Exploring Unintentional Racism: The Case of Tim Hanks

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Introduction

This case study is designed to help you explore your attitudes about race and learn about the complexity of the concept of racism. The case consists of several parts, or sections. After reading each part, we will discuss and also be writing about the issues raised in each part before moving on to the next segment of the case. A handout follows Part III on the social psychology of attribution theory, the concept of unintentional racism, and the idea of institutionalized racism.

While we are waiting to begin, please jot down a few notes about what comes to mind when you think of racism.

After you have done this, introduce yourself to the people next to you and discuss your thoughts and feelings concerning racism.

Some things you might want to think about include:

- How serious a problem do you think racism is in this society today?
- Is it worse or better than it was years ago?
- Have you experienced any incidents of racism?
- How do you distinguish between prejudice and discrimination?
- If you see these as problems, what are you doing to deal with them?

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Part I—Tim Hanks

I was an instructor at a suburban community college in a unique program for students who had very poor academic records in high school. As the social science instructor for 120 students, I worked to coordinate my teaching with three other instructors; one each in natural science, the humanities, and composition. Being a "sixties liberal," I wanted to make a contribution to integration and take a strong stand against racism. Tim Hanks, the only African-American student in my course, wasn't helping any. He attended class sporadically, turned assignments in late, missed others altogether, and performed poorly on tests. When he did come to class, he was usually late and always left before I had a chance to talk to him.

Like the other faculty in the program, I felt it was my responsibility to pull each student, regardless of race, through. I wouldn't lower standards but was prepared to do everything in my power to help all students meet the requirements. Nothing that worked with other students seemed to work with Tim. He made appointments to meet with me and his other instructors, only not to show up. Offers of extra time and assistance on assignments didn't help either. Attempts to call Tim at the phone number listed for him with the college were unsuccessful; the number had been disconnected. Letters to his listed address were returned as undeliverable.

Questions

Discuss the following with the people sitting next to you and look for as many different perspectives as you can find.

1. What would be some of your thoughts about the possible reasons for Tim Hanks' behavior?

2. If you were his teacher, what might you have done with him or any student who behaved this way?

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Part II—Turnaround

Eventually I came to the conclusion that Tim simply lacked the motivation to complete assignments and attend class regularly. He didn't have the academic skills to do the work nor the drive to correct his deficiencies.

As the semester drew to a close, it was clear that Tim would fail the course. It was painful to flunk any student but this was doubly so; something was obviously deficient in me. I didn't have what it took to succeed with African-American students. Shaking my head, I wrote an F on the grade sheet.

When I received my class list for the next semester I saw that Tim Hanks was in my class again. Feeling somewhat uncomfortable I wondered why Tim didn't try some other instructor. Tim obviously couldn't get motivated to do the work in my class the previous semester. Was he just a glutton for punishment?

Seven or eight weeks later Tim came in to get his midterm test from me. It was an A-. He had earned no lower than a B+ on any of his assignments. As he sat down to talk (a big smile on his face after seeing the grade on his midterm), I asked him, "What makes the difference between someone I had to fail last winter and someone I'll have to give an A to this fall?"

"I have a car," he said.

"How can a car make such a difference?" I asked, puzzled.

"Well, I live downtown near the Art Center. In a car it's a thirty minute trip. On a bus it's an hour and half both ways on a good day." Embarrassed, he looked down at the floor as he said, "On a bad day I would be OK till I got out here to Main Road. Then it would be hit or miss whether the bus drivers would pick me up. A couple of them would even swerve to splash slush all over me. If they did, I'd feel so bad I just got on a bus going back home." When asked why he didn't come in and tell me about these difficulties he said, "I was so embarrassed about doing so poorly in your class I just couldn't get myself to come in."

Questions

Discuss the following with the people sitting next to you and look for as many different perspectives as you can find.

1. How would you have reacted to these explanations? How does this affect your thoughts about the reasons for his behavior?

2. What would you have done next?

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Part III—Racist?

I was crushed. I admitted to Tim that I had assumed he didn't come to class regularly and had trouble with his assignments because he didn't like my class. Tim said, "Oh no! I really liked your course. It was just first on my schedule and so, if even one driver didn't pick me up, I couldn't get to it on time."

