Racism in Toyland

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racism in toyland

Christine L. Williams got her first experience as a low-wage worker at two national toy chain stores—one an upscale shop, the other a big-box outlet. Her experience reveals how retailers perpetuate a myriad of societal inequalities, and how class, race, and gender play out in today's shopping-mall culture.

Not long ago I had to buy a present for a six-year-old. I had at least three choices for where to shop: The Toy Warehouse, a big-box superstore with a vast array of low-cost popular toys; Diamond Toys, a high-end chain store with a more limited range of reputedly high-quality toys; or Tomatoes, a locally owned, neighborhood shop that sells a relatively small, off-beat assortment of traditional and politically correct toys. Can sociology offer any advice to consumers like me?

Unfortunately, many sociologists turn into utilitarian economists when it comes to analyzing shopping, assuming that customer behavior is determined only by price, convenience, and selection. But a number of social factors influence where we choose to shop, including the racial makeup of the store's workers and customers. In my book, *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping and Social Inequality*, I argue that racial inequality (and gender and class inequality as well) influence where we choose to shop, how we shop, and what we buy. The retail industry sustains such inequality through hiring policies that favor certain kinds of workers and advertising aimed at customers from specific racial or ethnic groups.

I noticed the connection between shopping and social inequality while working as a clerk at the Toy Warehouse and Diamond Toys for three months in 2001. These stores belonged to national chains, and both employed about 70 hourly employees. At the warehouse store, I was one of only three white women on the staff; most were African American, Hispanic, or second-generation Asian American. The "guests" (as we were required to call customers) were an amazing mix from every racial and ethnic group and social class. In contrast, only three African Americans worked at the upscale toy store; most clerks were white. Most of the customers were also white and middle to upper class. My experiences taught me to notice racial diversity (or its absence) wherever I shop.

"don't shop where you can't work!"

This slogan, popular during the Great Depression, rallied black protesters to demand equal access to jobs in stores, and many chains responded by hiring African Americans in predominately black neighborhoods: "We employ colored salesmen" signs appeared in Sears, Walgreens, and other stores eager for black customers.

Retail work is one of the most integrated occupations in the United States today. The proportions of whites, African Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics employed in retail jobs more or less match their representation in the labor force. But these statistics hide segregation at the store level. More than 15 percent of employees in shoe stores and variety stores, for instance, are black, but less than 5 percent of employees are black in stores that sell liquor, gardening equipment, or needlework supplies. Inside stores, there is further segregation by task: Whites usually have the top director and manager positions, and nonwhites have the lowest-paid, often invisible backroom jobs.

In the toy stores where I worked, the two most segregated jobs were the director positions (all white men), and the janitor jobs (all Latinas subcontracted from outside firms). The Toy Warehouse employed mostly African Americans in all the other positions, including cashiers. But over time I noticed that the managers preferred to assign younger and lighter-skinned women to this position. Older African-American women who wanted to work as cashiers had to struggle to get the assignment. Lazelle, for example, who was about 35, had been asking to work as a cashier for the two months she had been working there. She worked as a merchandiser, getting items from the storeroom, pricing items, and checking prices when bar codes were missing. Lazelle finally got her chance at the registers the same day that I started. We set up next to each other, and I noticed with a bit of envy how competent and confident on the register she was. (Later she told me she had worked registers at other stores, including fast-food restaurants.) I told her I had been hoping to get assigned as a merchandiser. I liked the idea of being free to walk around the store, talk with customers, and learn more about the toys. I had mentioned to the manager that I wanted that job, but she made it clear I was destined for cashiering and service desk (and later, to my horror, computer accounting). Lazelle looked at me like I was crazy. Most workers thought merchandising was the worst job in the store because it was so physically taxing. From her point of view, I had gotten the better job, no

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doubt because of my race, and it seemed to her that I wanted to throw that advantage away. (The manager may also have considered my background and educational credentials in assigning me to particular jobs.)

The preference for lighter-skinned women as cashiers reflects the importance of this job in the store's general operations. In discount stores, customers seldom talk with sales clerks. The cashier is the only person most customers deal with, giving her enormous symbolic—and economic—importance for the corporation. Transactions can break down if clerks do not treat customers as they expect. The preference for white and light-skinned women as cashiers should be understood in this light: In a racist and sexist society, managers generally believe that such women are the most friendly and solicitous, and thus most able to inspire trust and confidence in a commercial transaction.

