

EXCHANGE



Addressing Racelighting on Community College Campuses

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ABSTRACT

Racelighting is a form of psychological manipulation whereby Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) second-guess their experiences, perceptions, and realities due to racism. In this article, the authors provide recommendations for how community colleges can foster environments that counter the harmful effects of racelighting.

Racism is a normal, daily experience for Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) in U.S. society. In our nation's community colleges, racism has been identified as a detrimental factor impacting students' sense of belonging and identity development, educators' time investment in students, and campus climate (Wood et al., 2015). These factors inhibit students' learning, growth, and development as well as the institution's ability to facilitate their success (e.g., persistence, achievement, transfer; Wilson, 2021). In the 1970's, Pierce offered the term *racial microaggressions* to refer to the mundane and routine experiences Black people have with subtle racism. Pierce noted racial microaggressions confine Black people to a psychological state where they tacitly accept their disenfranchisement. Microaggressions can include a range of communication (e.g., verbal, nonverbal), and "these subtle, minor, stunning, automatic assaults are a major offense mechanism by which Whites stress Blacks unremittingly and keep them on the defensive" (Pierce, 1989, p. 308). Moreover, Pierce argued these messages greatly mar one's self-confidence, contributing to the recipient feeling immobilized. Sue (2010) expanded the concept beyond the Black community to address racial microaggressions People of Color and other minoritized communities face.

As Sue et al. (2007) noted, there are three primary types of microaggressions, including microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are akin to tradition and overt racism. These can include use of racial epithets, purposefully derogatory actions and characterizations, and discouraging interracial exchanges. This type of microaggression is focused on less often because the messages are rendered consciously. Microinsults insult People of Color through messages that are disrespectful, demeaning to the person's identity, or generally insensitive. These messages often are communicated without intention yet have a negative impact on BIPOC. Among the numerous types of microinsults are messages conveying People of Color are prone to criminal behavior, are academically inferior due to their racial heritage, and come from families and communities that are "lesser than." Respectively, microinsults are referred to as assumptions of criminality, ascriptions of intelligence, and second-class citizenship. Microinvalidations are messages serving to refute the experiences, perceptions, and racialized realities of People of Color. A key type of microinvalidation is the denial of individual racism, whereby a White individual dismisses the personal experiences BIPOC have with racism. As with microinsults, microinvalidations often are communicated without intention.

Racelighting defined

One outgrowth of racial microaggressions is racelighting. Essentially, racelighting is what occurs when gaslighting is racial. Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a “perpetrator distorts information and confuses a victim, triggering the victim to doubt their memory and sanity” (Tormoen, 2019, p. 2). Racelighting is done with the intent to control the victim’s thoughts, actions, and behaviors. Similarly, racelighting is “the process whereby People of Color question their own thoughts and actions due to systematically delivered racialized messages that make them second guess their own lived experiences and realities with racism” (Wood & Harris, 2021a, para. 4). Similar to differences between microassaults compared to microinsults and microinvalidations, racelighting can occur in ways that are both intentional and unintentional, referred to as active racelighting and passive racelighting, respectively. This is a key distinction between racelighting and gaslighting.

Active racelighting occurs when the perpetrator intends to confuse and disorient the victim, which is done to make the recipient question their own sanity and reality. This form of racelighting is most similar to gaslighting. The following scenario is an example of active racelighting:

Ambrosa is a Black female administrator at a community college. She is highly competent and is a seasoned student affairs professional. She was promoted recently to the position of director. Tracy is a White female staff member who has conflictual relationships with her peers. Tracy also does not believe she receives enough recognition for her contributions to the college and is jealous of the opportunities Ambrosa is given. Tracy sets out to undermine Ambrosa. In work meetings, she criticizes Ambrosa’s ideas, programs, and ability to manage her team. She does so publicly to undermine Ambrosa. Tracy repeatedly extends the stereotype that Ambrosa is emotionally unstable, especially when Ambrosa tries to defend herself. Despite Ambrosa’s fiscal prudence, Tracy actively tries to convince others that Ambrosa mismanages her budget. She uses labels about Ambrosa such as “diva” and “overbearing” and frequently uses the phrase “there she goes again.” Due to her vigorousness in conveying these messages to Ambrosa and their colleagues, people begin to believe there must be some truth to what Tracy is saying. Ambrosa starts to feel like she is under fire and cannot get things right. Her staff begin to undermine her openly, especially ones she has been forced to write up or discipline. Ambrosa begins feeling deep feelings of inadequacy and disorientation, and she starts to second guess her own decision making. Tracy is actively racelighting Ambrosa.

