

# **CASE TEACHING NOTES**

## **for**

### **“Exploring Unintentional Racism: The Case of Tim Hanks”**

by

**Robert W. Grossman**, Psychology Department, Kalamazoo College  
**Thomas E. Ford**, Department of Sociology, Western Michigan University

---

## **INTRODUCTION / BACKGROUND**

This case study is designed to help students explore their attitudes about race and examine the complexity of racism. It also has been used to teach about the social psychology of unintentional racism, attribution theory, and institutionalized racism. The case consists of several sections, or parts. Students are given one part of the case and asked to engage in corresponding discussion and/or writing activities before moving on to the next part. The third and final part of the case is followed by a handout and mini-lecture on the social psychology of attribution theory and the concept of unintentional racism.

This case requires that students apply theoretical knowledge to a particular situation, which can lead to a deeper understanding of the important relevant concepts. We believe that the case also promotes self-awareness and personal involvement with the topics of institutionalized racism, unintentional racism and attribution theory since it encourages students to consider their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences. This personal reflection may make the concepts more meaningful to students, leading them to evaluate their own previously unquestioned beliefs.

In a brief study evaluating the effectiveness of the case, scales measuring attitudes toward African Americans were administered. Students reported significantly less negativity than students who had not completed the case ([Ford, Grossman, & Jordan, 1994](#)). This finding provides some encouraging, albeit preliminary, evidence that the case may temper negative racial attitudes. On a rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), students reported that the case helped them better understand unintentional racism ( $M= 4.08$ ,  $SD = .76$ ). Students also reported that the case was interesting ( $M= 3.96$ ,  $SD= .87$ ).

## **Objectives**

The goals of the case are:

- to have students think about their definitions of racism and recognize that there are several different ways of thinking about it;
- to promote awareness of the subtle, unintentional forms of racism that operate to discriminate against African-Americans; and
- to increase understanding of and appreciation for cultural differences between African-Americans and whites.

The first objective was found to be the most consistent discovery participants in the case made.

## **BLOCKS OF ANALYSIS**

Conflicting definitions of racism arose during discussions of the case about whether the professor was acting and thinking in a racist manner. The differences in the definitions centered around three issues:

1. The first was whether the professor treated the African-American student as he would a white student. Some students argued that the professor was not racist because he treated the African-American student in a “color-blind” manner—the same as he would any (white) student. These students, at least implicitly, believed that racism is a term reserved for situations in which African-Americans are treated differently.

In contrast, other students argued that the professor’s color-blind perspective was precisely why he was racist. These students suggested that because Tim Hanks was African-American, he faced certain social constraints or barriers that impeded academic achievement (i.e., encounters with racist bus drivers who failed to pick him up for school). By treating Tim like any other (white) student, the professor failed to consider Tim as an individual facing unique circumstances and constraints. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that racism involves denying a person the most appropriate treatment as an individual.

2. The second issue contributing to conflict in definitions of racism was whether or not the professor had malicious intentions. Some students argued that to be racist a person must intentionally behave in a malicious or discriminating manner. Since the professor did not intentionally try to hurt or discriminate against Tim Hanks, his behavior should not be considered “racist.” These students believed that the term “racist” is too strong a label to place on someone who had behaved in such a well-intentioned manner toward African-Americans. Other students, however, argued that racism is defined by the outcomes of one’s behavior, not by the intentions of one’s behavior. These students believed that even though the professor did not intentionally discriminate against Tim, the professor’s behavior and thoughts had racist outcomes.
3. The third issue that led to disagreement was whether the term “racist” refers to a stable personality trait or a behavior. Some students thought that there was something racist about the incident, but they were hesitant to label the professor a racist. These students saw the professor as a decent person, and they did not see racism as an enduring aspect of his personality. Students who were hesitant to label the professor a racist thought the term “racist” may be used appropriately if it was limited to describing the professor’s behavior.

All groups looked carefully at the difference between prejudice (stereotypical thoughts and attitudes) and discrimination (behavior that differentially and negatively impacts on a minority group). Some found that prejudice alone was enough to qualify one as a racist while others thought that discrimination must be displayed. The concept of institutionalized racism, where the discrimination was unintentional and seemed to be “race-blind,” was a new idea for many participants.

### **Lecture on Unintentional Racism, the Fundamental Attribution Error, and Institutionalized Racism**

The psychology content goal of this unit involved giving the participants a [handout](#) and a lecture on unintentional racism, attribution theory, and institutionalized racism. The racism content was based on Gaertner and Dovidio’s (1986) distinction between aversive racism and old-fashioned, or blatant, racism. Whereas old-fashioned racism is characterized by overt hatred for African-Americans or other minorities, aversive racism is thought to be characterized by more complex, ambivalent racial attitudes of white Americans, as detailed in the [handout](#). This portion of the lecture revealed to students that people might unconsciously and unintentionally discriminate against African-Americans even while consciously making every effort to behave in a non-racist manner.

