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I Am Not a Thief: Retelling My Story to Understand a Racist Encounter

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Abstract

In the United States, acts of prejudice occur in many situations and spaces. Scholars and researchers hypothesize that these acts are often due to the racism that permeates our country. When seemingly racist acts occur, they are sometimes unreported, misunderstood or simply not addressed. As a Black woman falsely accused of theft, I endured assumptions made about me, and I made assumptions about my accuser. We are often left to speculate as to what fuels acts of racism, whether in the form of microaggressions or overt acts. As we try to assign reasons for others' behaviors, we must also inspect the conditioning of our own thinking. In this study, I utilize both Critical Race Theory and Attribution theory while employing an autoethnographical approach to dissect an unexpected racial encounter. Racism is a palpable subject, and in re-telling the event, I uncover assumptions, locate structured biases and find an empowering voice that allows my perceived racist encounter to be addressed.

Keywords

Autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, Attribution Theory, Racist Encounter

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I Am Not a Thief: Retelling My Story to Understand a Racist Encounter

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In the United States, acts of prejudice occur in many situations and spaces. Scholars and researchers hypothesize that these acts are often due to the racism that permeates our country. When seemingly racist acts occur, they are sometimes unreported, misunderstood or simply not addressed. As a Black woman falsely accused of theft, I endured assumptions made about me, and I made assumptions about my accuser. We are often left to speculate as to what fuels acts of racism, whether in the form of microaggressions or overt acts. As we try to assign reasons for others' behaviors, we must also inspect the conditioning of our own thinking. In this study, I utilize both Critical Race Theory and Attribution theory while employing an autoethnographical approach to dissect an unexpected racial encounter. Racism is a palpable subject, and in re-telling the event, I uncover assumptions, locate structured biases and find an empowering voice that allows my perceived racist encounter to be addressed. Keywords: Autoethnography, Critical Race Theory, Attribution Theory, Racist Encounter

- Example #1: A white person says to a black person, “When I look at you, I don’t see color.”
- Example #2: In denying racial biases, a white person says, “I am not a racist. I have several black friends.”
- Example #3: A white man or woman clutching their purse or checking their wallet as a Black or Latino approaches or passes. (Sue et al., 2007, p. 276)

Microaggressions often occur in phrases and actions like the ones stated above. Otherwise considered covert racist acts, microaggressions are “verbal, behavioral and environmental indignities ... that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271). People engage in them intentionally or unintentionally, and may be “unaware that they engage in such communications when they interact with racial/ethnic minorities” (Sue et al., 2007, p. 271), revealing a mindset indicative of a limited perspective of people and the world. As a Black woman, I have often been on the receiving end of such statements. Raised in the southern United States during the 70s and 80s, I am no stranger to assumptions of inferiority and the ignorance fueled by racism. As an academic, I have investigated culture, language and rhetoric in efforts to understand how limited perspectives are formed and whether they can truly be broadened or even changed. What follows is a story similar to the third example from above. It is an examination of an encounter I had in 2018 where a white woman falsely accused me of stealing her money. This encounter calls for an analysis of my lived experience. Having shared this encounter with numerous friends who had varied reactions, all with some level of indignation, I began to question the entire incident. At some point, I realized that the encounter had affected my emotions, causing both anger and weariness, while simultaneously enticing

my intellectual curiosity. This incident and the conversations that followed, acts as motivation for my autoethnographic study on why this particular White woman saw me as a criminal and how people, especially those in the dominant White American society, may interpret my Blackness.

Critical Race and Attribution Theories

Because this study is based on an experience that I interpret as racially motivated, I thought it was sensible to ground this study in the Critical Race Theory (CRT). This theory developed in the field of social sciences and “presumes that race and racism are central to explaining and articulating lived experiences” (Esposito, 2014, p. 279) of people who do not racially identify with the dominant culture. Historically, CRT has been used to interrogate specific laws, policies, frameworks, educational structures/apparatuses, and how they work to reproduce racial inequities in society” (Atwood & Lopez, 2014, p. 1149). Used as a framework to investigate racially motivated notions in the legal community, researchers also apply CRT to political, social and educational settings (Chavez, 2012; Griffin, 2013; Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017). CRT’s focus on “race, racism and power” (Bell, 2000) is central to my desire to explain my experience.