In contrast, passive racelighting occurs when there is no intent to sow doubt or disorientation. BIPOC begin to experience an accumulation of racial microaggressions early in life. The long-term effects of these psychologically invalidating and insulting messages can be the tacit belief that the messages are indeed true. The following scenario could be an example of passive racelighting:

Jeremiah is a 30-year-old Native American student studying business. He returns to college with the goal of transferring to a university. When he starts at the community college, his counselor tries to advise him away from his goal of transferring to a university and instead suggests he complete a certificate program in automotive repair. His counselor states the certificate program would be a better “fit” for him. Having been away from school for some time, Jeremiah struggles in his classes early on. His professors treat him like he is unintelligent and does not belong. In fact, when he first arrived to his calculus class, his faculty member asked him if he was in the right room. Jeremiah does not talk much in class because he is concerned he will not get the answer right. His professors see this as disengagement and routinely ignore him. In his English class, his most recent paper received a “B-” grade, and comments from the professor were demeaning. They suggested Jeremiah might want to drop the class before the deadline. Jeremiah begins to question his own worth and academic capabilities. He feels like he cannot get anything right and starts to question whether school is the right place for him. Jeremiah is experiencing passive racelighting.

Both forms of racelighting can lead BIPOC to second guess their experiences, feelings, capabilities, knowledge, decision making, recollections, and even their basic humanity. At an interpersonal level, racelighting can be amplified when messages are conveyed with a sense of credibility, authority, or authenticity. Due to the pervasive nature of racism as a culturally embedded aspect of society, racelighting messages can be amplified further at an organizational level when the actions and words of BIPOC are framed through labels emphasizing their criminality, inferiority, or emotional instability. As Wood and Harris (2021b) noted, BIPOC can experience intense feelings of doubt, disorientation, and delusion in response to an accumulation of racial microaggressions in an

environment. Racelighting can have significant negative effects on BIPOC students, faculty, and staff. Specifically, Wood and Harris III argued racelighting serves as a pathway to interpersonal outcomes such as racial battle fatigue (RBF), a term Smith (2004) coined as a framework to explain how experiences with racism impact BIPOC holistically. The impacts are noticeably similar to combat stress syndrome and can include cognitive impacts (e.g., marred attentional focus, inability to retain information), psychological impacts (e.g., stress, anxiety, anger suppression, resentment), and physiological impacts (e.g., tension headache, elevated heartbeat, upset stomach). Long-term effects of RBF pose significant ramifications for one's health and lead people of color to question their own worth (Smith, 2004; Smith et al., 2007). Given this, we offer three recommendations educators can employ to address racelighting in community colleges.

Recommendations for practice

First, institutions should provide professional learning opportunities for BIPOC students, faculty, and staff on topics such as bias, racial microaggressions, racelighting, and RBF. Professional learning is critical for racelightees and racelighters. For racelightees, or recipients of racelighting, professional learning provides an opportunity to learn about the nature of their oppression. Such opportunities can provide a sense of control over racelighting experiences, leading recipients to feel disempowered, disoriented, and delusional. This empowerment is key to countering experiences with racelighting (Wood & Harris, 2021b). For passive racelighters whose actions are unknown, greater awareness of racial microaggressions can lead racelighters to understand the ramifications of their actions. As Sue et al. (2007) noted, this education should enhance their ability to identify different types of racial microaggressions (e.g., assumptions of criminality, ascriptions of intelligence), to understand the impact of their actions on others and to engage in actions to repair their actions and improve their behavior. Moreover, passive racelighters may also benefit from learning how to be better allies to BIPOC when active racelighting occurs.

Second, institutions should support the establishment of employee resource groups (ERGs). ERGs are community or affinity groups at colleges designed for staff and faculty from the same identity groups to come together for support, networking, and advancing organizational diversity and equity goals. ERGs provide a venue for employees to engage with other employees who may have a shared understanding of the challenges they navigate due to their identities (Welbourne et al., 2017). ERGs provide a venue for educators to discuss their experiences with racial microaggressions, dispel stereotypes, and engage in informal learning (Green, 2018). ERGs can help to address racelighting by providing a venue to counter messages leading BIPOC to second guess their own experiences, thoughts, and realities. BIPOC can experience an environment where they are reassured of their capabilities, contributions, and experiential knowledge.

Third, institutions should have regular mechanisms in place to learn about the experiences of BIPOC and to intercede when racism occurs. This learning can include routinized opportunities to hear from BIPOC students, faculty, and staff about their experiences at the institution. Perspectives from these individuals can be attained through interviews, focus groups, town halls, and assessments of campus climate. To maximize the benefits of this recommendation, institutions must believe the experiences they learn about from those who have been impacted by microaggressions and racelighting. Otherwise, the racelightee is microaggressed further because of a denial of individual racism, a subtype of microinvalidations (Sue et al., 2007). This is disheartening when it occurs given that racelighting naturally disorients and makes the recipient of racelighting feel delusional; thus, denying the experiences racelightees articulate can accelerate experiences with racelighting. In addition, institutional leaders must have the intention to act on issues that are raised. Harper and Hurtado (2007) noted:

Conducting a climate study can be symbolic of institutional action, only to be filed away on a shelf. We advocate that data . . . guide conversations and reflective examinations to overcome discomfort with race, plan for deep levels of institutional transformation, and achieve excellence in fostering racially inclusive learning environments. (p. 7)

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