In the next portion of the lecture we introduced attribution theory and the concept of fundamental attribution error (FAE). This was designed to provide a framework for students to understand the racist

implications of the way the professor *thought* about Tim Hanks. It was explained that the outcome of the attribution process is that one may conclude that a given behavior is either indicative of the actor's disposition (i.e., personality, attitudes, etc.) or the situation in which the behavior was performed ([Jones & Davis, 1965](#); [Kelley, 1967](#)). The FAE was then introduced as the natural tendency to unknowingly overestimate the extent to which another person's behavior is indicative of his or her disposition and underestimate the extent to which it is indicative of the situation ([Fiske & Taylor, 1984](#)). It was argued that the FAE could have racist implications because whites are more likely to make derogatory dispositional attributions for an African-American person's failures or dependencies (i.e., why Tim failed a test) than for a white person's failures or dependencies ([Frey & Gaertner, 1986](#); [Pettigrew, 1979](#)).

The final portion of the lecture focused on institutionalized racism and was taken from the work of Robert L. Jones from his chapter "Racism: A Cultural Analysis of the Problem," in his book *Black Psychology* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (1991). The concept of institutionalized racism describes the situation where an organization or institution has policies that discriminate against a group even though the policies are not usually directed at such groups. In a typical case, a set of policies are designed assuming a level playing field, when in fact the field is very unequal.

These concepts greatly expanded students' understanding of racism. It was the first time that most of the students had considered the possibility that racism was *not* limited to uneducated, white extremists. It became clear that racism could be the product of normal cognitive processes of educated, sensitive people like themselves. It is hoped that students may become more sensitive to the ways in which their own behavior and thought processes may sometimes have racist implications.

## **CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

This case has been used in three different undergraduate course settings (in a course on Introductory Psychology, in which it was used as the focus of the social psychology unit; in a Social Psychology course, where it was used to accompany the unit on prejudice; and in a course on Prejudice) as well as presented to groups of faculty (in a workshop format with a liberal arts college faculty, at a Ford Foundation Conference, at the Lilly Conference on College Teaching, and as part of a Chautauqua Short Course on Increasing the Retention of Under-Represented Groups and the Learning of All Groups in Science, Mathematics, Engineering and Technology Courses). The case was used with two populations of undergraduates—at Kalamazoo College, a private liberal arts college, and at Western Michigan University, a large state university. The groups of faculty were different as well. At the Ford Foundation Conference, faculty and staff were interested in reducing racism and improving multicultural programming. The liberal arts college faculty members were from many different disciplines while the faculty at the Chautauqua was from the math and sciences. This latter group included faculty from community colleges as well as research universities.

In each of these settings, the case study generated rich discussions regarding differing definitions of racism as well as cultural differences between African-Americans and whites. When used with white undergraduates it has been shown to reduce prejudice towards African-Americans ([Ford, Grossman, & Jordan, 1997](#)). With faculty it generated effective discussion about unintentional racism and provoked deep thought about how teaching can be affected by subtle attitudes that instructors hold.

When used with faculty groups, the case is run in a single, one-hour session. The theory part is used as a reading that the faculty participants complete after the case discussion. When used with student groups, the case is run over two days, with a total of three hours spent on the case and its associated activities. In this approach, the instructor gives an hour-long lecture after the case in which research results that led to the development and testing of the theoretical concepts of the case are presented. The lecture is followed

by a further hour of discussion in small groups to make sure students see how these concepts apply in detail to the case. It is also helpful to ask participants to discuss where they think they may have gotten their attitudes toward minority groups.

When using this case with first-year students we found that students occasionally had strong reactions to the material (see [Weinstein and Obear, 1992](#) for more on this topic). The analysis and discussion of the case prevents students from distancing themselves from the material as easily as they might in a more passive learning situation. With this reduced distance, discussions can become more emotional and personal. In our experience with this case, only a few students responded in a highly charged emotional manner, momentarily at the expense of thinking constructively about others' ideas. In addition, some beginning students were frustrated by the complex, multidimensional concept of racism. These students seemed angry or impatient with the discussion when they didn't get one definition or a simple formula to apply to the case.

We found five specific strategies helpful in keeping a civil tone to discussions while still allowing for full expression of the strong emotions or "gut feelings."