CRT is a “fundamentally and socially transformative theory” (Reynolds & Mayweather, 2017, p. 287) that addresses the problems that arise from racism (Stefancic & Delgado, 2013). Other researchers, including women of color in academia, have found that “CRT necessitates that identities cannot be considered separately because they are mutually constitutive” (Esposito, 2014, p. 279) and have found CRT integral as a lens in examining their own experiences (Griffin, 2013). In the forthcoming analysis, I cannot separate my racial identity from the meaning of the encounter. I cannot ignore the fact that I am a woman and a scholar, and I cannot compartmentalize my Blackness. All of those factors shape who I am and my perspective in this experience.

CRT recognizes that racism is engrained in the fabric and system of American society. Until recently, there had been a lack of discourse about privilege and how this causes races to navigate American space differently (Hurtado, 2019). This theory plays a significant role in addressing issues of racial inequities in U.S. culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) on both larger institutional scales and in everyday occurrences. Acts of racism “reinforce and support racial oppression” (Levchak, 2018, p. 6), and this notion relates to the assumptions made about minority races. CRT addresses the value of those omitted from privilege and can be used to uncover the misinterpretations of culture that accompany racism. The theory provides a foundation for conducting an analysis of a perceived racist encounter and validates the existence of the presumptions and notions of White privilege that have been reinforced over time. Because it “challenges White privilege” (Esposito, 2014, p. 279), CRT is instantly relevant to the dissecting of my experience with a white stranger.

While CRT is a strong foundation for this study, as I continued to relive my experience, I found that the Attribution Theory would also be relevant in my attempt to understand the nature of the occurrence. As a scholar in Communication Studies, I have discussed interpersonal communication phenomena, and how we, as communicators, assign reasons for the behavior of others, usually based on whatever information we have about them. The Attribution Theory, created by Fritz Heider, is rooted in social psychology and addresses how people explain behavior (Malle, 2011). Studies have indicated that we make decisions about others’ behaviors based on the values of our in-group (Lins et al., 2017), and those “values can be used in a subtle way in the dehumanization of an outgroup” (p. 311). Applications of Attribution Theory to race and stereotyping have revealed telling results. In their study investigating public reactions, Graham, Weiner and Zucker (1997) found that race was a

determining factor in attributing judgments of responsibility. In workplace research, Blacks and Latinos were more likely to be given negative evaluations for similar behavior as Whites (Luksyte et al., 2013). Other studies indicate that negative assumptions are attributed to Blacks based on stereotypical beliefs about laziness and lack of self-discipline (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004).

The Attribution theory posits that if people can uncover “factors that give rise to a specific behavior, individuals are able to anticipate subsequent behaviors” (Haider & Joslyn, 2017, p. 360). In this study I can apply the Attribution Theory to answer questions about the woman’s assumptions about who I am and the motives for my behavior. It is useful in explaining any prejudgments made about me and what actions could have been anticipated. It helps to outline expectations that a person of privilege may have had about someone outside of her group.

Critical Race Theorists and researchers of Attribution Theory use narratives to dissect racial constructs and understand social encounters (Gambrell, 2016). The sharing of stories demonstrates encounters of racist acts and yields data about assumptions made about people based on their membership in a particular group. Because CRT is used to “explore the various ways in which racial thinking operates” (Flores, 2000, p. 437), using examples of people’s experiences with racism is one way to achieve that goal. The use of both the Critical Race Theory and the Attribution Theory will assist as I interpret my story from my own perspective.

Autoethnography

Innovative and interpretive, autoethnography is a qualitative research method that seeks understanding through studying the self. It often includes narrative and anecdotes and calls for creativity. Researchers have combined multiple theories with an autoethnographic methodology in telling their stories (Esposito, 2014; Ferdinand, 2018; Griffin, 2013; Pompper, 2010; Presley & Presswood, 2018). Autoethnography “locates the self within the situation” (Greene & Stewart, 2010, p. 304) and is a “way for us to communicate our oppression and illustrate our resiliency” (Esposito, 2014, p. 279). Autoethnography gives way for me to use my own experience to understand my reactions to treatment by others. It is a method that is available on a broad level and has the ability to expand perspectives (Tullis, 2017). Using autoethnography offers a path to “meaning and insight that cannot be gleaned from other research methods” (Fletcher, 2018, p. 43).

