

Is Racial Profiling Racist?

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At the end of June, in a suburb of Philadelphia, 65 youth of color attended a summer camp that had a membership to a private pool. Pool attendants asked the youth to leave the private pool; the President of the Valley Swim Club justified the pool attendants' actions saying that the "kids would change the complexion ... and the atmosphere of the club." The Swim Club revoked the camp's membership. In mid-July, a white police officer in Cambridge, Massachusetts, arrested Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in his own home for alleged "loud and tumultuous behavior." The police officer was responding to a 911 call regarding a possible break-in at Gates' home. Gates was arrested after the officers entered his home and he showed them two forms of ID.

While these were mostly seen as isolated incidents, we suggest that they are connected to a broader system of institutionalized racism and white supremacy that maintains segregated public and private spaces. Together, these incidents, and our responses to them, reveal the systematic ways in which white supremacy operates.

In the case of the youth of color at the swim club, many white readers of local newspapers responded by blaming the youth of color, denying that the racist language was in fact racist, and alleging that the club was merely overcrowded. In the case of Dr. Gates, the media responded by asking President Obama to comment on the incident, thereby re-focusing the racism in the interaction between Gates and the police into a conflict between Obama and the white police officers. Furthermore, some readers of the Chicago Tribune have commented that Gates is himself racist against white people, and that Gates should not have asked the officers their names. In contrast, we believe that these statements reflect an ongoing denial about white supremacy and ignorance of the racism people of color must contend with everyday.

One way to highlight the racial dynamics at play in these incidents is to consider the following questions: What if Gates were white? When he asked the officers for their names, would their response have been to arrest him? Most likely not. What if the summer camp was a bunch of white kids? Would parents have pulled their own white children out of the pool? Would the entire camp have had their

membership revoked? While white people can ignore or deny the impact of racism in this encounter, a group of youth of color does not have the privilege of not asking whether the treatment they received was based on race.

Looking at the two situations together reveals some truths about systemic racism. In order to see and understand such truths, we need to acknowledge that the society we live in grants privileges to white people while denying the same rights to people of color. This white supremacist system can only exist as long as people of color are being discriminated against. Because of their racial privilege, white people are much less likely to be scrutinized and followed around at stores, to be discriminated against by banks and other financial institutions, to be pulled over by the police for random checks, to be discriminated against at their work places, or to be portrayed as violent criminals in the media.

Because white people don't experience this kind of discrimination based on the color of their skin and because being granted privileges in our society over other ethnicities is such a common phenomenon, white supremacy is invisible to most white people. In order to dismantle white supremacy and racism in our society, we believe that white people need to start acknowledging how systemic racism is manifested in and projected through their thoughts and behaviors, which often plays out as follows.

First, both of these situations highlight how white people often approach people of color in fear, assuming that they will or already have behaved in ways that are disruptive and deviant. This belies the reality that in a white supremacist system, with a history of violence against people of color, people of color have much more to fear from white people. Yet white people's socially constructed fear is certainly evident in the way the youth were treated at the private pool. The youth did nothing more than get into the pool; the white parents viewed their mere presence as disruptive. Similarly, when Professor Gates asked the officers for their names and badge numbers, they viewed him as a 'loud and tumultuous' black man. Such stereotypes are portrayed over and over in the media, both as regards to these cases and in general, every day.

Second, white people may react with hostility when their presumed exclusive access to and control of a particular space, public or private, is seen as threatening by the mere presence of people of color. At the Philadelphia pool, the responses of the white members were to threaten canceling their

membership if their private club continued to be invaded by a ‘public camp’. This reveals that white people frequently assume that people of color do not belong in what they presume to be white or predominantly white space. The disruption of the youth at the private club was not merely how they could have behaved, but inherent in their very presence.

Likewise, Gates was approached as an outsider in his own community. In a predominantly white middle class neighborhood, when officers go out on a call concerning suspicious activity, people of color are automatically subject to being treated as suspects. Their presence is assumed to violate the privatized public spaces of white residents in a predominantly white neighborhood.

We bring together these two incidents to highlight that the impact of racial oppression and privilege is not limited to a group of youth in a Philadelphia suburb, or to one of the most revered black scholars in our country, but also to the thousands of people of color in our own city. For example, we see these effects in the drop out rates in our public schools, in the disproportionate expulsion of youth of color, and in the high levels of incarceration of people of color.

It is important that white people not take the easy way out by focusing on individual instances while ignoring the endemic and systemic racism in our society. White people must challenge themselves not to respond with defensiveness when someone identifies a behavior or practice as racist. Rather, white people must keep an open mind and try to understand how race and racism often work in ways that may go unrecognized by them. This includes the white people who helped write this piece.

The Chicago Alliance Against White Supremacy (CAAWS), a collaborative project of the Chicago Freedom School and the Women & Girls Collective Action Network, is a multiracial space committed to challenging and dismantling systems of white supremacy. We encourage Chicagoans to also work on these efforts in their daily lives by engaging in dialogue across race, and by speaking out against and actively interrupting acts of racism and white supremacy.