1. One of the most important tasks of the instructor during discussions is to encourage students to freely express their ideas. To facilitate such expression, we recommend *repeatedly* emphasizing that there is *not a single, correct answer to the questions* that accompany the case. Before this is said, many students expect the instructors to tell them who has the "right" opinion, and they are hesitant to voice differing views. We also encourage expression of divergent ideas by pointing out that *consideration of multiple viewpoints helps us to see different ways of thinking about racism*.
2. We cannot over-state the importance of *writing student arguments or comments on the chalkboard*. This keeps the focus on different ideas rather than allowing the group's energy to become focused on making and defending personal attacks.
3. *Acknowledging the emotion* in the classical Rogerian or "Active Listening" sense helps keep the comments from being taken as personal attacks (e.g., "You sound really angry about this"). Pointing out and labeling the emotion that is being expressed is helpful in keeping the feelings attached to an individual's opinion rather than allowing them to be directed toward another student. (You may want to read chapter six of David Burns' *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy* [1999] entitled "Verbal Judo" [pp. 135-144 especially] for an up-to-date illustration of this technique.)
4. Students answer questions in writing before voicing their responses. This, too, may help to balance the expression of feelings and ideas.
5. The organization and the structure of the case help to keep the discussion from becoming too emotional. After reading and discussing some of the case, students are introduced to academic concepts related to the Fundamental Attribution Error and aversive racism in lecture. This provides some grist for their "cognitive mills" and allows students to respond on an intellectual rather than simply an emotional level. Students are able to focus on using the concept of aversive racism and FAE to understand the case. This makes the discussion more cognitive and academic rather than emotional and personal.

The class is usually divided up into pairs or small groups of three or four students. The students are asked to read the material presented in Part I of the case and to answer the questions related to that section. After each person in their group is finished, they should discuss their answers, looking for as many different reactions as they can find. Only after discussing Part I should they move on to the next

part and repeat the process with the material in the other parts in a similar fashion.

After the group is finished writing about the questions in Part III it is usually productive to ask all those who felt that the instructor was racist (in answer to question 5) to raise their hands and the same for those who felt he wasn't racist. Ask the students to pair up with someone who has a view opposite to theirs and discuss their views and definitions of racism. Follow this with an open discussion with the whole group. The goal here is to make note of the different reactions to the material. It is best that notes from each different perspective be written on the board or on an overhead.

Next the participants should be told to read the "[Three Theories Handout](#)." After reading the handout and hearing the mini-lecture on unintentional racism and attribution theory, the students should be asked to apply the concepts of aversive racism and FAE to their reactions to the Tim Hanks case study.

In our experience students were readily able to see the FAE in the professor's attributions for Tim's academic difficulties, and how the FAE may have racist implications. Students also saw that they had made the FAE themselves when explaining Tim's behavior. Most students had made dispositional attributions for the causes of Tim's behavior and academic difficulties (see [handout](#) for further details).

After the case is over, the students should be asked to write "minute papers" in which they are asked to give their honest reactions to the case study, including what they thought about the lecture, discussion, and group activities. Because students tend to be concerned about grades, they should be reminded that they will get full credit regardless of what they write.

These written reactions have been valuable because we heard from students who had not talked in class, and we read some remarks that probably never would have been uttered in discussion. For example, one student said that it was very hard to talk about these things because she was afraid that she was racist, but she thought it was very helpful. Some students had negative comments, such as "white people can't teach me anything about racism" (from a white student) and "this topic doesn't belong in this course." Many students said that the unit had truly opened their eyes, and a few of them suggested that we do more than present concepts of racism—they said we should talk about solutions to the problem of racism.

Though the majority of white students agreed they were aversive racists by the end of the second discussion, a number of them strongly maintained this concept had nothing to do with them. One student in particular declared, "There were no blacks in the town where I was raised and consequently I have no prejudice in me, toward persons of any race or color." Others made statements like, "I'm not the least bit racist because whenever I have a feeling of fear of blacks or a desire to avoid them I strongly try to ignore that feeling and act opposite to it."

Students' realization of their own racism was not the only outcome. Many of the white students had no idea that racism continues to be a widespread problem. By the end of the case exercise, most students realized how prevalent racism is, even if they did not believe that they were racist. Giving the students clearer ways of thinking about racism and its dimensions led them to notice the more subtle forms of racism.

One student pointed out that she was beginning to understand the reactions of African-American women at a recent student diversity conference at which she represented the college. She had noticed that every so often, during large lecture sessions, generally presented by white faculty, the black women seemed to momentarily freeze in their facial expression. They would then seem to check for the reactions of other black women. A moment of recognition and agreement would seem to pass between these women and

then their expression would return to normal responsiveness. In discussing this observation later with some of these women she came to realize that what had occurred was that speakers often made remarks that were interpreted as racist by the African-Americans. The student now saw the remarks as an illustration of unintentional racism which put the women in a very serious bind as they were very angry with the speakers but also saw them as strong allies in the movement toward equality for African-Americans and other “minority” groups. If they were authentic and expressed the full force of their anger they would very likely alienate the speakers who were for the most part very helpful to their political ends. At the same time, withholding their anger was very uncomfortable and created the problem of letting the speakers continue on with their unacknowledged racism that could potentially damage African-American students and colleagues in the future.

