My Racial Experiences as a Black Person

By: Katherine Brown

During the last several months, America has had a racial reckoning. Prompted by years of continuous police brutality against black people and the Black Lives Matter protests happening across the US, the nation has really started to take a hard look at the historical plight of blacks in this country. Slavery and segregation are no longer subjects only mentioned in a few school classrooms, but instead, are being acknowledged (and condemned) publicly. People are starting to see the very real effects of slavery and segregation on modern day black citizens, recognizing them as part of systemic racism.

While some people might view racism as obvious wrongs like black people sitting in the back of the bus or calling a black person the "n" word, racism is actually much more complicated than this. There's much more to the story. Racism is weaved into the fabric of our society, from the judicial system, to movies, to even food brands.

Racism isn't always blatantly obvious. In fact, most of my own personal experiences with racism have been subtle. No one has called me the "n" word to my face or anything like that, but I've been the target of jokes, micro-aggressions, and discrimination.

I attended a small, white private school for most of my school years. I was around very few blacks and there wasn't really any diversity. Racism was never openly addressed. It just wasn't something that was talked about.

During middle school, there was one particular kid who routinely made racist remarks toward me and other non-white students. He told me things like, "What's it like to be black?" and "You're so black." I and other girls told the principal about his actions, but I'm not exactly sure what was done about it.

During high school, my teacher sometimes told racist jokes. They weren't funny, but I didn't know how to respond. There are many times I have laughed at racist jokes because I didn't know what else to do. What am I supposed to do when someone jokes that my last name is the same as my skin color? So, I did what any self-conscious 14-year old would do. I smiled and laughed along with it. What else was I going to do?

Once I graduated high school, I attended a big, white private university in the south. It could be awkward at times. In some situations, I was the only black person present - in my classes, in my dorm, in campus events.

There are a few racist experiences that happened in college that stick out to me the most.

During my sophomore year, I was walking from class one day, and these white guys drove past me in their truck. They yelled something at me. I didn't hear what it was, but it didn't sound friendly.

During my junior year, my college held a career fair to help students find jobs and internships for after graduation. I had donned my best suit and shoes for the occasion. I approached a company's career table, resume in hand. I tried to introduce myself and explain why I was there. However, I was abruptly stopped by the young women running the company's booth. I was told that the company was only accepting applications from seniors - even though they had accepted applications from (white) students of all classifications. I knew they didn't want my resume because I was black.

During my senior year, I applied for a student desk job. At the time, I was wearing my usual hairstyle, faux locs. When I entered the departmental office, the girl at the front desk told me that it was a laidback job and that the manager was looking for someone who could work a specific amount of hours, which I could. I felt good about it.

However, once the manager saw me, I immediately knew I wouldn't get the job. She didn't say anything racist, but I could see it in her eyes and facial expressions. She said she would get back to me about an interview after she reviewed my resume, but I knew I wouldn't get a callback. And, sure enough, I didn't.

I think that many times, people think that they hide their racism, but they tend to give themselves away. They look at you funny or just stare at you when you talk. It feels uncomfortable.

The truth was that she didn't want a black person with faux locs running the front desk for other people to see. She didn't want that to be the office image.

When it comes to the subject of racism, I think some people tend to adopt a "out of sight, out of mind" thought process. If they don't see or experience racism for themselves, it must not exist in the real world.

I think it might be hard for some people to believe that their own friends, neighbors, and coworkers - people they know - have experienced racism personally. I myself have been met with some doubt when I've mentioned my own racist experiences to people. It's hard to explain to someone who has never experienced racism that you didn't get hired for a job because of your hair type. They don't understand it. They try to explain it away or justify it. For them, racism is only a concept that exists in textbooks, something that happened a long time ago during the '60s. They don't want to face that racism is happening right now, to people they care about.

I think some people tend to assume that the issue of racism doesn't affect me, bother me, or apply to me as a black person. I assure you: it does apply to me. I - like many other black people - didn't magically make these stories up or pull them randomly out of the air. I just didn't discuss them. I didn't feel comfortable talking about them before now for fear of making things…. well, awkward. I didn't want to make people uncomfortable. It wasn't because I don't have a story to tell. Just because I didn't discuss my experiences, doesn't mean they didn't happen.

I think a crucial step in tackling racism is to talk about it. For me personally, I tend to avoid the subject of race with my white peers. We just ignore it, and everyone just tiptoes around the issue. However, I personally think that in order for things to change, we need to have a dialogue about it. Silence leads to misunderstanding, and people tend to get offended over things they don't understand. Hence, when awkward situations concerning race do occur, confusion ensues. Tensions flare, emotional barriers go up, and people shut down. Everyone leaves the situation feeling annoyed, angry, and even hurt.

I think having an honest conversation about racism can help prevent this. Discussing how you truly feel about the issue helps you express your feelings and say how the issue impacts you personally. Talking can also clear up racial misconceptions, falsehoods, and stereotypes.

While there is much work to be done in the fight for racial equality, I think talking about racism is a big part of it. It will take many hard conversations to obtain true racial equality in America.

References

WBUR. (2020). Mapping Black Lives Matter Protests Around The World (Picture). Retrieved from https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2020/06/22/mapping-black-lives-matter-protests