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“Ch*nks Don’t Need Trigger Warnings” by Sarah Butt (she/her)

ABSTRACT. *This reflection essay details an AAPI student’s account of learning to advocate for herself against racial microaggressions committed in a professional setting. Over the course of the semester, several incidences of harmful language and thinking were revealed from a colleague. The student recounts learning to speak up for herself, what it was like to advocate in White settings, and the confounding process of filing complaints within the department. This essay gives a clear example of the necessity for the administration to have better systems to keep their marginalized and victimized students safe from those who wish to do them harm, either through ignorance or direct action.*



STUDENT BIO. Sarah is a second-year doctoral student in the School of Psychology at the University of Southern Mississippi. She received her Bachelor's in Biochemistry from the University of Mississippi and her M.S. in Psychology from the University of New Orleans. Sarah is currently an extern at a behavioral psychology clinic where she serves as a Registered Behavioral Technician and school consultant.

Ch*nks Don't Need Trigger Warnings: A Semester Long Account of Learning Professional Self-Advocacy

On the first day of Multicultural class, a graduate course intended to help future mental health professionals explore the role of culture in both practical and research contexts, Marie*, a member of my small group spoke an almost comical self-fulfilling prophecy, stating that “some of us may hate each other by the end of this class.” Before the class began, students were randomly divided into small groups. The purpose of the small groups was to allow students time to explore theories of identity development via discussion format. The small groups were supposed to complete a project over the course of the semester in conjunction with a local free health clinic. Marie* was assigned as the discussion leader for the very first small group meeting. During that first group meeting, it was evident she had not read or prepared discussion points before class began. During her attempt to lead discussion, she referred to herself using ableist and harmful terminology no longer used in practice for obvious reasons. It was in jest, but it was still jarring that a future mental health professional would speak in those terms in a professional setting. Then, she went on to discredit the usage of trigger warnings in media. If that had been where she left the issue, the discussion would have been simply about differences in opinions. Instead, she continued on to describe how Disney included a warning before the movie *Aristocats*, scoffing that Chinese cats shouldn't need trigger warnings. My thoughts spiraled through my head while I wondered if I should say something. I was thinking “Are you serious? You really just said that, sitting next to a Chinese person? Of course, you did because no one has ever pulled their eyes back and yelled ching chong at you on the bus or asked if you knew how to play the piano with chopsticks.” I wanted to say something, to advocate for myself but I kept thinking “What if it goes badly? What if I'm just being too sensitive? Is that really even a big deal?” Personal and professional confrontations are different, and I was entirely unsure how to navigate this situation.

I kept hearing the trope in my head about how when people are questioned about their views and identities, they tend to get defensive and sink their heels into the ground. I didn't know what to do or how to react. I didn't speak up because I wasn't sure how I'd be received. I didn't know these people in my group and speaking out is a privilege that people of color are often not afforded if they want to remain safe and comfortable in their environment. In those moments, I prioritized my own comfort over an opportunity to educate someone. I told the professor after class because I was afraid. I felt guilty for punting the responsibility to someone else but complacent because I thought something good could come of it. The professor assured me he was taking the matter seriously, and that actions would be taken to ensure that this would be a learning opportunity.

At the beginning of the next class, Marie* made an apology to the small group. She was sorry, that she didn't mean to offend anyone, and that was not her intent. She could have stopped there but then she blamed it on her “speech patterns” and that she “was not speaking in a professional manner”. She did not take accountability for the comments, she did not acknowledge what she said was ignorant, and she made no efforts to make amends nor a commitment to improving her understanding of her harmful language.

At several points throughout the semester following the incident, I spoke about wanting to develop my racial identity as part of this course because I felt like it had been lost because I was adopted at 7 months to White parents. Marie* sat next to me in every class while I described

*Name changed

being treated as a White child and how it erased parts of my identity that I am now trying to grow into 20-something years later. I described how I never really felt Chinese, but I am not white either, and how I want to find some way to feel comfortable in the middle ground of my racial identity. I recounted countless times harmful language had been used against me growing up. I talked about finding a connection to my culture through food, how much it meant to me, and it being one of my first steps towards discovering myself.

