

Race and Respect



Trigger: Differential Treatment

Organization: A university (nonprofit) in South Africa

Recommended Chapters:

- Chapter 1: Social Identity: Understanding the In-Group/Out-Group Group Phenomenon by Stella M. Nkomo
- Chapter 2: Triggers of Social Identity Conflict by Marian N. Ruderman and Donna Chrobot-Mason
- Chapter 3: Organizational Faultlines by Astrid C. Homan and Karen A. Jehn
- Chapter 4: Leadership Practices Across Social Identity Groups by Marian N. Ruderman, Sarah Glover, Donna Chrobot-Mason, and Chris Ernst
- Chapter 5: Cultural Values by Shalom Schwartz
- Chapter 8: Social Justice and Dignity by Philomena Essed
- Chapter 9: Miasma: The Dynamics of Difference by Ancella B. Livers and Robert F. Solomon, Jr.

THE CASE

This case takes place at a mid-sized university in South Africa. The majority of students and employees are White South Africans, and the rest are Black South Africans. The university prides itself on equal opportunity and fair and non-biased behavior. It attempts to instill these beliefs in all employees and staff. The university seeks greater diversity and inclusiveness of its staff and students. However, there have been concerns about unequal hiring and enrollment practices at the university for quite some time. A great deal of tension is present between white and black faculty and staff members at the university.

The situation described takes place during a lecture in a first year course. The majority of students in the class are white. The average student age is eighteen years old. The situation primarily takes place between an older, black, female student in the class (Maria), who is also a member of the university staff, and a popular white male student (Mark).

Maria overheard Mark negatively gossiping about her with classmates. She could not hear exactly what he was saying, but had heard him say offensive things in the past like, "I'm sick of taking classes with people who should be cleaning my kitchen." Maria was frustrated, because she had heard similar comments many times before. She decided to verbally confront Mark during class. In an angry tone, she yelled, "Wake up! This is the new South Africa. I can take you to court for this." The professor noticed the confrontation and asked the two to step outside of the class with him to resolve the issue. He asked his assistant to continue the lecture. The students began to talk among themselves, wondering whether Mark was in trouble. The professor's assistant, who was a co-worker and friend of Maria, attempted to continue with the lesson. The students asked the assistant whether Mark was going to be in trouble. The assistant responded by saying that if he did something wrong, administrators would deal with it appropriately. He advised the students to bring their attention back to the lecture, but the students' minds were preoccupied with what had just occurred. One could hear rumblings from many of the students suggesting that Maria was wrong to confront their classmate and that she was too outspoken. The three black students in the class thought Mark's sense of humor was derogatory but did not say anything about the situation. They didn't agree with how Maria handled the situation, but could understand why she was angry with Mark. When the professor returned, the assistant asked him how everything went. The professor advised that things had been sorted out.

Mark's father was an administrator at the university and was upset when he heard about the incident with his son. He complained to the dean, a white male, and the dean filed a complaint against Maria. A few days later, Maria's director called her into her office and advised that she had to stand before a disciplinary hearing because of her confrontation with Mark in class.

After the hearing, the dean fired Maria. Some believed the dean's decision seemed extreme and unfair. Others believed the dean made a just and fair decision. There was a lot of speculation and conversation about what was really going on.

A year later, the professor's assistant (who is Maria's friend), ran into the dean at a conference. The two spent a few minutes catching up, and just as they were about to end their conversation, the dean said to the professor's assistant, "By the way, I made a mistake regarding Maria's dismissal. Could you communicate my apologies to her and let her know that I am sorry?"

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Core Questions

- What are the social identity tensions expressed in the case?
- Discuss how you think the different social identities might perceive the tensions expressed in the case. How does this incident represent what is going on in the greater society?
- What about the situation was handled well?
- What could have been handled better or differently?
- How do the different social identities of the players contribute to their power and influence?
- What if Mark and Maria's social identities were switched?
- What role did leadership play in this situation? What role could it have played?
- Describe how different leadership practices might lead to different outcomes.
- Discuss the leadership or absence of leadership in the case.

Reflective Questions

- Pick the character who is most different from you and reflect on how you would feel if you were in his or her position.
- Pick the character who is most similar with you and reflect on how you would feel if you were in his or her position.
- Who in the case would you feel the least comfort in leading and why?

Case-Specific Questions

- Do you think the outcome would have been the same if the dean were a black woman? In what way?
- How might individuals or the university work toward resolving any additional distrust and/or division this case may have contributed to?

- What do you think contributed to the silence of the black students in the class?
- What impact do you think the dean's apology would have?
- How do the events that took place in the case relate to xenophobia (a dislike or fear of people who are different from oneself)?
- What steps can be taken to support a perspective of allophilia (a positive orientation toward the members of a particular group seen as different or "other")?

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