At the upscale Diamond Toys, virtually all cashiers were white. Unlike the warehouse store, where cash registers were lined up at the front of the store, the upscale store had cash registers scattered throughout the different departments. The preference for white workers in these jobs (and throughout the store) seemed consistent with the marketing of the store's workers as "the ultimate toy experts." In retail work, professional expertise is typically associated with whiteness, much as it is in domestic service.

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The purported expertise of salesclerks is one of the great deceptions of the retail industry. Here, where jobs pay little and turnover rates are high (estimated at more than 100 percent per year by the National Retail Federation), many clerks know almost nothing about the products they sell. I knew nothing about toys when I was put behind the cash register, and I received no training on the merchandise at either store. Any advice I gave I literally made up. But at the upscale store I was expected to help customers with their shopping decisions. They frequently asked questions like, "What are going to be the hot toys for one-year-olds this Christmas?" or "What one item would you recommend for two sisters of different ages?" One mother asked me to help her pick out a $58 quartz watch for her seven-year-old son. A personal shopper phoned in and asked me to describe the three Britney Spears dolls we carried, help her pick out the "nicest" one, and then arrange to ship it to her employer's niece. Customers asked detailed questions about how the toys were meant to work, and they were especially curious about comparing the merits of the educational toys we offered (I was asked to compare the relative merits of the "Baby Mozart" and the "Baby Bach"). On my first day, I answered a phone call from a customer who asked me to pick out toys for a one-year-old girl and a boy who was two and a half, spend up to $100, and arrange to have the toys gift-wrapped and mailed to their recipients.

At Diamond Toys, most customers didn't mind waiting to talk with me. When the lines were long, they didn't make rude huffing noises or try to make eye contact with their fellow sufferers, as they often did at the Toy Warehouse. I couldn't help but think that the customers—mostly white—were more civil and polite at the upscale store because most of us workers were white. We were presumed to be professional, caring, and knowledgeable, even when we weren't. Like the employers of domestic workers studied by Julia Wrigley, white customers seemed less respectful of minority service workers than white workers; they were willing to pay more and wait longer for the services of whites because they apparently assumed that whites were more refined and intelligent.

On several occasions at the warehouse store, I saw customers reveal racist attitudes toward my African- American coworkers. One night, after the store had closed, I saw Doris and Selma (fifty-ish African Americans) escorting several white customers out. Getting straggling customers to leave the store after closing was always a big chore. Soon after, as I was being audited in the manager's office, Selma came in very upset because one of the women she and Doris escorted out had spit out her chewing gum at her. Doris and Selma were appalled. Doris said to them, "That is really disgusting, how could you do that?" And the woman said to Doris, "What's your name?" like she was going to report her. This got Selma so angry she said, "If you take her name, take mine too," and showed her name-tag. She told the woman that she was never welcome to come back to this store. Selma was very distressed. Talking back to customers was taboo, and she knew she could be fired for what she had said. The manager told her that some people are going to be gross and disgusting and what can you do? Clearly Selma and Doris would not get in trouble over this. But I sensed it was doubly humiliating to have to fear that she might be punished for talking back to a white woman who had spit at her.

Although I suffered from plenty of customer condescension at this store, at least putting up with racism was not part of my job. Once when Tanesha, a 23-year-old African American, was training me at the service desk, two white women elbowed up to the counter to complain to me about the long wait for service (they had waited about five minutes while we were serving

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another customer). I said something about being in training, and they thought I meant that I was training Tanesha. So they said, "Well, call up someone else to the register!" I said I'd have to ask Tanesha to do this. They demanded that I stop training her for a moment to call another person to the exchange desk. "No you don't understand," I said, "I'm the one who is in training; she knows what she is doing, and she is the only one who can call for backup, and she is in the middle of trying to accommodate this other customer." They seemed embarrassed at having assumed that the white woman was in charge. When they realized their mistake, they looked mortified and stepped back from the counter.

shopping while black

During the civil rights era, equal access to stores was high on the list of demands for racial justice. Before Jim Crow laws were repealed, many stores restricted their facilities to whites only. Black customers often were not allowed to try on clothes, eat at lunch counters, or use public restroom facilities in stores.

Today the worst forms of racism have been eliminated. Gone are the "whites only" signs on restrooms and drinking fountains. But some stores build to exclude. The history of suburban malls is a history of intentional racial segregation. Even today, so-called desirable retail locations are characterized by limited access. In my city of Austin, Texas, local malls have *opposed* public bus service on the grounds that it would encourage undesirable (nonwhite) patrons.

