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Dirty Dancing with Race and Class:

Microaggressions toward First-Generation and Low Income College Students of Color



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Race and class in education are intertwined dance partners, tangoing through the lives of college students who belong to both racially and economically minoritized groups. This is not a beautiful and graceful dance to beholden, but a destructive and dirty performance of racism and classism operating together in the same way dancers move in unison. This dirty dance occurs when White faculty member assumes a student of color is a transfer student from a community college, even after examining transcripts that clearly indicate the contrary. While this example appears to be based on race, there is a simultaneously classed element to it: the assumption that a student of color *must* have transferred from a community college. Here, the racist assumption and classist belief support one another, cannot be easily separated, and therefore move in concert with each other. Race and class operate as a dirty dance because one influences the other just as coordinated partners waltz together. The faculty member's above assumption is an example of a racial microaggression, a covert act of racism aimed at people of color as a subtle way to maintain White supremacy (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). It is also classed because the implicit bias is undergirded by an

assumption about perceived class associations based on a student's skin color.

Theoretical Frame

Leonardo (2013) advanced the concept of *raceclass*, where one is inseparable from the other, imploring for partnering race and class to understand what they bring collectively to the educational dance floor. Within higher education we posit that *raceclass* has been historically presented through the "great equalizer" myth, in which racially and economically minoritized students can transcend racism and social class by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps through education. This myth is based on a meritocratic ideology supported and maintained by Whiteness (McIntyre, 2002).

We believe racial microaggressions help the *raceclass* great equalizer myth to go unchallenged. Racial microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (Sue, Capodi-

lupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007, p. 273). Returning to the White professor's harmful assumption above, we believe similar experiences are *raceclassist microaggressions*- or the intersection of racial microaggressions and class microaggressions. Raceclassist microaggressions are subtle digs targeted at people of color due to their perceived belonging to a lower class position and the racist assumption that racially minoritized people *must* be from poor or working-class backgrounds.

Methodology

We explore how raceclassist microaggressions impact a of first-generation and low income college students of color by analyzing the experience of one of our authors, Sarcedo. This methodology is a form of critical race theory's counterstorytelling. The methodology of counterstorytelling presents an opportunity to share a personal narrative from a person of color to challenge the majoritarian stories which maintain White supremacy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Facing microaggressions can often be dismissed because they are, by definition, subtle, vague, or hidden (Sue, et al., 2007), so we strenuously acknowledge that microaggressions have very real effects (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Sue, et al., 2007) and seek to use Sarcedo's counterstory to illuminate how raceclassist microaggressions are experienced by first-generation and low income college students of color, with the understanding that her counterstory is not an unmediated view into the experience of all first-generation and low income college students of color (Cousins, 2010).

Raceclassist Microaggressions and the First-Generation and Low Income Student of Color

Sarcedo tells her counterstory of a particularly memorable raceclassist experience which occurred during a small group discussion with three White women in an undergraduate educational psychology class. In her autoethnographic counterstory, she discusses how her White classmates carried on a conversation about spring break service learning and study abroad

trips which excluded her as an economically minoritized student of color. When she finally joined the conversation to chime in about her experience taking International Baccalaureate (IB) classes in high school, one of the White women quipped, "I would have never guessed you did IB," a jab at Sarcedo which assumed she was not capable of taking on such lofty academic pursuits undergirded by the notion that students of color and poor folks were academically inferior. When the conversation turned to graduate school, the White group members laughed at Sarcedo for not knowing about the Graduate Record Examination. For Sarcedo, it was "not just laughter; it felt as if they were mocking me and snickering as if my nescience was hilariously worthy of ridicule. Their laughter was far more isolating than ignoring me earlier in the conversation had been" (p. 9). Their laughs were loaded with the raceclassist assumption that Sarcedo could not move on to graduate education as a low income college student

of color. This experience reinforced the message that Sarcedo did not belong in college or graduate school, for it was laughable. Sarcedo walked away from this raceclassist encounter feeling a deep sense of hurt and isolation.

We undertake a raceclass analysis of Sarcedo's counterstory to show how raceclassist microaggressions affect first generation and low income college students of color. Our analysis conveys that White and middle class college stu-

dents assume that racially and economically minoritized college students are academically inferior (Gusa, 2010; Leonardo, 2013), which supports White supremacy. Raceclassist microaggressions have the *material power* to disenfranchise students of color by excluding them from academic spaces (Leonardo, 2013). Additionally, raceclassist microaggressions serve an *educative function* in that they reinforce perpetrators' racist and classist beliefs while allowing their harmful beliefs and actions to continue to flourish (Leonardo, 2013).

The Emotional and Academic Effects of Raceclassist Microaggressions

We pose three chief effects of raceclassist microaggressions on racially and economically minoritized students. First, we propose that raceclassist microaggressions have a deeper emotional effect on low income and first-generation college students of color

Feelings of being marginalized, hurt, isolated, and dehumanized are results of how the power structures of both race and class collide and collude.

because they lie at the intersection of multiple identities, compared to students only belonging to one minoritized group. This is not to claim greater victimhood in the hierarchy of oppression (Museus & Griffin, 2011), but acknowledges that raceclassist microaggressions which target multiple identities impact students differently than microaggressions aimed at only one identity. Second, we posit that an important consequence of the heavy emotional toll of facing raceclassist microaggressions is that it becomes difficult for students to visualize themselves succeeding at the university level in a process similar to internalized racism. Third, and perhaps most devastating, raceclassist microaggressions carry the implicit message that racially and economically minoritized students are not supposed to be in college. The subtle digs of raceclassist microaggressions and the resultant isolation felt in their wake represent one small piece in the “profound patterns of exclusion” in higher education which serve to further disadvantage students of color (Hirald, 2010, p. 54).

Recommendations for Practice in Higher Education Student Affairs

Although our examination of raceclassist microaggressions focused on the individual experience as a unit of analysis, because microaggressions are perpetrated by individuals while serving as part of an institution to bolster Whiteness (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), we conclude with recommendations for student affairs to mitigate the disastrous effects of raceclassist microaggressions. One recommendation is to raise awareness of Whiteness, which Gusa (2010) pointed out is endemic in higher education, and how Whiteness manifests inside higher education and is expressed

through microaggressions. This can be achieved by integrating sustained awareness campaigns into existing student affairs programs such as orientations, freshmen seminars, and student leadership development while promoting staff professional development opportunities which also support these programming efforts.

Another recommendation is to work to empower students of color. Student affairs programming could accomplish this through workshops, activities, and roundtable sessions exclusively for racially and economically minoritized college students. Through closed spaces designated for students of color and low income students, especially at predominantly White institutions of higher education, student affairs professionals can prevent campus spaces from representing White spaces, which alienate students of color while masking contemporary color-blind racism from White students (Cabrera, 2014). Faculty can also promote empowerment of minoritized students in their classrooms by becoming “comfortable with addressing race issues, validat[ing] feelings experienced by students of color, legitimiz[ing] a different racial reality, and exhibit[ing] good communication and facilitation skills” (Sue, et al., 2009, p. 188).

However, these types of changes must be done without putting the onus for success on racially and economically minoritized college students. An institutional praxis requires that the impetus for change is driven by the institution and not exclusively prompted by minoritized students themselves; for if the institution does not make explicit attempts to support students of color, they ultimately fail students of color. The collision and collusion of race and class all too often

represents a dirty dance that batters and bruises minoritized students throughout their educational journey. We, as educators and student affairs professionals committed to equitable education, must work to halt the coercive dance between race and class on our campuses in order to allow racially and economically minoritized college students to flourish.



Image by Natalie Battaglia