Utilized with CRT and Attribution Theory, autoethnography allows me to seek understanding about the assumptions made about my behavior, while couching that understanding in a relevant spectrum of racial boundaries. By using an autoethnographical approach, I can engage in self-investigation, going beyond a mere description of “what happened.” “Autoethnography is highly valued as a means of legitimizing narrative voice. Using narrative, authors attempt to engage the reader in their personal experiences, which are often difficult or traumatic” (Fletcher, 2018, p. 44). In this instance, autoethnography provides a platform for me to use established theories to help me not only understand how an assumption was made about me based on my race, but also to understand how I assign reasons for white people’s behavior. As a method, autoethnography affords me the opportunity to offer an enlightened view of a communicative event while lending affirmation to my voice.

The Story

As I entered into my gate area at Atlanta Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, I was glad that the gate agent was making an announcement that they needed bags checked at no charge. I was about to board a flight to Tampa, Florida. I was going to a writer’s conference

because I wanted to learn more about creative writing in hopes of penning a novel one day. When traveling on Delta airlines I usually purchase the Delta Comfort seats or use points to get an upgrade. This time, however, I bought the economy ticket, which meant I could not choose my preferred window seat. I ended up in a middle seat, 25 B. As I boarded the plane, I was hoping to just enjoy the quick flight by listening to some music or playing games on my phone. When I arrived at my seat a white gentleman had just sat in the window seat, 25 A. We exchanged nods and he promptly put on his headphones. As soon as I got settled, I did the same.

Several minutes later, a woman arrived for the aisle seat, 25 C. She was white, petite and casually dressed. I guessed she was in her late fifties. When she sat down, I realized just how little room the economy seats provided. As she was organizing her things, we bumped arms a few times. So, to show my friendly nature, I said “I didn’t realize how close these seats were, so let me apologize now for the many times I may bump you during the flight.” She smiled and responded, “Oh, no problem. You just lean over here whenever you need to and go ahead and use this arm rest.” I was delighted that she seemed friendly, too.

A couple of minutes later, she explained that she had just gotten off a connecting flight that arrived late and had to rush to the plane. She was wondering if she had time to slip to the restroom at the back of the plane. Even though I had my earbuds in, I heard what she said. I looked up and saw people still boarding the plane and told her I thought she had plenty of time. She jumped up, tossed her things in the seat and went to the back of the plane. She returned shortly thereafter, buckled in, and the plane took off.

This particular flight had the video screens for each seat, so I decided to watch a movie. After doing a quick search, I chose “The Mountain Between Us” starring Idris Elba and Kate Winslet. I hesitated because I vaguely remembered a trailer where it looked as if Idris Elba’s character would be playing “savior” to the white woman. It was just a fleeting thought, because, after all, Idris Elba if nothing else, is good to look at. The actual irony turned out to be that the movie was about a plane that crashed on a mountain. At any rate, I started the movie, aware that the short flight time would not allow me to finish, but I wanted to watch as much as possible to ensure that I would have time to finish it on the return flight.

Most of the flight was uneventful. I was watching the movie and enjoying the complimentary snacks. We began our descent and were close to landing. I noticed the woman in 25 C was starting to fidget. I first thought that she might be nervous about landing. Then her nonverbals indicated that something was wrong. She seemed to be frantically looking for something. I looked at her and asked if she was okay. She then held up her wallet and said she was missing two-hundred dollars. She flipped her wallet over to show the empty slots and said that all of her credit cards were missing. I made a face- the one where you are sorry for someone, but glad it’s not your problem. I then went back to watching Idris walking up the mountain. 25 C became more flustered. She asked, “Did you see anyone take my wallet? I shouldn’t have left it here when I went to the restroom.” I told her no but reminded her that I had been on my phone and was not really paying attention while others were boarding the plane. Still, I assured her that I would have noticed if someone had reached that far into our aisle. In a huff she said, “I am going to have to cancel all my credit cards.” I just nodded my head agreeing. I tuned back into Idris. By now the plane had landed, but I was intent on seeing as much of the movie as possible, so I kept watching. The woman pulled out her phone and started to dial. Then she looked through her wallet again as if the money was going to magically appear. Now I was a bit distracted and was about to give up trying to hear what Idris was saying.

That is when the woman in 25 C looked at me and said “Ma’am. You can keep the cash, but can I please have my credit cards?” I cut my eyes toward her. I thought I must have misheard her since I had my earbuds in. So, I removed the earbud from my right ear and then

assumed that it was simply a failed attempt at humor. I said, “Are you joking right now?” She answered, “No. Really. It’s okay. You can keep the money, but I need my credit cards.” A flurry of thoughts came rushing to my mind. I thought about my parents and how they raised me- to be Christ-like, but to also stand up for myself. I thought about people and their cameras and what could become a nasty incident that would end up on the evening news. I thought about my seven-year-old son. I thought about the law. I thought about so many things in just a few seconds.

