African American women are sex-stereotyped as independent, assertive, and aggressive. Because of our history of slavery we have been depicted as strong workers and caretakers. We have had to take charge of situations and do what had to be done for the survival of our families and ourselves.

Stereotypes serve as social shorthand. At their most positive, they facilitate connection by allowing us to feel that we know something about another person without doing the work of actually getting to know them. At their most negative, they allow us to feel justified in avoiding contact with others, and as a result we may feel we don’t have to work at making connections.

Beliefs that are informed by stereotypes can be so strong that we tend to accept them, even about ourselves, and act as though they are true. Thus girls think they are not supposed to be good at math, women believe they are not supposed to do jobs that men have traditionally done, etc. I call this internalized sexism, which has many of the same consequences as internalized racism.

If we think about the different stereotypes ascribed to White women and Black women we can see, developmentally, how White girls and Black girls might process their experiences differently due to gender and race. Black women can take on roles ascribed to them such as nurturing, strong, and aggressive. White women can take on passive, fragile, weak, and powerless roles. We need to consider how these roles and the perceptions of these roles get played out in our interactions with each other. If White women have internalized perceptions of themselves as weak, passive, and powerless, then it must be difficult to identify with the power of White skin privilege.³ If Black women have internalized perceptions of

themselves as strong, assertive, and nurturing, then it must be difficult to identify with a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability. It is also hard for Black women to perceive White women, who are stereotyped as weak, as actually being powerful and strong. Similarly it would be hard for White women to perceive Black women as weak and vulnerable.

Now how do these stereotypes influence our interactions? When in conflict with Black women, White women often take a stance that suggests that they are weak. They cry, they shut down, they act as though they have no power. This was my experience of most of the White women at the conference I mentioned previously, and I have had similar experiences in work situations. Many women of color perceive this behavior as a manipulation that is enacted in the service of deflecting attention away from the power that comes with White women’s skin privilege and their affiliation with powerful White men. Perpetuating the stereotypes of being passive and weak, especially around issues related to racism, allows White women to see themselves as powerless in initiating change and making a difference in society. Black women also buy into the stereotype and underestimate the power of White women. If we remain stuck in these stereotypical representations of each other, we will not be able to effectively utilize our collective strengths or empathize with our respective vulnerabilities.

Things Shared, Things Not Shared: Racism

The experience of racism is not shared. Audre Lorde wrote, “White women fear their children will grow up to join the patriarchy and testify against them, women of color fear their children will be dragged from a car and shot down in the street, and White women will turn their backs on the reasons the children are dying.”⁴ Remember some of the violent incidents against Black men and women just in the past decade: James Byrd in Texas, Amadou Diallo, Abner Louima, and Alberta Spruill in New York. We are not just women of color fighting against the patriarchy; we are women of color who live with the fear of racist acts against us and those we love.

When I talk about race, I am coming from a Black womanist perspective. Alice Walker defines a womanist as a feminist of color who is willful, serious, loving and committed to survival and wholeness of an entire people, male and female.⁵ I think about race as it impacts my life and the lives of other people of color. I think about race as a mother of a young Black man, as a sister, as a daughter and as an intimate partner. I have often wondered how White women balance the duality of race and feminism, of White skin privilege and feminism. Do they actively and knowingly participate in the racist structure, while fighting against the sexist structure? Or is there

a denial of the racist structure as a way of distancing themselves from that aspect of the struggle against oppression? It is hard for Black women and White women to talk about these issues if there is no understanding of where we stand on issues that affect at least one side so deeply.

Race and racism are really shared by White women and women of color in that we all live in a racist society. The difference is that women of color actively experience racism almost on a daily basis. Chester Pierce calls these experiences *microaggressions*.⁶ Race and racism in America are closely related to power, authority, leadership, privilege, and superiority, and women have traditionally had difficulty dealing with these issues. White women all too often do not want to acknowledge their White skin privilege and their access to power through affiliation with White men, who are their fathers, sons, and husbands. This White skin privilege and access to power is not available to most African American women and women of color. When this difference is put on the table, it affects communication and, unfortunately, often forces it to shut down.