In addition, the case prompted some students to consider ways in which they might learn more about the phenomenon of unintentional racism and the factors that influence it. One student was so energized by the discussions that he conducted some of his own “research” using the case study. He was interested in testing whether the race of the student in the case study would, indeed, influence the attributions that people make for the student’s academic difficulties.

Most gratifying were the reactions of the African-American students in the classes. One pointed out that she felt sure the professor in the case was “racist” but until the lecture on “aversion racism” she couldn’t articulate her reasons for feeling that way. Another African-American student felt he understood for the first time why he so often felt betrayed by his white friends. He had gotten to the point where he thought all white liberals were “two faced” and so was very cautious whenever approached by white students.

### **Pre-class and Follow-up Assignments**

The case is designed as an introduction to the topic so that the participants don’t have to do any reading before doing the case. When done as part of a course, relevant social psychology chapters were assigned following the case study. When done with faculty, copies of relevant articles were made available. In one workshop, copies of Claude Steele’s article “Thin Ice: ‘Stereotype Threat’ and Black College Students,” *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1999; 44-54. (available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99aug/9908stereotype.htm>) were made available. The case served as a very effective introduction to that article.

### **REFERENCES**

- Burns, D.D. 1999. *Feeling Good: The New Mood Therapy*. New York, NY: Avon Books
- Fiske, S.T., and S.E. Taylor. 1984. *Social Cognition*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Ford, T.E., R.W. Grossman, and E.A Jordan. 1997. Teaching about unintentional racism in introductory psychology. *Teaching of Psychology* 24(3):186-188.
- Frey, D., and S.L. Gaertner. 1986. Helping and the avoidance of inappropriate interracial behavior: A strategy that perpetuates a nonprejudiced self-image. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50:1035-1090.
- Gaertner, S.L. 1973. Helping behavior and racial discrimination among Liberals and Conservatives. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 25:335-341.
- >Gaertner, S.L., and J.F. Dovidio. 1977. The subtlety of white racism, arousal and helping behavior. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35:691-707.

- Gaertner, S.L., and J.F. Dovidio. 1986. The aversive form of racism. In: J.F. Dovidio and S.L. Gaertner (Eds.), *Prejudice, Discrimination and Racism: Theory and Research*. Orlando, FL: Academic Press, pp. 61-89.
- Grossman, R.W. 1994. Encouraging critical thinking using the case study method and cooperative learning techniques. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching* 5:7-20.
- Jones, E.E., and K.E. David. 1965. From acts to dispositions: The attribution process in person perception. In: L. Berkowitz (Ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*. New York: Academic Press, vol. 2, pp. 219-266.
- Jones, R.L. 1991. Racism: A cultural analysis of the problem. In: R.L. Jones (Ed.), *Black Psychology* 3<sup>rd</sup> edition. Berkeley, CA: Cobb & Henry Publishers, pp. 610-636.
- Kelley, H.H. 1967. Attribution theory in social psychology. *Nebraska Symposium on Motivation* 14:192-241.
- Pettigrew, T.F. 1979. The ultimate attribution error: Extending Allport's cognitive analysis of prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 5:461-476.
- Steele, C. M. 1999. Thin Ice: 'Stereotype Threat' and Black College Students, *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1999; pp. 44-54.  
<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/99aug/9908stereotype.htm>
- Weinstein, G., and K. Obear. 1992. Bias issues in the classroom: Encounters with the teaching self. In M. Adams (Ed.), *Promoting Diversity in College Classrooms: Innovative Responses for the Curriculum, Faculty, and Institutions*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, pp. 39-50

**Acknowledgements:** The impetus that strongly influenced the development of this particular case came from the Director of Multicultural Affairs at Kalamazoo College, Jeanne Baraka-Love. She suggested that “white faculty need to teach about racism because students are clearly in need of strong role models who are dealing effectively with their own prejudice” (J. Baraka-Love, personal communication, August 16, 1992).

**Date Posted:** 01/26/04 nas

Originally published at [http://www.sciencecases.org/racism/racism\\_notes.asp](http://www.sciencecases.org/racism/racism_notes.asp)

Copyright © 2003 by the [National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science](#). Please see our [usage guidelines](#), which outline our policy concerning permissible reproduction of this work.