

Racial Mindfulness: Paying Attention to “Racial Moments”

Terri A. Karis

The Importance of Paying Attention

[Test Your Awareness: Do The Test - YouTube](#)

Project Assumptions

1. A defining feature of Whiteness is not thinking about race.
 - Colorblindness -- “inscribed patterns of (in)attention”
2. Transformative potential in “simply” paying more attention to race.
 - Habits of attention are connected to habits of mind and sense of self. What we practice attending to changes our brains and ways of being in the world

Project Assumptions

3. Drawing a distinction between explicit racism and racialization –
 - How and in what ways does race shape our sense of self, our relationships, our social contexts, our culture?

Organizing Attention

- “Am I racist?”
- “Was what I just observed racist?”
- React in defensive or self-protective ways,
- Difficult to actually notice important aspects of how race functions in our lives

The Importance of Paying Attention

- Mindfulness is “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”

- Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4



- Here-and-now experiences are sensed directly
- Accepted for what they are
- Acknowledged with kindness and respect

Mindfulness Skills

- Noticing sensations, images, feelings and thoughts (SIFT)
- Nonjudgmental and non-reactive about what you're noticing
- Describing with words
- Acting with awareness --not on auto-pilot

“Racial Moments”

- Defined as any time a person became aware of race
- “Directed mindfulness” (Ogden, 2009): directs attention to specific aspects of experience that are considered important to a particular goal.
- Goal: Thoughts and feelings linked to a “racial moment” were the focus of attention.

Systematic Self-Observation (SSO)

- Designed to get at subjective phenomena-thought processes, motives, and emotions
- Rooted in idea that studying small events of everyday living can generate important insights
- Deliberately leaves research topic imprecisely defined in everyday language, a means of encouraging participants to employ their own understandings
 - Rodriquez & Ryave, 2002

Racial Moments

Systematic Self-Observation

- Go about your daily life as you normally do.
- When race comes into your awareness through a thought, feeling or interaction please observe it.
- Don't change it, judge it, or do something different. Simply document the experience using the following format.

- 
- What is the situation?
 - Who is involved? (it might be just you)
 - What are the thoughts, feelings and/or words spoken?
 - Reflection afterwards: how do you understand what happened? What were your thoughts and feelings that came after the initial thoughts or feelings?



Have your own racial moment

Whiteness Project

A student's racial moment

1. At the intersection I see a car being driven by an African woman wearing a traditional-looking, black headscarf with a bumper sticker that says “No one is free when others are oppressed.”
2. Me.
3. I'm surprised! I associate bumper stickers like that one with white progressives, not black African women dressed in traditional (Muslim?) attire. My surprise is quickly followed by delight and curiosity. What's her story, I wonder?

- 
4. A few minutes after registering my feelings, I feel saddened by my response. Why such shock that she should connect to the message in that sticker? Have I completely believed the dominant interpretation that African women are oppressed and that stickers *like that* are about *them*? Do I think that only white people (read: Western) are “free” and un-oppressed? Would I have felt surprised if the car hadn’t been driven by an African woman, but by an African *American* woman?

- I think it would have depended on whether the African American woman looked “progressive” or not, because I have a few black women friends who are entirely capable of driving around with such messages on their car bumpers. So, I’m thinking it was the combination of factors that played into my response– my beliefs about African women, Muslim women. I was also a little uncomfortable that I felt such delight... Is it patronizing? Is my thinking it’s “cool” somewhat condescending? I’m thinking it might be.... But I think I also appreciate the fact that she shook up some of my assumptions.

Patterns in Racial Moments Reflections

1. Paying attention to race-related thoughts, assumptions, feelings and behaviors (all previously outside of conscious awareness).
2. Staying with the process of reflecting even when it gets emotionally uncomfortable (often taking the form of questioning).
3. Accepting ambiguity and not-knowing.

Patterns in Racial Moments Reflections

4. Awareness of previously unconscious racialized worldview.
5. Seeing one's White racial identity and understanding what it means to be part of the dominant or privileged racial group.
6. Imagining, considering and understanding the perspectives of people of color.

Staying with the process even when emotionally uncomfortable

- “I guess I had these thoughts before but just dismissed them, chastising myself for having them but never really exploring them. I guess when I slow down and think a little I start to notice that these thoughts have to come from somewhere.”

Accepting ambiguity and not-knowing

- I understand more about my own assumptions of the world, how frequently race is part of those assumptions, and how I am constantly censoring myself to be a “good person” without looking at it very closely . . . I’m not the same . . . I really had to experience the state of not-knowing before I could understand it. . . .

Awareness of previously unconscious racialized worldview

- . . . I was surprised that Black people have stereotypes about other Black people, or surprised that Black people have stereotypes at all. Writing that down it looks foolish and I don't think I thought that before. . . I'm finding so many things that aren't changing ideas for me, but challenging me to call into my consciousness things that I didn't have in my consciousness before. I'm learning to see things that were easy to ignore before, but now I can't ignore them if I try.