What I can only assume was the Holy Spirit grabbed my tongue and I said in a quiet voice, “I didn’t take your stuff.” I put my earbud back in and tried to focus on Idris but did not hear a word he said. I began wondering what this woman would do next. I knew that if she pressed the matter further that my reaction would be drastically different. I then thought to myself, “Be better.” (It was my church’s motto for the year). So, I took out my earbuds and I turned to the woman who had just decided that the only Black woman in the surrounding three rows was a thief, and I did the unexpected. I offered to help. I did so by asking her a series of questions to help her figure out what may have actually happened to her money. I asked her if she had stopped anywhere when rushing from one plane to the next. I asked her if she thought the plane had cameras, suggesting that the airline may have video of someone taking her wallet. She began to look puzzled. I assume she was wondering why, if I had stolen her money, I would suggest she check video footage. I asked her had she checked her larger purse thoroughly and whether she had looked around the floor, on the sides of the seats and in the seat compartment in front of her. She was about to give a negative response when the light bulb in her brain came on. She said, “You know, sometimes when I travel, I separate my things, so I don’t lose everything at once if something happens.” Then, 25 C reached down in her bag, pulled out a second wallet, opened it, and found her cash and her credit cards. She let out a sigh of relief. The white woman in 25 C then turned to me and said, “If I sounded accusatory before, I apologize.” *If?* She offered what I call the “conditional apology” - as if whether she did something wrong depended on how I felt about it. She had falsely accused me of stealing. That was indeed wrong. Still, she had the gall to preface her apology with an “If.” I again thought she was joking. I knew, however, that she was not. I took a deep breath and exhaled with a “woosah” (a term used to calm emotional responses in stressful situations). Then I responded, “Don’t worry about it.” I turned off Idris’ movie and gathered my things.

As we were leaving the plane, walking down the narrow aisle, 25 C turned around and said to me, “You really are very kind. I should not have accused you.” I just said, “It’s fine.” I walked away, slightly stunned by what had happened, but not at all surprised.

Aftermath

In some contexts, Critical Race Theory (CRT) addresses racism as an “ingrained, everyday experience so mundane and routine as to blunt the shock of its violence and to naturalize and internalize its occurrences” (Fernando & Rinaldi, 2017, p. 10). Although racism permeates American society and is in many ways routine, my experience on that airplane was not expected. Since my incident on the plane with the white woman in 25 C, I have thought about what made her think I was a thief. As much as I try to reason that it was simply because I was the one in the seat next to her, I cannot bring myself to believe that she would have reacted the same way if the white gentleman who was sitting by the window occupied seat 25 B instead. I began to wonder if my seat had been across the aisle where another white woman had been sitting, would 25 C still have thought I was the culprit. In my mind, I thought, “Of course she would have.”

Because attributing others’ behaviors to prejudice can create negative emotions, (Remedios & Snyder, 2015), my re-telling of the story contributed to my increasing hostility

about the encounter. The more I recounted what had happened, the more I became frustrated with what had transpired. Re-telling the story led me to own my frustrations and validate my need to further investigate. I compiled a list of questions to address my frustration: Why did 25 C assume I was a thief? Why didn't she assume some of the truth about me? Why didn't she assume that I was raised in a professional family, where education is expected, and Christian love is taught? Why didn't she assume that I had three degrees, two of them terminal? Why didn't she assume that I was a licensed attorney and was once in the trusted employ of the U.S. Attorney General? These things are true. 25 C knew none of it, and that lack of knowledge should be of no consequence. Those nuances should not dictate whether she should treat a stranger with common respect. While she knew nothing of my background, positive or negative, she chose to assume I was thief. A plausible explanation for her ignorant attack on my character stems from theories on racism whereby people perceive that Blacks lack the same work ethic as Whites (Lins et al., 2017). Perhaps 25 C thought I did not value working for money, believing my preference was to just take hers. Though I did not know this woman, my experiences guided my judgment, whereby I concluded that her assumption was likely based simply on the tone of my skin and the braids in my hair.

