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St. John's University / College of St. Benedict

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Racism More Than Private Belief

Aubrey Immelman
Department of Psychology
St. John's University / College of St. Benedict
December 1993

In its November 4 article, "Senate Calls for Severe Sanctions," *The Record* quotes Saint John's Senate member Tom Burke as stating that "Racism refers to a belief that somebody has." Experience has taught me not to believe everything I read in print; I therefore recognize that Mr. Burke may have been misquoted or simply quoted out of context. Nonetheless, the statement attributed to Mr. Burke calls for closer scrutiny.

Racism — indeed any form of outgroup antagonism such as sexism, ageism, or homophobia — is more than simply a private belief system; it also has emotional and behavioral manifestations. That perspective is accurately reflected in a letter by Mr. Burke to the editor of *The Record*, published on November 18. In this letter Mr. Burke states his position that we need to make a distinction between "criminal behavior [which] may be punished, [and] disreputable beliefs [which] may not." Not only is this a valid point, it also highlights the semantic trap created by the indiscriminate use of the terms "prejudice" and "racism." The following framework may help us avoid some of those pitfalls.

Beliefs associated with racism typically constitute *stereotypes* about the shared characteristics of members of a social category. This is the cognitive component of group antagonism. Stated differently, stereotypes represent the "mind" of racism.

The second component of racism is *prejudice*, the negative evaluations or dislike of outgroups or their members. Conceptually, this is the affective (emotional) component of group antagonism — in other words, the "heart" of racism.

Finally, racism is usually associated with some form of negative behavior toward individuals, based purely on group membership. This behavioral component of group antagonism is usually referred to as *discrimination* — what one might think of as racism "in deed." There are, however, more subtle behavioral manifestations such as verbal rejection and physical avoidance, and also more serious actions such as physical attack and genocide.

The implication of the foregoing analysis is that, in addressing racism and other forms of group antagonism, we need to attack the problem at all three levels: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. It is therefore not sufficient simply to punish negative, antagonistic actions; we also need to address the stereotyping and negative evaluations of outgroup members, perhaps by redoubling our educational efforts and offering experiential learning through prejudice-reduction workshops. I hope a positive outcome of the unfortunate racial incident of October 9 at Sal's Bar & Grill involving Saint John's University students will be appropriate action along these lines.

Note. A version of this article was originally published as a letter to the editor in *The Record*, December 9, 1993, p. 12.

The Record, [November 4, 1993](#), p. 1

Senate calls for severe sanctions

By Maria Plonski
Staff Writer

On Oct. 9, a fight broke out between four St. John's students as a result of racial comments that were made. An investigation by the Stearns County Attorneys' office and the SJU Human Rights Office is in progress. The St. John's Senate is specifically looking at the comments that James Collins and Chad Wandler directed towards Larry Tucker and T.J. Jones-Embry.

The Senate, in reaction to this fight and the racial attitudes that caused it, has written a letter to Gar Kellom, SJU vice-president of student affairs at his request.

This letter serves to express the feelings of a majority of the student body, as well as recommend that appropriate actions be taken against Collins and Wandler if they are found guilty of racism after a complete investigation has been conducted.

The letter states, "Racism of any kind will not be tolerated within the CSB/SJU community." It was also expressed that a majority of the students on both campuses were upset by the fights and the reasons for which they occurred.

According to the letter, the Senate

believes that the fight and other racist actions and attitudes are problems for everyone on campus including "the education and well-being" of every student, faculty and staff member on campus no matter what race they may be.

Terry Flynn, president of the Senate, wants to make clear that the Senate's letter is not intended to be used as a basis on which the University will make its final decision.

"What I really want to stress is that we're not interested in judging or charging the students involved, but interested in recommending the correct sanctions to be imposed on them if guilty. [The letter] is meant to influence the sanctions, but not the investigation," said Flynn.

The Joint Human Rights Policy of both SJU and CSB states: "It is our policy to seek prompt and equitable resolution of allegations of discriminating relating to race, religion, color, national origin, sex, sexual orientation ... All community members will abide by these policies at institution-sponsored events on campus or away from campus."

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The Record, [November 4, 1993](#), p. 4

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The Policy also states, "Violations of the Human Rights Policy could result in disciplinary actions up to and including dismissal or expulsion."