Seeing White racial identity

- I was sitting in class listening to the presentations. I began to think about the similarities and differences among my classmates. . . to think about [a Black student's] presentation and how different it must be for [the two students of color] to present in front of a class of mostly White people. . . . I wonder why I hadn't thought much about these similarities and differences before. I began to think about the idea that being White allows me to choose not to think about my skin color.

Imagining perspectives of people of color

- I was amazed at his views of people who are White, as an empty and potentially harmful force that changes the world around them to suit themselves. This was scary to hear. I have not perceived myself in that way. I was amazed at the experience of someone who is not White. I felt sad at my ignorance of this, but glad that I am at least able to see some aspect of this now. I see that I have been cultured to not notice the differing experiences of others. I am very excited to start to see other world views, even if they are not pleasant for me. I need to see how others may see or experience my way of being in the world.

Letting White People Off the Hook?

- Compassion : the “force that gets us to move ourselves into an unknown and uncomfortable place, to take our blinders off so that we are willing to see...”

(Frances Kendall 2006, p. 10)

- Offering empathy to Whites as they learn about race “could be experienced as coddling, reinforcing privilege, and ignoring the urgency of the situation for those who want white people to make progress more quickly”.

(Tochluk, 2013 p. 9)

A Student's Racial Moment

Driving along I noticed a passing car that was full of young African-American men. The car was beat up and the men looked like they were working class. The thought that came to my mind when I saw them passing was, 'Wow, that doesn't look good. I wonder if they are drug dealers on their way to Madison or Milwaukee.' [1. *Paying attention*] Then I reined in my thoughts [2. *Staying with process even when uncomfortable*] immediately realizing that I was having a racial moment.

When I looked closer [*2. staying with process*] I realized that the men in the car looked like they might have been related and noticed that there was an older African-American gentleman in the back seat that was probably dad or Grandpa. It's weird. I guess I had these thoughts before but just dismissed them, [*4. Previously unconscious*] chastising myself for having them but never really exploring them. [*2. Staying with process*]

When I slow down and think a little *[2. Staying with process]* I start to notice that these thoughts have to come from somewhere. Maybe they are thoughts that are associated with just looking at people who are different from me. *[3. Not-knowing]* Or maybe they are thoughts that were conditioned in me from childhood or from the culture and it plays in the back of my mind. *[3. Not-knowing]* It's kind of weird -- it's like an automatic computer program that boots up in certain situations. When I noticed the beat-up car and then the men driving, the program booted itself up into my conscious thought and started to play out in my mind. I didn't ask for them -- the thoughts just came. *[4. Previously unconscious]*

So I forced myself [*2. Staying with process*] to try a new pathway (as you suggested) [of thinking by realizing that each one of those men in that car has a story to tell. [*6. Imagine perspective of Other*]
Each person has a truth to be told and to be heard (I want to hear. I want to understand [*3. Not-knowing*]). Each person of color is like me. Not White, [*5. Seeing white racial identity*] but human, with desires, failures, hopes, dreams, maybe some dreams beyond their reach because of their color.

(that angers me *[1. paying attention]* -- I just didn't know.) *[3. Not-knowing]* Choices, opportunities, things that are out of our control, all play a part in what we all are and become. How they are looked at in public, never being able to be 'normal' as defined by the White dominated culture. *[5. Aware of Whiteness; 6. Imagine perspective of Other;]* I've never really thought this way before. It's hard and it hurts. *[2. staying with process]*

Outcomes of Mindful Awareness

- Bodily regulation
 - Balancing parasympathetic and sympathetic nervous systems
- Fear modulation
 - Calming/soothing fears
- Attuned communication
 - Coordinating input from another mind with the activity of one's own
- Response flexibility
 - Capacity to pause before action
- Empathy
 - Empathic imagination of what might be going on inside someone else.

• Dan Siegel, *The Mindful Brain*



Paying Attention to Power/Privilege and Difference

- **Learn to be “Comfortable with Being Uncomfortable”**
 - Feelings of discomfort are expected as just part of the territory on this particular learning journey.
- **Cultivate Interest in and Curiosity about Your Inner Landscape**
 - “Simply” notice thoughts, feelings & body sensations. Notice your patterned responses.



Paying Attention to Power/Privilege and Difference

- **Let Go of Self-Judgment**
 - Self-judgments that arise can become immobilizing and short-change the learning process.
- **Regard Emotions as a Flag: There's More to Explore**
 - Feelings → an indicator of having run up against a new idea that challenges a prior, perhaps unexamined, belief
 - We can cultivate curiosity about what we haven't yet discovered about our own thinking habits.

- **Start Where You Are**
 - We've all been shaped in different but predictable ways by living in a stratified culture. Remembering this can help us have compassion for ourselves and others.

I want to learn to live in the moment... just not this moment. Some other moment. Like a moment on the beach.



- The acronym COAL describes the state of mindfulness that is open and receptive to whatever arises in the field of awareness

- **C**uriosity
- **O**penness
- **A**cceptance
- **L**ove