But open access is not enough to ensure racial diversity. Diamond Toys was located in a racially diverse urban shopping district, next to subway and bus lines, yet nearly all its patrons were white. I didn't fully realize this until one day when Chandrika, an 18-year-old African-American gift wrapper, told me that she thought she saw one of her friends in the store. We weren't allowed to leave our section, so she asked the plainclothes security guard to look around and see if there was a black guy in the store. I asked her about this. Was it so unusual for an African-American teenager to be in the store that one black guy would be so apparent? After all, lots of young men came in to check out the new electronic toys and collectibles. Chandrika assured me that a young black man would definitely stand out.

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One way that many stores show hostility to racial/ethnic minorities is through consumer racial profiling. Like racial profiling in police work, this involves detaining, searching, and harassing such people more often than is done for whites, usually because they are suspected of stealing. Some scholars have labeled this potential violation of people's rights "shopping while black." At the stores where I worked, clerks weren't allowed to pursue anyone suspected of stealing; that was the job of the plainclothes security workers. However, relations between customers and clerks sometimes broke down, and I saw double standards in the treatment of whites and minorities.

At the warehouse store, I was told to treat shoppers as if they were my mother (most shoppers at both stores were women). At the service desk, I was told to appease them by honoring all requests for returns, even if the merchandise had been used and worn out. The goal, my manager told me, was to make these shoppers so grateful that they would return to the store and spend $20,000 per child, the amount their marketers claimed was spent on an average child's toys.

In my experience, only middle-class white women could depend on this treatment. Nevertheless, I watched many white women throw fits, loudly complaining of shoddy service and merchandise with comments like "I will never shop in this store again!" Such arrogance no doubt came from being accustomed to having their demands met. On one occasion, when a white woman threw a tantrum because the bike she had ordered was not ready as scheduled, the manager offered her a $25 gift certificate for her troubles. She refused, demanded a refund, and left shouting that she would "never come to this store again." The manager then gathered the entire staff at the front of the store and chewed us out for being disorganized and incompetent.

Members of minority groups who wanted to return used merchandise or needed special consideration were rarely accommodated. The week before the bike incident, I was on a register that broke down in the middle of a credit card transaction. A middle-class black woman in her forties was buying in-line skates for her ten-year-old daughter. The receipt came out of the register but not the slip for her to sign, so I had to call a manager, who came over and explained that she needed to go to another register and repeat the transaction. She refused, since it seemed to go through all right and she didn't want to be charged twice. She had to wait more than an hour to get this problem solved, and she wasn't offered any compensation. She didn't yell or make a scene; she waited stoically. I felt sorry for her and went to the service desk to tell a couple of my fellow workers what was happening while the managers tried to resolve it, and I said they should just give her the skates and let her go. My fellow workers thought that was the funniest thing they had ever heard. I said, "What about our policy of letting things go to make sure

Photo by AP/Wide World

we keep loyal customers?" But they just laughed at me. Celeste said, "I want Christine to be the manager, she just lets the customers have whatever they want!"

Research has shown that African Americans suffer discrimination in public places, including stores; middle-class whites, on the other hand, are privileged. We do not recognize this precisely because it is so customary. Whites expect first-rate service; when they don't receive it, some feel victimized, even discriminated against, and some throw tantrums when they don't get what they want.

When African-American customers did shout or make a scene, the managers called or threatened to call the police. Each of these instances involved an African-American man complaining and demanding a refund. Once a young black man, denied a cash refund, threw a toy on the service desk and accidentally hit the telephone, which flew off the desk and hit me on the side of the head, knocking me to the floor. Within minutes, three police officers arrived and asked me if I wanted to press assault charges. I did not. After all, angry people often threw merchandise on that desk, and what happened had been an accident. But at least I was appeased. At the end of my shift, the manager gave me a "toy buck" for "taking a hit" in the line of duty, which entitled me to a free Coke.

There wasn't much shouting or throwing at the upscale store. It protected itself from conflict by catering to an upper-class clientele, much as a gated community does. This is not to say that diversity always leads to conflict, but it did at the warehouse store because race, class, and gender differences existed under a layer of power differences within the store. Clerks and customers interacted in a context where these differences had been used to shape marketing agendas, hiring practices, and labor policies—all of which benefited specific groups (especially middle-class white men and women).

what about tomatoes?

