

Making the invisible visible: Creating a safe space in the ombudsman practice to address systemic issues on race

It is our responsibility as ombudsman to acknowledge difficult issues, push the envelope, and create tension for others and sometimes ourselves. As Ombudsman Emeritus at the National Institutes of Health Howard Gadlin said at the 2018 Coalition of Federal Ombudsman Annual Conference, “If we are not generating tension in our agency, then we are not doing our jobs.”

One of the tensest topics is race. Race is centralized when extremists commit heinous acts such as the 2019 shooting in El Paso, TX¹ or the 2017 automobile attack on protesters in Charlottesville, VA,² but awareness of its day-to-day impact is often minimal even though racial disparity is frequently woven into the fabric of our institutions. It is where unexamined policies and practices reside and where discriminatory behaviors and biases slip into our interactions. As a facilitator of racial dialogue for the past 20 years, I witness people’s nervousness and discomfort when engaging on race and often see these issues remain unacknowledged or dismissed in order to ease tension.

Recently, a white, female, non-ombuds keynote speaker presented to an ombuds audience on bystanders and noted a “culture of shaming” that thrives due to the anonymity of the internet/social media. She illustrated her point using the experience of Justine Sacco, a senior director of public communications who made several offensive tweets while travelling from New York to South Africa. She capped it off with a “racist” tweet: *Going to Africa. Hope I don’t get AIDS! Just kidding. I’m white.*³ The tweets went viral; outraging many, which led to her firing. Various accounts describe what took place as “public shaming” and “humiliation.”

Condemning the use of public shaming and humiliation as a form of punishment is conceivable; however, the systematic reproduction of this narrative/tweet without addressing its wide-ranging impact presents problems. The speaker’s behavior telling this story and response to feedback about the story, overlooked significant aspects of this narrative, which warrants further exploration because it reflects issues relevant to ombudsman practice.

The media, public opinion, books⁴ and the presentation itself portrayed Justine Sacco as a “posterchild” for the issue of public shaming, advancing a narrative that assumes her innocence and role as a victim.⁵ After the incident, she and others quickly came to her defense by clarifying

¹ Ross, J. a. (2019, August 15). El Paso racism and rhetoric. The growing toll of bigotry in America . USA. Retrieved from NBC news: www.nbcnews.com

² Jr, E. K. (2017, September 3). Making sense of the violence in Charlottesville. *The Atlantic* .

³ Johnson, Ron. (2015, February 14). How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life. *NY Times Magazine*.

⁴ Johnson, Ron. (2015) So you’ve been publicly shamed.

⁵ Blanchfield, P. (2015, February 24). Twitter’s outrage machine should be stopped. But Justine Sacco is the wrong poster child. Washington DC, USA.

her intentions “the joke was not intended to be racist,” while failing to take responsibility for its impact; and by claiming that the “joke was taken out of context,” redefining the context to suit her needs rather than acknowledge existing historical and social contexts. She was also protected by her portrayal as a victim, “her job was taken from her...” and “her life is ruined,” and finally she was afforded innocence, “she made a numbskull mistake,” or “she deserves a second chance,” further absolving any accountability for her actions.⁶

As a result, the story shared had glaring omissions of how her behavior/tweet reinforced negative stereotypes that feed the ongoing racist discourse on HIV/AIDS and Africa. Furthermore, it failed to acknowledge her innate understanding that systems (i.e. institutions health care, justice, education) will work in her favor to protect her, thereby granting her unearned advantage because she is white, which is an example of white privilege.⁷ Immediately following the presentation, I offered feedback to the speaker. The speaker was dismissive, she presumed I did not comprehend her point of view and suggested I clear up the misunderstanding by reading her book.

Justine is both a victim *and* a perpetrator; to focus solely on her victimhood without acknowledging her role as a perpetrator serves to maintain white racial comfort. Dr. Robin DiAngelo coined the term white fragility to describe a condition where white people are uncomfortable when faced with discussions on race and have a range of strategies to avoid it.⁸ The inability of the dominant white culture to tolerate her portrayal as a victim *and* a perpetrator exemplifies white fragility.

Furthermore, because whiteness remains centralized⁹ in this story as it is told, it suppresses the possibility for other narratives to emerge. Without space for narratives to unfold, the impact of white privilege and racism remain unheard, which has real physical, financial and psychological consequences for non-white people. The speaker’s behavior, whether conscious or unconscious, duplicated a racial dynamic that was already playing out on a macro level with this narrative.

As an ombudsman, I am concerned about what initially appeared as lack of awareness and later appears as the speaker’s disinterest in the impact of her behavior. If this occurs in an open forum at a conference, what might happen behind closed doors in the confidential space an ombudsman shares with his/her inquirers? What could an ombudsman overlook? Can those serving as ombuds, or their supervisors, recall interactions that may have acted to reinforce the inequities present in a situation and in the system; further creating a barrier within ombudsman practice?

During the 2019 IOA annual conference, keynote speaker Dr. Robin DiAngelo led the ombudsman community in a conversation on race, specifically white privilege and white fragility. How do ombuds create space for multiple narratives to emerge in practice? What

⁶ Johnson, Ron. (2015, February 14). How one stupid tweet blew up Justine Sacco’s life. *NY Times Magazine*.

⁷ Wise, T. (2008). Membership has its privileges: thoughts on Acknowledging and challenging whiteness. In P. S. Rothenberg, *White Privilege essential readings on the other side of racism* (pp. 133-136). New York: Worth Publishers.

⁸ DiAngelo, R. (2016). In R. DiAngelo, *What does it mean to be white? Developing white racial literacy*. (pp. 246-248). New York: Peter Lang.

⁹ Centering whiteness is akin to saying, *All lives matter*, instead of Black lives matter and I feel uncomfortable when the conversation is not about me (or my feelings).

challenges do they face personally and professionally? The conference offered a starting point for these conversations; how will the profession seek to sustain them?

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