

# BLACK IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY: A STUDENT'S REFLECTION ON RACIAL CONFLICT IN A BSW PROGRAM

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*This narrative is a reflection about the author's recent encounter, as a young African American woman, with racial conflict in an undergraduate social work program at a predominately white university in the Midwest. This narrative tells not only the author's response to this racial conflict with one non-minority student, it also tells the story of the silence and complicity of the undergraduate program in letting this incident and similar derogatory incidents experienced by other students of color go unchallenged. This narrative suggests that, long after the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision, racism continues—even in a social work education program.*

As a young African American woman, I have grown up in a society where racially derogatory terms are "supposed" to be a thing of the past. It is no longer socially acceptable or politically correct for whites to refer to minorities in a racially degrading manner. However, with the recent trend of some African Americans referring to themselves by the "*N-Word*" (pronounced with an "a" instead of the "er" at the end), it becomes confusing for some white Americans. My own view always has been that the "*N-Word*" is inappropriate in any context, whether used by non-minorities or minorities. However, it was not until a classroom incident in my undergraduate social work education that I realized exactly how much weight that word carries, both past and present.

Before proceeding further, it is important to clarify the reason the offensive term in question is not being published in full. The editorial policy of *Reflections* requires that this racially derogatory term be referred to only through the use of "n\*\*\*\*\*," rather than spelling out the entire word. In my view, the unfortunate effect of this policy is that it disconnects readers from the emotions that I felt, which are of central importance to understanding my experiences and those of other students of color who have heard these types of derogatory terms in the course of our personal and professional lives.

I share my story because it is a recent incident of racial conflict. I hope that fellow social workers and colleagues in other helping disciplines can feel the pain that I went through because words do hurt, more than we think. And if we do not share our history with one another, then we cannot assist in improving the problem.

## **The Storm of a Word**

At a predominantly white university I attended as an undergraduate, the ethnic minority population made up approximately 2% of the student population, and African Americans were less than .08%. The university acted as if they cared about the "at-risk populations" (apparently meaning anyone outside of the "norm") because they allowed minority student organizations to host a variety of consciousness-raising programs. However, attendance by the white administration, faculty, staff, and students was scarce at these programs.

I decided to take a course entitled "multiculturalism/diversity and social work" because I thought it would be a good learning experience. It was the first time that this course would be offered as an elective to students. Also, the course was to be taught by a professor of color. The course syllabus stated that students would learn in-depth history about minorities in America. The course was different from all of the other social work



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courses because it specifically focused on “disadvantaged/at-risk” populations, which made it different from the “cookbook approach”<sup>1</sup> to diversity used in other courses. This course, in contrast, was intended to educate students on the historical content of race relations, gay/lesbian issues, and persons with disabilities, and to help students become aware of their conscious and subconscious biases, in order to best serve clients.

Following the first session, which focused on introductions and a discussion of classroom etiquette, the students began their voyage in learning about multiculturalism and diversity. I was extremely interested in the professor’s instructions on classroom etiquette, which emphasized the importance of respecting one another, validating history, respecting peers’ point-of-view, and asking questions if one was unclear about a subject matter. The overall importance of the classroom etiquette was to embrace similarities and respect differences.

The second session focused on the Native America/American Indian population. At the beginning of our discussion, the professor again reiterated the classroom boundaries. The professor then began the lecture in a unique manner, opening up the floor for discussion on the different stereotypes held about Native Americans. Students and the professor alike had the opportunity to share various mythologies about Native Americans/American Indians. The shared experience was progressing well until a white student in the class began making fun of the way Native American/American Indians spoke. Apparently, this was a form of mockery that people from the student’s hometown did quite often. Initially, I did not know what the student was doing. It was not until later that I understood more clearly what the student was doing and why it was wrong.

The third week of class was focused on a discussion about African Americans. Once again, we began class by talking about the

various mythologies and stereotypes we had heard about African Americans. The students, including myself, began saying different things we had heard; yet, we kept in mind classroom etiquette. Unexpectedly, a firestorm was lit. The same white student who earlier had mocked Native Americans/American Indians used the term n\*\*\*\*\* in a phrase to refer to African Americans. The student did not direct the phrase at me *per se*; rather, the student used the term to refer to African Americans in general.

I sat there in this multicultural/diversity course for social workers dumbfounded because the truth had slapped me in the face. It was not as if I had never heard the term before or that I was naïve enough to believe that people do not make racist slurs anymore. However, all of us in the class were supposed to follow the same social work code of ethics that emphasizes the inherent value, dignity, and respect for all people. I believe that I took the statement so personally because I was the first and only African American in this BSW program; therefore, I knew the American historical context behind the word. The student’s words made me initially feel helpless.

