1-31-2007

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Study Finds Hidden Racism in White Students

01.31.2007 | Research, Faculty, Culture and Society  "What I found was there is a profound difference between the frontstage – when whites are with people of color – and the backstage – when they are with other whites," said Leslie H. Picca, assistant professor of sociology.

In what is perceived to be the safe backstage among whites, Picca said she found that "racial comments and jokes are not only ordinary, but are often tolerated, encouraged and even expected.

Racially based joking is especially prevalent and is regarded as "part of the fun," she said, which makes it difficult for many white students to stop it or even object to it.

Picca's research will be released this spring in a book co-authored with Texas A&M University professor Joe R. Feagin titled "Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage," and issued by Routledge Publishing.

The findings are based on Picca's analysis of written journals kept by 626 white college students from a variety of colleges and universities nationwide in 2002-03.

Picca said her research is significant because earlier findings from surveys and interviews indicated an increase in tolerance throughout the U.S. because whites reported declining racist attitudes.

"I wanted to go one step further and find out what was going on when a researcher was not present," she said.

The journals offered first-person accounts of students' interactions with other students, at work and in their homes. Students reported incidents and conversations involving different generations, genders and socio-economic groups.

Picca said the majority were traditional college-age students, from 18-25 years of age, although older students were included.

She said she was particularly interested in this age group because they grew up in the post-civil rights era when racial discrimination became unacceptable and wider integration of minorities occurred in communities as well as in the media.

"This is a new generation who grew up watching The Cosby Show. They have the belief that racism isn't a problem anymore so the words they use and the jokes they tell aren't racist," she said.

"These are white, educated students – the kind of people we generally believe are less racist. It was heartbreaking, just heartbreaking, to see how frequent, how common and how harshly these racial stereotypes are being perpetuated," she said.

Other findings included:

The use of the "n-word" is prevalent among white students in the backstage settings. One student reported hearing the word 27 times in a single day.

There is the belief that a person is not racist if their behavior or words do not physically harm or are not heard by a person of color.

Whites "protect" the backstage area by using whispers, code words and vague language to avoid being heard by people of color.

White women are more likely to object to racist language and jokes, but may face insults or ill treatment for such objections.

Racial and ethnic stereotypes are highly durable; students are using the same language and labels commonly used for centuries.

In view of her research, Picca said she was surprised by the use of the "n-word" by stand-up comic Michael Richards in December – not because he used it, but because it was in a frontstage setting.
"The way whites talk about racial issues hasn't changed much over the past 40 to 60 years. It has just changed forms," she said. "People argue that the n-word no longer has racial meaning, but it's very common and very prevalent and they do seem to know the racial significance of it."

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