I didn't say that I'd thought Tim had no motivation and poor academic skills. In fact, at that moment, though I was too embarrassed to admit it to him, I realized how racist my assumptions were. Partly I was projective because I attributed Tim's behavior to the things that would have caused me to behave as he had. If I didn't get to class on time or failed to get my homework done, it would be due to my low motivation. By implicitly assuming Tim was just like me, I had dramatically misunderstood Tim's behavior in a very racist way.

But worst of all was the realization that my attributions were simply intellectualized versions of unconscious racist stereotypes about African-Americans. I'd thought, "Tim doesn't have the academic skills to do the work nor the drive and motivation to correct his deficiencies." "Lack of academic skills" was my way of covering the unconscious feeling that Tim wasn't bright enough to do college work. In essence I was saying he was lazy. If the school had consulted me on a decision to let Tim have a second try, my attributions could have ruined Tim's chances. Luckily they didn't ask me. If he had come in to see me during his first semester, would I have confronted him on his "low motivation"? Ironically he missed his appointments so I didn't confront him. If I had, what effect would that have had on him and his willingness to relate to me in the future? Here I was, a "sixties liberal" and a self-convicted racist.

I wondered if my nonverbal communication gave Tim any hint of these underlying feelings. If so, did they in any way contribute to his hesitancy to communicate about his transportation problems the term before? As a clinical psychologist I would have to guess that my nonverbal signals, and those of my colleagues, probably did contribute to Tim's uneasiness. I wondered if my fear of making a mistake with a minority person and deeper discomfort being around someone who looked so different made me more hesitant to ask why he was having trouble in my class in the first place.

What I learned was one didn't have to be a bigoted bus driver to be part of the system of racism. All I had to was to make a "natural" "assumption of similarity" and give in to my "normal" fear of difference. I didn't have to hate African-Americans or consciously discriminate against them all. All I had to be was myself, and the racism operated.

Questions

Discuss the following with the people sitting next to you and look for as many different perspectives as you can find.

1. Do you agree with the instructor's conclusion that he is a racist? Explain your answer.

2. How is prejudice different from discrimination? For example, would you have considered the instructor racist if he had told the readmission committee about his view of Tim as lacking academic skills and the motivation to improve them? Would you consider the instructor racist if he had confronted Tim on his low motivation?

3. Find someone who disagrees with you. Write out their definition of racism and compare it with yours. Do they disagree? If so, on what dimensions? Do they agree? If so, along what dimensions?

4. How would you characterize the difference between the racism of the bus drivers and the racism of the instructor? Are both kinds equally prevalent in our society, and to what degree are they both destructive?

5. Can you think of any examples of racism in your experience? How are they similar to and different from this example? Was your experience nearer the "bus driver" end of the racism continuum or more like the instructor's "racism"?

6. Take some time to think back and see where your attitudes toward African-Americans may have come from. Do you remember the first time you met or saw an African-American? Were your views affected at all by the television, newspapers, and movies you saw as a youngster? What were your later experiences like?

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Three Theories from Social Psychology That Are Useful in Understanding Our Reactions to This Case

One theory that helps make sense of our reactions to this case was developed in the research of Gaertner and Dovidio (1986). Gaertner and Dovidio distinguish between *aversive racism* or *unintentional racism* and old-fashioned, or *blatant racism*. In contrast to old-fashioned racism, which is characterized by overt hatred for and discrimination against African-Americans or other minorities, aversive racism is characterized by more complex, ambivalent racial attitude. On the one hand, aversive racists are well-intentioned people who typically (1) avoid acting in a racist manner, (2) support public policies that promote racial equality, (3) sympathize with victims of past injustice, (4) identify with liberal political agendas, (5) possess strong egalitarian values, and (6) regard themselves as non-prejudiced. On the other hand, aversive racists almost unavoidably possess negative feelings and beliefs about African-Americans (it may be built into the social fabric of our minds). In contrast to the old-fashioned racist, however, the negative feelings experienced by aversive racists are not hatred and animosity toward African-Americans, but rather *discomfort, uneasiness, or fear* in the presence of African-Americans (which may be built on our biologically based fear of strangers). In addition, this negative affect is frequently unacknowledged or dissociated from the self because it conflicts with one's egalitarian self-concept and value system.

Because aversive racists are concerned with maintaining an egalitarian self-concept, they typically do not consciously or intentionally discriminate against African-Americans. The negative affect underlying the racial attitude of aversive racists, then, is likely to influence behavior in subtle, unconscious, and unintentional ways. That is, the aversive racist is likely to discriminate against African-Americans only in situations in which discriminatory behavior can be easily rationalized, such as when the norms for what is appropriate (non-racist) behavior are unclear (Gaertner, 1973), or when there are nonracial justifications for one's discriminatory behavior (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1977). People may unconsciously and unintentionally discriminate against African-Americans even while consciously making every effort to behave in a non-racist manner.