At the end of the semester, each person was assigned to give a presentation to the entire class on an underprivileged or underrepresented population. This assignment was designed to help students utilize research and critical thinking skills to develop counseling implications while increasing their speaking competencies surrounding these marginalized communities. Marie* was assigned Asian American Pacific Islanders as her population to cover. The presentations were supposed to be fifteen minutes in length. Marie* had fifteen minutes to cover areas in which AAPI individuals are underprivileged, research and counseling implications, and advocacy implications. AAPI individuals have had a long history of experiencing racism in America, so one would think she would have easily been able to fill more than fifteen minutes. Marie*'s presentation on Asian Americans lasted under five minutes. She brought up the common microaggression "Asians are good at math" as a way in which AAPI individuals are underprivileged. Two minutes in, Marie* cited an incident during which a White woman heard a Chinese woman cough and released a slew of racial slurs and xenophobic language. One issue with citing this incident is that Marie* did not use the term "racial slurs". Marie* boldly and confidently stated "...Go back to China you, coronavirus chink. The White woman said chink because it's an offensive term for Chinese people". I couldn't hear the remaining two and half minutes of her presentation due to the sounds of blood rushing through my ears. She was the final presentation of the class period and after she indicated she was finished, the professor abruptly ended the class.

To me, allowing a student to speak in micro-aggressions and racial slurs should not be tolerated under any circumstances. I understand everyone starts at a different place in their multicultural competency, but she had already been reprimanded and this was supposed to be her chance to demonstrate that she was taking the topic seriously. This was a chance to take her consequences seriously and grow and she did not. She did not educate herself and her she was intentional with her ignorance. She was not even competent enough to cover the population as it was assigned. She was assigned AAPI individuals, and she only covered Asian Americans. Further, after looking into her presentation sources, I discovered that the incident she cited didn't even happen. She either didn't read her sources correctly or she made up her own scenario to fit her rhetoric. We were second years in the program at this point, and it made me wonder how many other people had been subjected to her ignorance for the past year. I consulted with other students from the class and her program and became even angrier when I discovered that Marie* had been complained about several times but multiple students of color, and nothing had ever been done. She had a reputation of making similarly ignorant and harmful comments. Other students stated they had tried to explain to her why the comments she made were harmful and perpetuated stereotypes of minorities, but that they always fell on deaf ears. I felt so angry with her, with the professor, and with the supervisors that had allowed this student to be unchecked for so long.

The following week, Marie* didn't seem apologetic or ashamed, where was the empathy? The professor made an apology to the class for allowing her to continue and not saying anything

*Name changed

and then left space for us to reflect as a class on what had happened. During the reflection period in which we were allowed to speak our minds there was only silence. Was everyone waiting for me to say something? I was waiting for the validation from my peers, and I was met with silence and stares. I thought I didn't need validation from everyone and that I was confident enough on my own. But when I didn't get it, I discovered I sorely needed to hear my peers collectively condemn Marie's* actions. We all knew it was wrong, but no one would *say* so. Why were we all so afraid to confront Marie* to her face? I was assured by my professor that there were consultations being had and action being taken against Marie*. However, the department had to protect Marie's* FERPA rights. What about protecting me? What about protecting her clients?

I met with the professor and advocated for myself to no longer work in my small group with her. I asked instead to be placed in a different group, or if there were any other options. Despite my pleading, I was told I would still have to work with this person even though she was not apologetic about being racist directly towards me. The decision would make sense if there had been no prior racially insensitive interactions between Marie* and myself, but there had been. I was in tears, begging not to work with her because I did not want to carry the weight or responsibility anymore. I was told research indicated that continued interactions would lead to common ground, and this was the best way for both Marie* and myself to learn growth. I was told that continuing to work with a racist was the "least bad option" and there would be worse downstream consequences if I were allowed to leave my group. Again, protecting the perpetrator, and not the victim. This "research-based" model put the weight and energy on me, the person of color. This entire model seems to be opposite of everything we were learning in class. It required me to "humanize" myself to Marie* so that she could empathize with me.

I am not willing to be a part of someone's learning process when it is clear they are not trying to do so. I will not subject myself to being a social experiment for an unapologetically racist mental health practitioner. My willingness to discuss the loss of my Chinese identity with my small group after her ignorance showed that I am much more practiced and intentional about existing in an environment in which there are differences. The fact that I know where she went to college and high school, how she felt about her upbringing, and how it contributed to her identity truly shows that I was the one committed to listening and growing. If our small group discussions over the semester did not "humanize" Chinese people to Marie*, I really do not know what will.

Eventually after further self-advocacy and involvement from supervisors in my own department, I was given the option to complete an alternative assignment. I, the victim in this instance, was asked to write an essay. But I should not have been told I needed to work with her after requesting a change the first time, regardless of what the research says. I should have been given the option to stay in my group and complete the work I had intended to, without her there. I was excited about the final project. As part of the assignment my group was looking into ways the free clinic could better advertise services they offered within the community such as mental health talks, free health classes, etc. I put effort and care into the resources I added to the project. Not being able to see the project through was disheartening because I was so excited to have a product to put into the community. I was on a pre-med track in my undergraduate degree, and the final project combined some of the old interests I had with my current career path, and I wanted to show my strengths. Being given an alternate assignment felt like I was the one being reprimanded when I should have felt as though I was the one empowered.