Some experiences with prejudice provoke negative emotions, like depression, while others may actually increase self-esteem (Remedios & Snyder, 2015). My experience did not lead to depression, nor am I certain if my self-esteem has increased. However, the encounter did lead me to want to further explore the occurrence. Research supports that "women of color may be motivated to understand the specific reasons for their devaluation" (Remedios & Snyder, 2015, p. 376).

As CRT directs me to what I know inherently as a Black woman, I began to question why I so easily assumed that this woman was a racist. Applying Attribution Theory would guide me to answer the question: "To what do I attribute 25 C's behavior?" My reactive thought is quick and easy: She is white. She is ignorant. She is racist. But my scholarly inquiry calls for me to challenge that response. After all, what do I know about this woman? Not much. Was I subscribing to the belief (Bell, 2000) that the racial problem in this country simply lies in white people? Perhaps I was.

After considering the options, and critically evaluating my other encounters of racism during my life, I validated my conclusion. Years of living as a Black woman in this country certainly influenced the arrival of my conclusion. It was further validated by every reaction I received when sharing the story with others. After telling the story to numerous friends and colleagues, not one of them assumed it was anything other than racism. Not one. Most of them anxiously awaited to see what action I took to "put 25 C in her place." Moreover, my conclusion is validated by every unspoken incident of racism that I have endured in my lifetime.

In assigning reasons for 25 C's accusations, I avoided attributional ambiguity by paying attention to the salient identity marker in that situation- my race (Remedios & Snyder, 2015). After all, when trying to understand racism, a "productive path through the turbulence" (Subotnik, 2017, p. 64) requires facing certain truths. In what appears to be a scaled-down version of economic scapegoating (McKenzie, 2014) the white woman in 25 C unjustly blamed the black woman for her perceived economic misfortune. Her aversive racism almost certainly stemmed from a racial bias (Luksyte et al., 2013) and led her to prejudge me. As I seek to evaluate the outcome, curious as to if there could have been another reason for the false accusation, I can admit that there *could have* been other reasons, but I know in my heart that there were none. 25C did not know me any more than I knew her. This presents as a case where the simplest explanation is the best explanation.

Writing about the event while engaging in autoethnographic study prioritizes and contextualizes my experience (Chavez, 2012). In her mind, because I was black, I must be a criminal. In my mind, because she is white and accused me, she is a racist. It is possible that

neither is true. (Well, at least I *know* that I am not a thief). However, like the examples mentioned at the start of this paper, this type of experience is all too common.

In re-telling my story where I was falsely accused of stealing from a woman on an airplane, I have uncovered the difficulty I faced and unmasked the trauma I have experienced. I have often reiterated this story to my loved ones and my colleagues. It was not until the fifth time of verbally re-living the story that I began to notice my nonverbals. As I neared the part of the story where the woman offered me a conditional apology, my left eye began to twitch. The more I told the story, the more it became real to me and the more I began to suffer the strain from blowing off what seemed at the time to be insignificant microaggressions. I was digesting the overt racism and awesome audacity of that woman in the seat next to me. And now, having recounted the events applying Critical Race Theory and Attribution Theory, I understand how I had suppressed my justified anger. Because I wanted to “go high when they went low” I attempted to simply push the racism out of my way. I am now more cognizant that encounters like these for Black women and other people of color are so commonplace that we grow weary of addressing them.

Yet, the re-telling of this event, and in this sense, the academic analysis of it, helps me move a piece of my experience to a different space. My examination of what I still deem to be the white woman’s non-existent desire to free her mind, coupled with my own self-examination that includes the culmination of my life experiences that contribute to how I interpret the world, have given agency to my ongoing empowerment.

Conclusion

While my neighbor in the seat next to me and I both are guilty of operating from assumptions, the difference in her perspective and mine is the timing of our assumptions. When I met her, I assumed she was nice and initiated a cordial chat. When something went wrong, she made assumptions, believing I was a thief. I made assumptions, identifying her as a racist. My negative assumption about her and her mindset, did not surface until after I fell victim to her unfounded accusation, reminding me of the Afrocentric view that there is “no such thing as black racism against whites; racism is based on fantasy; blacks view of whites are based on fact” (Asante, 2003, p. 43). In trying to avoid being labeled the “angry black woman” I discounted the moment where I was more than justified in being angry. And guess what? The “black woman” part is here to stay. No, I didn’t steal her stuff. And no one can ever steal my voice.

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Author Note

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