Understanding Things Not Shared

Talk about racism stimulates angry feelings: feelings of superiority and inferiority, feelings about authority, power, and privilege. If we think about race from a systemic perspective, we can ask, who has power and authority to make decisions, and who has access to those with power and authority? A survey of women managers and professionals conducted by Catalyst found that African American, Latina, and Asian American women lag behind White women and men of color in the kind of jobs they hold and the pay they receive.⁷ The results show that women of color do not have the same access to opportunities for mobility in employment as their White counterparts, which speaks to White skin privilege and to how the simultaneity of race and gender is a double negative for women of color. While employment discrimination has been the experience of both White women and women of color, we can see from surveys such as Catalyst's that race and White skin privilege can make a difference. How do we address this difference in access to opportunity as we move into a more multicultural society?

Consequences Of Things Not Shared: Anger and Fear

Dealing with racism means dealing with anger and fear: anger at exclusion, unquestioned privileges, racial distortions, negative stereotypes, stolen opportunities, betrayal, and cooptation. As a Black woman, racism is a part of my daily experience. I must talk about it. I must be free to express my anger and rage at racist acts and the impact of racism on the lives of

people I care about. Audre Lorde refers to Black women's rage as being part of a symphony, with rhythms to listen to and learn from.⁸ Some research on the socialization of Black and White girls around anger suggests that while White girls are socialized to stifle their anger, Black girls learn that anger can be useful.⁹ Black women express their anger as a means of setting boundaries, standing up for and taking care of themselves, telling others what they will and will not tolerate.¹⁰ Here again is the issue of perceptions and stereotypes, how women buy into them and how they can affect behaviors and interactions. How does the White woman who has internalized her perception of self as passive and weak relate to an angry Black woman whom she perceives as strong and possibly aggressive?

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The stereotypes of White and Black women help us to maintain projections of each other. A projection is an unconscious way of defending ourselves by rejecting uncomfortable emotions and attributing them to others. If my stereotypes of White women are that they are weak, passive, and powerless and that Black women are strong, caring, and nurturing, then it allows me to project all the weak, passive, and powerless aspects of myself onto White women. White women become the weak "other." It puts me in a difficult place because it does not allow me to hold on to the weak and powerless parts of myself as a Black woman, that are indeed a reality in this society. My projections of these aspects of myself onto White women prevent me from being in touch with some parts of myself that allow others to see me as vulnerable and needy.

White women's projections of Black women as nurturing and strong force White women to lose sight of the strong and powerful parts of themselves. It allows them to see the anger in Black women as bad and dangerous. The angry Black woman who is justifiably angry about racism becomes the

“angry bitch,” representing aspects of White women that are unfeminine, undesirable, and out of character.

Many White women do not see race and racism as problems that affect their own lives and society as a whole, and talking about race and racism provokes anger and fear. Women of color, on the other hand, are expected to talk about race and to hold on to all of the anger and rage that is stimulated by this topic; women of color are also expected to educate White women about race without getting too angry. We are expected to find a way to contain our anger and discuss this topic in a way that allows White women to hear it but not to experience the pain of our anger and frustration around it. Perhaps women of color, in their stereotypical role of being strong caretakers and nurturers, take on the anger about race in the service of White women. Perhaps our backs are the bridges. The book *This Bridge Called My Back*, a collection of writings by radical women of color, asks, “How can we—this time—not use our bodies to be thrown over a river of tormented history to bridge the gap?”¹¹ A bridge gets walked over again and again, and I think that this is where the anger surfaces in women of color—we perceive the burden of dealing with race as one that is always on our backs.

Summary

Stereotyping and projecting allow White women and women of color to maintain their places in the status quo. It keeps us from initiating and managing systemic changes and prevents us from recognizing racial differences as having the same legitimacy as gender differences. Consider the changes that could occur in society if racism was given the same energy that sexism has received the past two decades. What would happen if consciousness of gender and race for women of color were integrated into the feminist movement? What would happen if the intersectionality of race and gender were acknowledged? Integrating the various aspects of oneself, the projections of “the other,” the perceived good and bad, make for a more complex person, one who can work from different places with different people. It is something that I optimistically strive for and pray that more of you will do the same.

Endnotes

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