A second set of ideas that are helpful here are from attribution theory and the concept of *fundamental attribution error* (FAE). This framework helps us understand the racist implications of the way the professor *thought* about Tim Hanks. This theory explores how we account for or explain the causes of behavior we perceive. The process of trying to account for cause is called the attribution process. Researchers in this area point out that one may conclude that a given behavior is either indicative of the actor's *disposition* (i.e., personality, attitudes, etc.) or the *situation* in which the behavior was performed (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1967). The FAE was then introduced as the natural tendency to unknowingly *overestimate* the extent to which another person's behavior is indicative of his or her *disposition* and *underestimate* the extent to which it is indicative of the *situation* (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1984).

It is argued that the FAE can have racist implications because whites are more likely to make derogatory dispositional attributions for negative behaviors performed by an African-American versus another white person. For instance, in one small class of undergraduate students that did this case, 29 students

proposed a total of 77 different explanations for Tim's behavior. Of those 77 explanations, 59 (77%) suggested dispositional causes whereas only 18 suggested situational causes. At least one dispositional cause was listed by 27 of 29 students, and 18 (67%) students proposed only dispositional causes.

Some of the more popular attributions were: (1) Tim did not like the class, (2) Tim lacked motivation, (3) Tim was embarrassed by his poor performance, (4) Tim was shy, (5) Tim was lazy, and (6) Tim was irresponsible. Only 11 students mentioned even a single situational cause for Tim's behavior, and each of those students also listed at least one dispositional cause. In addition, the situational causes listed tended to be more vague and abstract than dispositional causes. For example, one student making a situation attribution said "there might be something else going on in his life besides the class." Four other students thought that Tim might have "family problems." Interestingly, none of the students reported racism as a possible cause for Tim's difficulties.

A third concept from social psychology that is important here is *institutionalized racism* (Jones, 1991, pp. 610-611). Although this concept applies more to organizations than to individuals, this case can be used to see how a person can unintentionally contribute to decisions that have racist consequences. In particular, if the professor in our case were invited to sit in on a readmission decision for Tim, he might offer his opinion that Tim just lacked the motivation, skills or appropriate self-discipline to be a part of the program. Based on that view, the admissions committee might deny Tim a second opportunity to take courses. This would appear to the admissions committee to be a fair, color-blind and therefore non-racist decision. In fact, because the environmental conditions are quite different for Tim than they would be for a Caucasian student, the decision would have a racist or discriminatory effect. In other words, "color-blind" usually means that we treat people as if they were white-middle-class or even white-upper-middle-class. The existence of institutional racism makes it important that we all examine our academic policies to see if there are any negative racial, social, or ethnic effects. If there are, then we need to examine our assumptions about how level the playing field really is. Making fair, seemingly race-blind decisions may actually lead to racist policies and we might be overlooking unique barriers to success. This case suggests that it is valuable to recognize social category memberships like race, and examine those memberships for the constraints, benefits, and perspectives that go along with them.

Some discussion questions for these three ideas from social psychology include:

1. How does the concept of "aversive racism" fit your reactions in this case? (Fit reactions in your teaching?)

2. Do discomfort, uneasiness, and /or fear characterize your reaction when in the presence of African-Americans and other underrepresented groups?

3. Does your behavior ever unintentionally end up discriminating against members of underrepresented groups?

4. Were the responses of the instructor in this case more dispositional or situational? List each of his attributions and decide which type they were.

5. Can you find examples of situational and dispositional attributions in your responses to this case? Which type predominates?

6. Do you see that the professor's behavior with the admissions committee could have been an example of institutionalized racism? Can you think of any other policies that might have this effect?

7. Does emphasis on "academic rigor" ever have a discriminatory effect in courses?

A second set of discussion questions (if there is time) related to Tim Hanks being the only African-American in a class of 120 students include:

1. How do you think being the only African-American in a class of 120 affected Tim? How do you think you would you feel if you were Tim?

2. How do you think this affected the way other students perceived him?

3. Why would it have been hard for Tim to find a friend to ride with? Or a group to study with? Or someone to get notes from?

4. Do you think Tim would have been looked at as the spokesperson and/or example for minorities in the class?

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