I never imagined that I would hear such a derogatory term from a social worker (or future social worker), so I sat angry, restrained, and feeling quite irrelevant. Perhaps I did not have the right to be upset since the term was not directed at me personally? Maybe it was okay since the class was discussing stereotypes and myths of ethnic minorities in America? However, the major difference between this particular student and the other students was that the rest of us used the euphemism “n-word” in order to respect one another. Finally, I wondered—perhaps the student really had racially derogatory beliefs?

The entire class sat there in silence. My white classmates looked at the floor, or one another, or at the professor. No one looked in my direction. I could feel the professor’s

displeasure, as s/he glanced at me. I sat there observing the behavior of the other students, and I could smell the trouble in the air. In my heart, I knew that some students felt embarrassed—their faces screamed embarrassment—but the sense of mutual accountability, guilt, or shame was absent. Some students no doubt felt sympathetic for me, as an African American; however, their silence suggested that the racist words and behavior of a fellow white peer did not offend them. Perhaps this was because the statement was indirect (or general); or perhaps, they were in shock; or perhaps, as whites, they were not offended because they had never experienced derogatory racial comments directed at them or members of their racial and ethnic group. After approximately two minutes of uncomfortable silence (which felt like a lifetime), the class proceeded on, as if nothing had transpired.

During the remainder of the class, my mind reflected on the historical wrongs to African Americans. The first incident that popped into my head was the “Little Rock Nine.” In 1957, the Little Rock Nine referred to the first group of Black students to be admitted into Central High School, a public school in Little Rock, Arkansas, that previously had been segregated, as an all-white school. I thought more specifically about one student in particular, Minnijean Brown, who was kicked out of Central High School for dumping a bowl of chili on a white peer who had been harassing her. Now, I could understand how Minnijean was provoked to take such actions.

I then moved backwards and thought about the U.S. Supreme Court desegregation case that established Little Rock Nine, *Brown v. Board of Education*. I am grateful for the outcome of that decision because it is the reason why I could attend a predominantly white university. However, I soon learned that physical desegregation is not the equal to mental integration. After replaying several

historical events in my mind, my anger was replaced with frustration. Following this particular incident, I thought that the educational system was probably better off when it was segregated—yet, I knew better.

When class concluded for the night, I moved swiftly to my car. Once inside, I felt safe, so I cried. I was no longer crying for myself. My soul began to cry out for my grandmother, my ancestors, and other African Americans who had experienced racial hatred behind such an ugly word. For the remainder of the week, I went through a full cycle of emotions because I knew about the hatred that the *N-word* carried. I felt alone, sad, ashamed, and then irritated by the incident. I kept trying to analyze where the class discussion went wrong? And how was this different from the others?

### **The Final Outcome**

The next class session was peculiar because no one other than the professor spoke. The entire class appeared apprehensive about participating in the current topic’s discussion. The professor ended class a little early that night, but before dismissing the students, the professor talked about the incident from the preceding week. The professor began by apologizing to the class for what happened.

The professor mentioned that s/he had spoke with the director of the BSW program and the director did not know what to do or say about what had occurred. The director stated that the professor should share what happen with other faculty colleagues and brainstorm solutions. The professor indicated that the only thing learned from faculty colleagues was that this was not the first time that a white student had referred to African Americans as n\*\*\*\*\* in this BSW program. Further, there were other times when faculty had not addressed these behaviors occurring in class. The difference between those earlier incidents and mine was that, previously, there

were no African American students in those courses.

There were several problems with how the course professor, the department director, and other faculty members responded to this incident. First, the professor apologized to the entire class before apologizing to me. Yes, the entire class was indirectly affected in a roundabout way, but I was the one most directly affected because the comments were against my ethnicity. (There was a part of me that felt empathy for the professor. As the only African American and one of three students of color in the program, I could relate to the course professor in terms of race relations, since the professor was only one of two professors of color in the social work department. I also found it ironic that the professor assumed responsibility for "fixing" the problem that, perhaps, the professor was not trained to handle. I assumed that directors of programs were well-equipped with tools for this type of problem solving. I wondered if perhaps the director did not feel comfortable addressing a situation involving race or racism because the director was from the majority race.)

Second, the professor waited until the end of class to talk about the problem, instead of making it a priority for the beginning of class. Third, apparently neither the program director nor faculty had a plan for addressing racial conflict in the program, whether occurring among students, faculty, or staff. It was hard for me to understand how leaders and educators in the profession could not have a plan for resolving racial conflict. Situations like these are kind of like that saying, "expect the worse—hope for the best," which simply means, be prepared. Fourth, although the director was made aware of what had occurred, I was never contacted to make sure that everything was okay, or even asked if I were still interested in the program. The lack of accountability on the part of the students, faculty, and administrators could have altered

my perspective on the social work profession. And in the end, that could have persuaded me to change professions. Lastly, to hear that a similar situation had occurred in previous classes made me upset. I could not believe that a profession that teaches conflict resolution and values fighting social injustices would allow such indecent behavior to occur within the classroom.