*Name changed

With more self-advocating, I was able to identify a contact person to report what had happened with Marie*. I felt a moment of hope, but I never received a response to my email. I had to seek out the process for filing a complaint myself. After again, recounting everything that had happened for what felt like the 10th time and submitting the online form, I waited and heard nothing back. Apparently, it went to the wrong department, so it had to be forwarded to the correct department. Clearly the process for filing a complaint is difficult, further marginalizing those who need it most. I read every handbook, I read the ethics codes for the APA, I read the student code of conduct, and nothing led me to the correct place.

Two weeks later, I was called to a meeting regarding the incident. I was told that the intent was to simply find the best way to support me going forward. They were interested in listening to me and wanted to hear my side of the story. After checking the names of the individuals I was slated to meet with, I realized I would be walking into a room full of White people in power and advocating for myself against a White student. This was the opportunity I had been waiting for, but I was terrified I wouldn't be taken seriously. I reached out and requested if the professor of the class or my immediate supervisor could accompany me to the meeting to provide support. I was told no. They found it unnecessary and promised that I shouldn't fret because they just wanted to support me. In that moment I felt angry that my request was being ignored and I again felt terrified that I had made the wrong decision.

I entered the meeting already holding back tears. I knew that the meeting wouldn't be about supporting me, because again, I had advocated for myself and been dismissed. I was asked to tell my story while they listened and asked a few questions here and there for clarification. I felt ignored when I said that I was not the first or only person who has had an interaction like this with Marie* and asked them to consult with other people from the department and other students of color before making a decision. The weight of what it took for me to get there and why I would make the complaint in the first place seemed ignored. I was dismissed from the meeting, and someone said something to me as I was leaving but I couldn't hear them. The only thing in my head was "Don't cry, not here, not now."

My experience as an AAPI individual in a multicultural education setting can be summed up simply; a room of White faculty members met and ultimately decided that a White student's racial aggressions towards a person of color weren't serious enough for their dismissal. I sat in a room full of mostly White classmates, and not a single one was willing to call out the racism or blatant absence of remorse. The only things protected in what happened after were the university, the program, and Marie*. They referred to her as "this student" in meetings and classes to protect her dignity. They protected someone who chose willful ignorance over education and growth. My multicultural class taught me to recognize the patterns and become a voice for those who do not have one. We were taught that it is our duty as psychologists and advocates. But I sat in a room wondering when will those responsible for our education actually *do* what they are teaching us? When do they protect us? When do they protect the students of color who are begging for our education to stop being compromised to save the education of someone who devalues vital components of our practice? They placed a value on the experiences of myself and other people of color who had to interact with "this individual", and it was lesser than the value of protecting an aggressor who is intentionally and willfully resistant to educating herself. Her education was more important than mine. Her dignity was more important than mine. She gets to complete the course and the semester as unbothered as she always has. I took extensions and

*Name changed

incompletes and new assignments. I have had to combat mounting hopelessness and disillusionment with my own field.

While I felt comfortable speaking up in class, I am unsure if this experience has made me more or less likely to take action in the future. I felt supported initially because I was given some level of transparency surrounding the matter. The professor of the course was communicative and reassuring and asked me how much I wanted to be a part of the mending process. I felt reassured that Marie* was truly being educated and taking it seriously. After the second incident, I feel differently. There was much less transparency. Professors placated my concerns with “your feelings are valid” and “we promise, we are doing something”, but nothing changed. The current lack of transparency and the fact that Marie*, who has shown herself to be severely resistant to growth, remains a training mental health professional sends the message that there aren’t real consequences for racist actions. Individually, it seemed as though everyone agreed Marie* committed an egregious error. Institutionally, everyone seemed to be idling and waiting for someone else to do something. The system needs to change.

I do not see the intent of self-advocacy when the answer is placation and invalidation from those at the top. The process itself is unclear and inaccessible to students who desperately need support. Students deserve to know that there are consequences to intentional racism. Marginalized students deserve to know that they will be supported and have access to a safe environment to be open about ignorance they have faced from others. The bureaucracy of academia protects the institution and not its own students. For the sake of myself, and anyone else who has been subjected to intolerance and ignorance at the hands of those like Marie*, we deserve to know that the university cares about us and prioritizes the needs of victims of racial injustice.

Author’s note:

The names and portions of this story have been edited to protect the author from a system that consistently devalues the education of its marginalized students.

*Name changed