College Students, Blackface and How to Talk About Race

The University of Southern Mississippi confirmed Monday that six students dressed in blackface for a costume party. The USM Dean of Students Office said the six women, all members of Phi Mu sorority, dressed in blackface to depict themselves as the Huxtable family from “The Cosby Show,” as part of their participation in a 1980s-themed, off-campus costume party on Wednesday.

It should be said that the university gave an excellent response to the incident. “Though it is clear that these women had no ill intent,” said Dean of Students Dr. Eddie Holloway, “it was also clear that they had little cultural awareness or competency, and did not understand the historical implication of costuming in blackface.”

“Blackface” incidents aren’t uncommon— their ubiquity has inspired one of the best public campaigns against racism that I’ve seen in a long while. Even still, this begs the question, why is it so hard for (some) white college students to grasp the core prejudice and disrespect that comes with blackface? After asking friends about this, and their answers were illuminating.

As one noted, part of this has to do with our national reluctance to engage race like adults. Public schools teach the basics of slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction and the civil rights movement, but there’s no attempt to go deeper with the material, and move away from the notion that racism is something reserved for the Bull Connors and Klansmen of the world. It’s not just that students leave history education with a skewed, and often benign, view of American apartheid (in my experience, Jim Crow is reduced to its cultural signifiers—there’s no attempt to deal with the reality of state-condoned terrorism against black Americans), but that they come away with the belief that racism is the sole province of bad people.

In the minds of many white students, another friend pointed out, racism is something of a Platonic state. Racism isn’t expressed in behavior—if they themselves aren’t racist (meaning, if they believe that they aren’t racist), then none of their actions can be racist, even if they are clear demonstrations of racial prejudice. The flipside of this is a devotion to the idea of “colorblindness” as if racial disparities no longer exist. I’m sure that if you were to poll white university students, you’d find significant opposition to affirmative action, on the view any consideration of race is racist, even if you’re trying to adjust for past disparities.

Challenging this—and providing students with a more sophisticated understanding of racial prejudice—is much harder than it might look. As we’ve seen in politics on multiple occasions, people tend to shutdown the conversation when challenged with the notion that they’re indulging one prejudice or another. I would like to know the details of the University of Southern Mississippi’s plan to educate the students in question. Honestly, if it involves a sitdown with African-American students, I’m not sure that it will be effective. In general, people of color are burdened with the task of “educating” others on race, so much so that racism is seen as a problem for minorities, not necessarily white people.

Minorities have a part to play, certainly, but when addressing racial prejudice among white students, other white students need to do the heavy lifting. The longer we think of racial prejudice as something that people of color have to fix, the much harder it will be to develop a half-sane conversation about race in this country.