

Modern Racism at a Multicultural Men's Retreat

In the late 1990's I attended a week-long multicultural men's retreat. 100 men from around the United States – about equal numbers of men of color and white men – came to the retreat to share our thoughts and feelings about masculinity and to deepen our relationships with one another. One of the explicit goals of the retreat was to experience a multicultural community, where we would encounter one another as men of color and white men. Some of the participants knew each other prior to coming to the retreat; most of us were strangers.

I wrote and sent this letter after the retreat to all of the men who had attended.

Dear _____

It has been a month since we were together at the retreat. Since I got home, I have talked with many friends and colleagues about my experience. After hearing what I had to say, several of them suggested I put my thoughts on paper and share these thoughts with all of you who attended the retreat with me.

And so I am writing a letter to all of you, hoping that my comments will be useful. If my comments are not useful, or if you are angry with what I have written, please feel free to ignore this letter or share your thoughts and feelings with me. I am interested in being in a dialogue with men who have similar and different perspectives from mine, and to learn from each other. I don't consider my perspective to be right or wrong; it is simply a perspective, and I am interested in hearing how others see the same situation from a different perspective.

I would like to hear your thoughts.

Sincerely,

Cooper Thompson

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From the moment I arrived at the retreat, I noticed that white men were interacting with men of color in ways that I found troubling. It looked to me like examples of what in my work we call modern racism: behaviors that are well intentioned but racist in their impact, even though the white people engaging in these behaviors may be unaware of their impact and probably not intending to be racist.

Modern racism is a way to describe the subtle, covert ways that white people, acting individually and collectively, maintain positions of superiority over people of color. Modern racism is in contrast to old fashioned racism: overt and explicit acts of prejudice and discrimination.

Most of us (hopefully) don't support explicit acts of racism, whether they are modern or old fashioned. But our attitudes and beliefs about race are usually acquired in childhood, reinforced by cultural norms, and resist change, and so it is likely that white people's sense of superiority will emerge in a new form rather than disappear. Modern racism is the result.

I was surprised and sad to see so much modern racist behavior in a setting where I expected to see far less. I thought that one of the goals of this retreat was to create a multicultural space for exploring our relationships with each other as men with different racial and cultural identities.

So I began to talk with other men at the retreat about what I was seeing. In general, the men of color knew exactly what I was talking about, and often added details that I had missed. But the white men seemed surprised by my observations about racism at the retreat, and most of the white men disagreed with me. One white man said, "Racism here? You're preaching to the choir. If we were racist, we wouldn't have come to this retreat."

Here are some of my observations about white male behavior at the retreat that I consider to be example of modern racism:

- Some older white men tried to give advice to younger men of color. As far as I could tell, the older white men hadn't asked if the younger men wanted their help, and the younger men of color hadn't said they wanted help. Apparently, the white men were assuming that they had something valuable to offer the young men. This sounded like an assumption of superiority to me, maybe based more on age than race.
- White men challenged men of color on the validity of their feelings, experiences, and perceptions; again, it sounded like an assumption of superiority, as if only white men knew what is true.
- An African American man was describing a situation in which he distrusted a white man; another white man listening to this said, "That happens between any two people. It has nothing to do with race." I challenged the white man three times on his discount of the African American man's experience, and tried to explain how he was discounting. He told me, "That is your interpretation of what I am saying." I asked him if he was willing to consider the possibility that the impact, not the intent, of his comments was a discount of the African American man and he refused to consider that. Furthermore, at no point in the conversation did the white man ask a single question for information to the African American man, such as "Why did you feel that you couldn't trust the white guy?"

- When an African American man talked about his experience with racism, a white man responded, “Are you sure? Isn't it really because of and not because of racism?”
- White men were shocked when they heard an African American attending the retreat describe how he was stopped by the police three times on the way to the retreat; the white men tried to explain away the police officers' behaviors, as if it couldn't be due to race.
- A man of color made a statement that was clear and precise; a white man re-stated and "clarified" the statement made by the man of color.
- In a conversation with an African American man, a white man gave information about a past job, living situation etc. apparently as a way to demonstrate that he understood, cared, and/or knew about racism ("giving credentials") while at the same time he was not listening to or validating this African American man in his personal experiences with racism.
- A white man suggested that the young men of color should come to the front of the room – and introduce themselves so that he knows who they are – instead of his initiating contact with them.
- Four of us (two men of color, two white men) were standing together in a small group, doing a task that had been assigned to us. As we tried to complete the task, the other white man in our group of four repeatedly asked me for information on how to do the task that has been assigned to us. He didn't ask the men of color how to do the task.
- An older white man, speaking to a younger man of color, used overly familiar language in communicating with him, and tried to use the language that he believed the younger man might use with his peers.
- A white man said to me, "I came here to understand how they (the men of color) feel – what it's like for them – I can't imagine what their life is like." He then proceeded to tell me that he usually avoids African-American and Latino men. Two men of color, who were listening to this conversation, reacted by saying that he wanted to know how men of color feel by observing them but not through any personal, intimate contact. He got defensive.
- As the large group session began one morning, several men of color were at the coffee pot just outside the door to the main room. A white man standing near the door whistled and gestured at them to get into the meeting. His face was stern, his arms folded across his chest; his posture had an authoritarian quality. About a hour later, still standing at the door, he stared hard at five young men of color who are walking into the room in the middle of the session. He followed them carefully with his eyes; again, there was an authoritarian quality about his presence, as if he was getting ready to discipline the latecomers.