After the professor voiced his/her concerns regarding how racial insults previously had been handled in the BSW program, the professor turned to me and apologized. The professor expressed sorrow about "the confusion" and said that s/he could not even imagine how this would change my life, both personally and professionally. The professor also apologized to the entire class for not handling the situation sooner, stating that the professor felt uncertainty about where or how to begin the conversation.

I accepted the professor's apology. Yet, I was perplexed about the word "confusion" because I felt that the incident was much more than that. However, I decided not to harp on the terminology. After the professor finished, I chose to share with the class how I felt about the situation. I told my peers that this one incident changed my perception toward social work. I looked at the white student who had made the comment straight in the eyes and said, "If you would have said that word around the Chrissy from six months to a year ago, you would have been picking your teeth up off the floor. Yet, I have changed and for the betterment of myself. When you said that word, I found myself speechless because I could not believe that a fellow social work student would use such horrible language." I told my peer that the word n\*\*\*\*\* is full of hate, and it is used by whites to make African Americans feel inferior.

My white peer sat there looking guilty as charged. When I mentioned that the "old me" previously would have responded to that type of language with physical retaliation, the

student began to cry. I think that the student cried because of the realization that the word would have evoked a violent response, had the incident occurred a few months ago. If the student previously did not know the impact of the *N-word* on an African American, the student certainly knew it now. I concluded by stating to the white student, "Somewhere in my heart I have empathy for you because you do not know the extent of your words. The old saying about 'sticks and stones' is not true because words do hurt. No scab will ever cover the wound I endured from hearing a fellow social work student use such a vulgar word."

I thought that the student would have apologized then, but the student did not. The apology only came later—much later. After speaking directly to my peer, I turned to the rest of the class.

"You all let me down. We are taught in social work to respect and fight social injustices. And I want to know how can you fight social injustices for your clients, if you cannot stand up for a peer? You all know me, you all have been in classes with me for over two years, and you allowed another social worker to degrade African Americans. I figure, if you cannot defend a colleague, then how can you stand up for your 'disadvantaged/at-risk' clients?"

It took a minute for someone in the class to step up to the plate. Nonetheless, someone did and said that s/he felt bad about the situation. This peer (another white student) stated that s/he did not know what to say after the other white student made the comment. The peer said that s/he felt embarrassed and compassion for me because s/he had not a clue about how I felt. After the first student spoke, other students became involved, which made the student who made the racial slur feel worse. Finally, that student broke down and apologized to me for the comment. In my heart of hearts, however, I knew that the student did not mean it because, afterwards,

even as we encountered each other around campus, the student never acknowledged my presence again.

### **After the Storm**

I am proud that I let everyone in class know how I felt. Initially, I was hesitant to share this anger. I did not want to fit into the typical portrayal of black women, which is perceived by many white Americans as ANGRY. I accepted the fact that on that night I changed several of my peers' insight as to who I am; but I no longer cared. My intention was to prevent this from happening to another social work student of color. I left class that night with my head held high. I did not rush out to my vehicle this time. Oh no, I strolled with pride because I had empowered myself.

There was tension in my classes for the remainder of the year. I had several social work students come up to me and ask what happened. And then, there were students who spoke to me frequently prior to the incident who hardly said two words to me or ever spoke to me again. I believe that the students in the program were split on how they felt about me. I overheard some students say that they thought I was violent because I stated how the "old Chrissy" would have reacted, but I heard no acknowledgment of how I had changed. I fought back mentally because it would have caused me more professional damage to fight back physically. I did not give in to the anger, but I used that emotion as a tool to better my personal and professional growth.

The remainder of my senior year was awkward. I always felt like an outcast in the social work program; however, I began to feel the wrath after the incident. Some students and professors began to treat me differently. I can recall three separate occasions after that night when I knew I was being treated differently because of what had happened. The first occurred the following day when I walked into one of my morning classes, which

had several of the same students from the previous night, and they were discussing the incident with other students. The small groups hushed when I walked into class. Another example was the professor for this particular morning course. This was someone with whom I thought I had a good rapport. However, the professor did not look me in the eye for several weeks following the verbal altercation. A final example was a comment from an older white student who asked me, "Why do ethnic minority students feel they can walk around campus with an attitude?"

