

letters

Getting a mixed message

To the Editor:

I must take issue with Renée LaChance's editorial ["Who Is Served?" *Just Out*, May 2, 1997]. Whether you call someone racist or prejudiced, the true issue is whether you treat people with simple justice. Has Chief Moose done so? I'm not certain. At this point, I'm getting a mixed message. I want to take his public acts of goodwill toward the sexual minority community at face value, but at the same time it doesn't look like his treatment of Capt. Garvey has been evenhanded. His past public blowups and remarks can perhaps be forgiven, but they make me very uneasy about what may be going on underneath the surface of the man. If Moose, in his capacity as chief of police, treats people differently because of their sexual orientation or race or for any other reason, he needs to be relieved of his position, just as Garvey, if he violated his duty or broke orders, should suffer the consequences as well. All the evidence is not in, and I am willing to wait to see what comes to light over the next several months. But in the end, injustice must be fought, no matter what community it comes out of.

If we don't treat all injustice equally, no matter what its source, we haven't a moral leg to stand on when admonishing society at large. Indeed, the closer we get to home, the more vital the battle becomes—in other marginalized communities, among our own people and finally in our own hearts.

Stephen Simpson
Portland

Condemn all generalizations

To the Editor:

Like many thoughtful readers, I was shocked to open the May 2 issue and see Renée LaChance announce that "Racism is defined as prejudice plus power." She goes on to explain that because "white people in the United States are in power," therefore "it is impossible for a person of color to be racist" toward whites, though they can be capable of "prejudice."

Although the meanings of words evolve over time, no one person, not even a newspaper editor, can redefine a word overnight. LaChance may want to distinguish between "racism" and "racial prejudice," but for most people, these terms mean the same thing. My *Webster's Collegiate* says that racism is "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities, and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race." If this is too erudite, there's also a second one:

"racial prejudice or discrimination." Nowhere does it imply that racism is something that only white people do.

We will not move beyond prejudice until we condemn all generalizations about race, including LaChance's statement: "white people in the United States are in power." This statement is false, and it is an obstacle to a free and empowering society. Many white people are not in power, for reasons that have nothing to do with race, and they are understandably offended that

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an editor feels free to utter this fallacy about whites, when the same fallacy expressed about any minority group would be reviled. Increasing numbers of people of color are in power, often on the strength of their abilities, and they are understandably offended by descriptions of the power structure that ignore their presence, or imply that they are present solely for symbolic diversity.

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Every race has its racial separatists, from Farrakhan to the Freemen. Indeed, the demand for racial separation is a predictable stage in racism's retreat. Many of us, though, long for a society that respects us as individuals and opens the way for us to build healthy communities based on really understanding each other.

Racial history should be embraced and understood as part of that healthy understanding. But shorthand generalizations about race (such as "Asians are dry cleaners" or LaChance's "white people are in power") are not just logically false:

They are painful obstacles to building a just and humane world.

Jarrett Walker
Via e-mail

Self-serving definitions du jour

To the Editor:

I'd like to know where Renée LaChance learned the English language. Where did she learn that racism is defined as "prejudice plus power"? It doesn't say that in my dictionary. I have no problem with her defending Chief Moose, but the whole paragraph leading up to the ludicrous statement that it is "impossible for a person of color to be racist" is incredibly irresponsible writing. If it is her opinion that it is impossible for a person of color to be racist, then she should state it as her opinion. In her article, she makes up her own definition of racism and presents it as common fact. The dictionary may not be quite up-to-date when it comes to contemporary definitions, but that shouldn't be taken to mean that those people with the power of having a regular editorial column can just assume they have absolute authority to redefine commonly held concepts.

I have my own definitions of prejudice, racism and discrimination, which are supported by my

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dictionary, and which I believe to be much more commonly held and logical than LaChance's self-serving definitions du jour. I have always understood prejudice to be a bias against (or for) anyone or anything. I can be prejudiced toward a co-worker because of his or her voice quality or choice in footwear. I can be prejudiced regardless of my relationship to the power structure. If a prejudice is against (or for) anyone of a given race because of their race, then that prejudice is racism. While the term "prejudice" refers to "preconceived judgment" or "irrational hostility" to-

ward an individual or a group, the "isms" (racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, etc.) refer to prejudice toward a specific group or category of people, again regardless of how much power is conferred upon that group by society.

Racism is present when a person is judged on the perceived characteristics of his or her race rather than on his or her actual characteristics. An excellent example of racism was provided by LaChance when she argued that Chief Moose can't be racist because he is a person of color and is therefore on the downside of power in the United States. While I agree that, generally speaking, people of color are on the downside of power in the United States, to say that every individual in that group is on the downside of power is a gross generalization and, as such, is racist. The actual characteristics of Chief Moose's position directly contradict that generalization. He is the chief of police in the largest city in the state. I consider that a powerful position.

With power comes the capacity to discriminate, which may be where LaChance got her definitions confused. While prejudice and racism (and sexism, homophobia, etc.) are attitudes, when they result in differential treatment of individuals based on categorical distinctions, those actions comprise discrimination. While the "routine, institutionalized mistreatment of a person based on his or her membership in a group," as LaChance mentions, is certainly an insidious type of discrimination, I take umbrage at the assertion that any mistreatment that is not routine and institutionalized cannot be considered racist.

I applaud that the number of good things Moose has done for the community were mentioned in the editorial. But when LaChance starts referring to the racist statements attributed to Chief Moose as "unfortunate actions" and "a few bad calls," she starts sounding like a biased politician. And when she argues that he is incapable of racism because he is a person of color, she sounds positively racist.

Gregory Anderson
Via e-mail

Editor's note: When I consult my dictionary—and I do have one—I find that the noun "editorial" is defined in part as "a statement of opinion in a newspaper or magazine...as by an editor...."

I knew the definition of racism that I live by would be radical to some Just Out readers. The definition of racism as prejudice plus power is not new and is not something I made up. It is a definition taught in unlearning racism workshops, including the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission's Dynamic Differences workshops. It is also the definition used in two fine books on unlearning racism, White Awareness by Judith Katz and Uprooting Racism by Paul Kivel. I suggest you and Webster catch up with the times, as they are a changin'.

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