- During a discussion of the previous night's activity, a white man stood up immediately after a comment by a man of color (almost interrupting him), walked to the front of the room where the leaders were, and talked to the group as if he was teaching us "the truth."
- In referring to the comments of a Latino named Miquel, a white man called him "Ricardo."
- A white man asked an African-American man a question. But when the African American man responded, the white man walked out of the room within 10-20 seconds of having asked his question, in the middle of the response.
- Another white man asked a question to a Latino man, without appearing to be genuinely curious or interested in the response.
- A white man said, during the large group meeting, "I can do anything I want to do in this space."
- Outside of the large meeting room, a white man approached an African-American man to talk about his (the white man's) racism; as I listen, it had a tone of the white man going to confession, seeking absolution for his sins from a man of color.
- A white man said in the large group "It's offensive to be grouped with white men. What is this white man stuff?"
- A white man said, "There are currently 41 civil wars outside the US; tribal wars in the U.S. are a thing of the past. And white men aren't involved in any of those 41 civil wars."
- Several white men were upset about the men of color wanting to have a separate meeting and suggest that the white men are also men of color; one white man said, "I m pink," another said, "I'm blue."
- While a few white men said publicly that they have privilege or are racist, they didn't seem to translate that awareness into day-to-day reality. I never heard specific examples of how these white men noticed or used their white male privilege or how they behaved in a racist way. It's as if they were caught in their own rhetoric, saying the "right" thing, but didn't know what privilege or racist behavior looked like.
- As a man of African descent was expressing his thoughts with passion and anger a white man interrupted him and said, "Don't point your finger at me."
- A white man said, "I don't have a racial bone in my body – in my heart I'm not racist." I asked him what he meant by that, and I think he said (it wasn't entirely clear to me) "I don't mean to hurt Black and Latino men; I want to help; I don't want to treat them as either better than me or less than me – both are racist things to do." I asked him to

consider if, in fact, he does treat Black and Latino men differently; as I asked him this, he got uncomfortable and changed the subject.

- In a public space, but not during the public meeting, I was in a conversation with four men of color. We were huddled together at the request of one of the men, giving him some support. In the space of about five minutes, three different white men walked up to our huddle and leaned in over our shoulders to listen. In each case, we had to ask them to leave. I was stunned that they didn't seem to respect private space; I took this as an expression of entitlement.
- I noticed this same dynamic at other times: white men walked into what I understood to be a private conversation without asking if they could join or without seeming to read any signals that the conversation might be private. In one case, a white man leaned over my shoulder to get in a conversation and interrupted me as I was talking; when I asked him not to interrupt me, he got mad at me and said, "I have a right to talk." I'm not aware of ever seeing men of color do the same thing at this retreat.

In summary, I believe that white men at the conference engaged in the following modern racist behaviors:

- giving unsolicited advice to men of color, as if we knew what is best for them
- discounting the experience and knowledge of men of color
- denying that race impacts our perception of the world
- repeating what men of color say as if we could say it "better" than they could
- taking up space (both time and physical) without recognizing the presence of men of color
- trying to control the behavior of men of color as if they were "out of control"
- describing all the "good" things we've done as a way to prove we don't have racist beliefs or act in racist ways
- telling men of color what we want them to do to take care of our needs
- ignoring the expertise of men of color
- avoiding personal contact with men of color
- being overfamiliar with men of color, as if we know them personally based on stereotypes we have of them

- blaming men of color for the racism they experience
- assuming that "our way" of doing things is the right way and pointing out to men of color that "their way" is wrong or inappropriate"
- taking over the conversation
- claiming public space as if it is ours
- telling men of color that we're racist in a confessional style, as if we are seeking their forgiveness and trying to gain their acceptance, as opposed to talking with other white men about our racist behavior and attitudes for the purpose of learning about ourselves and changing
- not recognizing or claiming our racial identity and privilege as white people
- refusing to deal with men of color on their terms

(I want to thank Paul Medlyn and Alexander Lynn, both participants at the conference, who read over my notes and made helpful suggestions in how I could best describe the racism I noticed.)