There are alternatives to shopping at large chain stores, although their numbers are dwindling. The store I'm calling Tomatoes is a small, family-owned business in an upper-middle-class neighborhood on a busy street with lots of pedestrian traffic. It's been in the neighborhood for 25 years, owned by the same family. It sells an offbeat assortment of toys, including many traditional items like kites and wooden blocks, and a variety of toys I would call "politically correct." It didn't carry Barbie, for example, but it did have "Get Real Girls," female action figures that look like G.I. Joe's sisters. I laughed when I saw a pack of plastic "multicultural" food, including spaghetti, sushi, a taco, and a bagel (all marked "made in China").

Working conditions at the store seemed very relaxed compared to what I had experienced. The owner wore shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, and the workers dressed like punk college students, including weirdly dyed hair, piercings, and tattoos. They didn't wear uniforms (as we did at the other two stores). One clerk wore her T-shirt hiked up in a knot in the front and stuffed under her bra in the back. Clerks seemed to be on a friendly, first-name basis with several of the customers, who were mostly middle-class white women.

Although I didn't get hired at Tomatoes, after several visits I noticed social patterns in the store's organization. The owner and the manager were both white men, and all the clerks were young white women. The owner was the only one who was near my age (mid-40s). You can never be sure why you aren't

hired, but my impression is that I wasn't young enough or hip enough to work there. Although Tomatoes allowed more autonomy and self-expression than the stores where I worked, race, class, and gender inequality were as much a part of the social organization there as in other retail stores.

conclusion

I ended up buying my gift at Tomatoes—a children's book written and autographed by Marge Piercy. My decision reflects my identity and my social relationships. But what are the implications of my choice for social inequality? My purchase supported a store that was organized around racial exclusion, gender segregation, and class distinctions.

Everyone has to shop in our consumer society, yet the way shopping is organized bolsters social divisions. The racism of shopping is reflected in labor practices, store organization, and the guidelines, explicit or unspoken, for relations between clerks and customers. When deciding where and how to shop, consumers should be aware of what their choices imply with regard to racial justice and equality. Although an individual shopper can do little to change the overall social organization of shopping, raising awareness of the inequalities that our choices support must be a first step in imagining and then creating a better alternative.

recommended resources

Lizabeth Cohen. *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Knopf, 2003). A comprehensive social history of the politics of consumerism in the 20th century, focusing on race and gender inequality.

Joe R. Feagin and Melvin P. Sikes. *Living with Racism: The Black Middle Class Experience* (Beacon, 1994). An encyclopedic account of the routine racism that middle-class African Americans face in their daily lives.

Robert E. Weems. *Desegregating the Dollar: African American Consumerism in the Twentieth Century* (New York University Press, 1998). Describes the complex history of racism and resistance experienced by African-American consumers in the United States.

Christine L. Williams. *Inside Toyland: Working, Shopping, and Social Inequality* (University of California Press, 2006). A study of the social organization of the retail industry, emphasizing how shopping reproduces race, class, and gender inequalities.

Julia Wrigley. *Other People's Children* (Basic Books, 1995). Wrigley documents the racial preferences and prejudices of middle-class employers who hire nannies to provide child care and other domestic labor in their homes.

out of context: ornithocide

joel best

Dubious estimates for the size of social problems often involve big, round numbers. Earlier this year, NPR's *All Things Considered* reported that one billion birds die each year in the United States from colliding with windows; an architect interviewed on the segment declared that the figure was based on "very careful data." Certainly some birds die after flying into windowpanes, but how can this be calculated? The number reported comes from the work of an ornithologist who believed that an earlier estimate (3.5 million window-related bird deaths per year—based on an assumption of one death per square mile of land) was too low. Figuring that the U.S. has roughly 98 million buildings with windows, and estimating (on the basis of observing only two private homes) that 1–10 birds die after flying into windows, the ornithologist calculated that the annual death toll falls between 98 million and 976 million. News reports fixed on the latter figure and rounded up. Not everyone agrees. One bird-death Website offers a rival estimate that only 80 million birds are killed by window collisions, but argues that domestic cats kill more than one billion birds per year. ("This figure does not include the losses resulting from feral or wild populations of cats.") There are about 60 million pet cats, so this would mean that each cat kills an average of 17 birds per year.