I was baffled by this comment because I was making an effort to apologize for what happened the night before out of respect for my elders. I was raised in a family where I was taught to respect my elders. In my family, children and young adults are taught to respect older adults, and if you do disrespect an older adult you must apologize for your discourteous conduct. I stated to this older student, "I am not the spokesperson for ethnic minorities on this campus. You should take this up with the persons with whom you are having the problem." I was puzzled and angered by this older student's comment. That was the moment that I realized I would never "fit-in" with some of my white peers. Initially, I tried to "fit-in" and befriend all the social work students. However, I resolved a long time ago that I would never jeopardize my blackness (or my heritage) just to "fit-in."

The final outcome was that I found my passion in the field of social work, which is to educate and advocate. I have moved forward in my life and I am currently pursuing my master's degree in the field of social work. One day, I hope to teach at the college level in a school of social work, in addition to obtaining my doctorate degree.

### **The Cycle Continues**

Initially, I was hesitant to share my story because of my love for the profession. I did not want to embarrass the profession, the

college institution, or the BSW program because that was the bridge that crossed me over. I had to sit down and seriously weigh out the pros and cons of such a narrative. During my deliberation, I decided to contact the director of the BSW program I attended.

I wrote in the email that I was considering sharing the racial incident that had occurred in my undergraduate studies. I asked the director why I was never contacted after the director had learned about what had taken place. I also inquired further about whether similar occurrences had happened to other students of color in the BSW program. The director of the program wrote back immediately, stating that s/he had heard about the verbal altercation in the classroom, but wanted to give the professor a chance to resolve the situation. The director indicated, however, that if the professor did not resolve the dilemma, then it would be left up to the director to address it. The director mentioned that another incident had occurred in her/his class the night before I wrote my email. In a course taught this year (2003) by the director of the program, a white student had used a racially derogatory term in the presence of students of color. The director asked *me* what steps should be taken to resolve the situation.

I stated that the director, as the professor of the course, should speak with the class as a whole, advising them of classroom civilities and the NASW Code of Ethics that each signed their names on. Finally, I told the director that, if I were still a BSW student in the program, I would have liked for the director to acknowledge that the incident occurred through a phone call or a meeting. I said that I believe that it may be helpful to the students of color (currently in the program) if the director met with them, either individually or as a group to validate their feelings.

After much thought and reading the emails from my former BSW program director, I knew what I had to do. I decided that it was time to share the story experienced by many

students of color, whether it is on an implicit or explicit level. I realized that I am not writing a narrative solely about my racial experience, but I am also describing the negative racial experience of other students of color in predominately white programs. I wanted to share the experience that some students and faculty of color have experienced; yet, they have remained silent, as they experience a lack of programmatic response to these types of episodes. I hope my narrative serves as a vehicle for change, so that this cycle does not continue.

### Macro vs. Micro Problem

Race remains a taboo subject in America. In classes, we try to talk around the issue, or not address the topic at all. From my experience in different social work classes, some professors choose not to touch the issue of race at all, and, if they do, it is with a "cookbook" methodology. What I mean by this is that professors use the same approach when attempting to teach about racism, as if all clients are exactly the same. The "cookbook" approach makes me feel that professors do not want to get their hands dirty while talking about race.

From the confession of this professor, I gathered that this was not the first time that a student in this particular program had used a derogatory term to refer to minorities. As a minority social work student, I get frustrated in speaking with other minority students and learn that they have encountered some form of implicit or explicit racism from a professor or fellow peer.

Do not get me wrong, the world should not have stopped; yet, the feelings of students should be validated. The issue should not go unresolved for weeks, months, years, or never be resolved. I believe that all social work programs (not just a few) should have implemented a plan of action for situations of this nature. By implementing a plan of action in each social work program, racial

discrimination and other forms of discrimination based on differences can be resolved at their early stages. And the issue will not be taken out of context or control. *Limit the flicker before it becomes a flame.*

### Conclusion

This is a narrative about one young African American woman's experience in a BSW program. I cannot speak directly about the era of *Brown v. Board of Education* because I was not yet born at the time the Supreme Court made its historic ruling. However, I have researched and spoken with people who were around during that time and through them I have obtained a thorough knowledge base about the outcomes of the case. If it were not for *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the history of desegregation would be written entirely differently. I can honestly say that I do not know where we would be as a country if it were not for *Brown v. Board of Education*.

I am sharing my story because I want to let all persons in the helping professions know that explicit and implicit racism is wrong. Today, there are no laws on the books restricting minorities from equality in America. However, there are persons who disagree with the laws of the land and apply some type of "ism" in their life. I hope that this narrative has opened the hearts and minds of minorities and non-minorities, alike. The purpose of this narrative was to share the importance of racism (whether individualized or institutionalized) and of communication etiquette for all people. All educational programs must develop an *active response* to incidents of racial intolerance and prejudice.

### (Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> As discussed elsewhere in this narrative, the cookbook approach refers to a "generic" type of approach, rather than discussing each cultural group in a manner appropriate to each group's own cultural uniqueness.

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