The letter uses the words "severe sanctions" to reduce speculation as to what will happen to the students. The Senate does hope that this letter will serve as a representation of the student body and be an influence to future students who accept and carry out negative racial attitudes.

Matt Ezzell, Senate chairman of the Student Advisory Committee, states that, "If the Senate had recommended a specific punishment, they could not serve on the Judicial Appeals Board if an appeal is filed pertaining to this specific incident."

The letter passed with 11 in favor, 2 opposed and 1 senator abstaining because of his indirect involvement in the incident.

Tom Burke, parliamentarian and Joint Club Board co-chair for the Senate, is one of those greatly opposed to the letter.

Burke feels that the students should have the freedom and the liberty to say what they want, racial or otherwise. States Burke, "Racism refers to a belief that somebody has. To punish somebody or to give your approbation to a punishment that involves what somebody says, denies them that fundamental right to freedom of speech."

Burke also states, "In the event that St. John's is able to conduct a hearing for the individuals accused of racism, it may force the accused to defend themselves, which will undoubtedly affect their civil or criminal case. The consequences of being found guilty at a civil level are much greater and they will inevitably affect these persons for the rest of their lives. I feel that this letter will interfere with the judicial process at St. John's."

Burke has many doubts about the letter and the implications it has regarding the

University's decision and the exact timing of the letter.

"So should the letter have been sent? Not if the implications of this letter are that we demand a quick and expedient action on the part of the administration that may force these individuals to testify before a potential civil case is disposed of," said Burke.

Also, states Burke, "Should racism be the only consideration here? Why not focus on the violence?"

Flynn stated that the issue of violence was not expressed in the letter because the Senate "did not want to weaken [its] stance on racism."

Regardless of dissension between senators, the letter was sent to Gar Kellom on Monday morning to show that students will not tolerate racial attitudes such as those that caused the fight. This letter serves as a reminder that violence of any kind, racial or otherwise, is not accepted.

"This is an issue that the SJU community has to face. Racial harmony is essential to the community atmosphere that St. John's is so proud of and this type of incident only serves to divide and destroy our community," Ezzell said.

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If the two campus ministries decide on unifying ministries or portions of the ministries, they would begin to develop the new programs for the fall of 1994, said Heymans.

CSB student and SJU Campus Ministry employee Julie Heupel responded strongly to the thought of losing the college's identities if the ministries unite.

"Campus ministry is supposed to be the heart of the campuses, and if they combine, what's next?" Heupel said.

The Record, [December 9, 1993](#), p. 12

A focus on racism at CSB/SJU

To the Editors:

In the past few weeks, the communities of St. Ben's and St. John's have been focusing on issues surrounding multiculturalism and race. However, there are more problems which deserve our attention.

I think when most of us hear words like "multiculturalism" or "diversity," we automatically assume a Black/White issue. Multiculturalism is far bigger than that. It includes all people of color, such as Black, Hispanic, Mexican, Asian, etc.

But there are other issues which scream for the attention of faculty, students, and administration alike. For example, issues surrounding sexism or homosexuality. It seems to me that nobody really wants to hear, much less deal with, these invisible issues. Maybe it's because the homosexuals on our campuses look like everybody else. They can't wear their sexuality like their skin color. Maybe sexism isn't talked about because those of us around here would like to believe—foolishly—that men and women are treated as equals.

As a gay female, I've been wondering these past few weeks why I've even bothered in the first place to fight for what I strongly believe in. I feel like I'm the only one who gives a damn. And you know what? I'm tired and fed up with most people's general attitudes toward differences.

I think what bothers me most is the fact that a lot of people are talking, but who's

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Beliefs associated with racism typically constitute stereotypes about the shared characteristics of members of an outgroup or social category. Social scientists regard this as the

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The implication of the foregoing analysis is that, in addressing racism and other forms of group antagonism, we need to attack the problem at all three conceptual levels - cognitive, affective, and behavioral. It is therefore not sufficient to simply punish negative, antagonistic actions; we also need to address the stereotyping and negative evaluations of outgroup members, perhaps by redoubling our educational efforts and offering experiential learning through prejudice-reduction workshops. Hopefully one positive outcome of the infamous event of October 9 at Sal's Bar & Grill will be appropriate action in this regard.

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Assistant Professor of Psychology