COVID-19 and Videoclassism: Implicit Bias, Videojudgment, and Why I'm Terrified to Have You Look Over My Shoulder

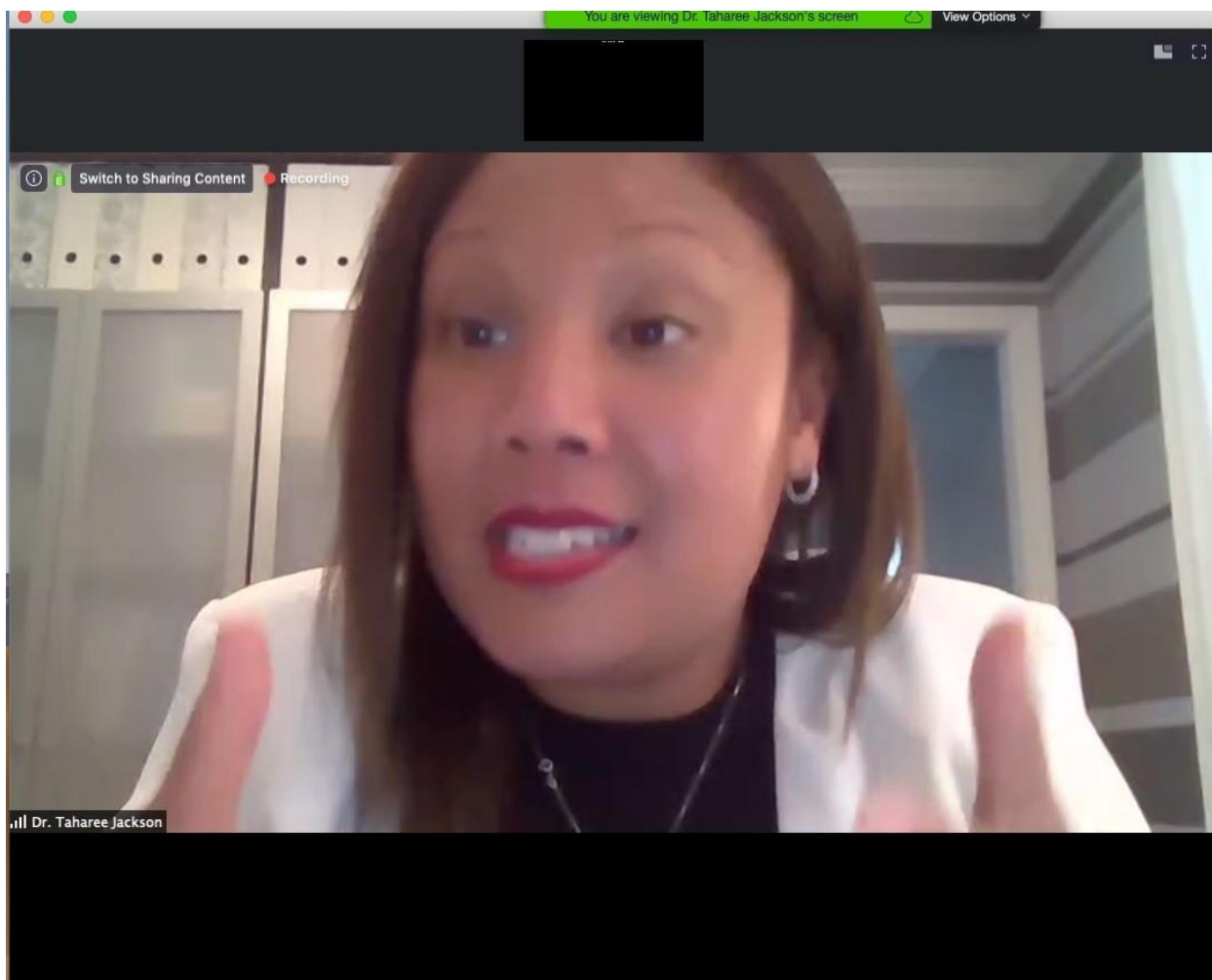- Published on March 27, 2020

Taharee Jackson

Diversity Equity & Inclusion Speaker, Writer, Trainer of Diversity Trainers @ DrTaharee Consulting/Federal EEO Counselor

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Just this week, I found myself leading an all-day webinar on antiracism for a group of over 100 Vermont educators. I was originally due to co-lead the session in person with the nation's foremost expert on poverty, Dr. Paul Gorski of the Equity Literacy Institute, but due to the bizarre time in history this has become as a result of the Coronavirus outbreak, we were asked to lead the session online. Great, I thought. For the 19th time this week I'll be allowing a group of strangers into my home office. Into my life.

Given these unprecedented times, I am using videoconferencing software platforms almost daily. I have interviewed for new job opportunities thrice now on WebEx, BlueJeans, and Hangouts. I have an upcoming interview with a major federal agency on Skype. This Saturday, a group of professional women and I will hold a mental health check-in via videoconference. And my best friend—whom I haven't seen in I don't know how many weeks—is pining for a watch party on Netflix so we can at least feel as close and we would ordinarily be.

When I think of how I am eager to participate in these platforms as an adult, I immediately juxtapose that with how I might have felt as a student: MORTIFIED. As I write, every school in my state has been closed indefinitely, and students have no choice but to FaceTime with friends, videoconference with teachers, and even complete their assignments with laptops and sometimes synchronous class "meetings" online. College students are home making memes of their hilarious professors, and ultimately making the best of their courses on Zoom or whichever online platform allows us to "see" one another in real time.

I'll get right to it. Each time I participate in a videoconference, I know the other participants can look over my shoulder. They can see what's in my office—with glimpses of my entire home—and they will subsequently judge me for it. Lucky for me, I have a fantastic sense of style (I am a professional interior designer in my head), but even then I have a secret. I live in a tri-level home that I purchased as a short sale. This was the worst home in the best neighborhood I could afford, and I have depleted my savings just to make the home habitable, much less presentable.

I am single, I am my own breadwinner, and the descendant of American slaves. I have no access to intergenerational wealth, and as the highest income-earner in my family, I am constantly sharing my salary. As someone who grew up in a poor family, my income will never be my own. My office and the rest of my home are just videoworthy enough for me to escape embarrassment not because I am wealthy, but because I have learned the art of being a "Craigslist Crackhead." That is, I use giveaway items from Craigslist FreeStuff to transform others' trash into magazine-worthy décor. It is rather time-consuming, but it's the only way. It's my own means of decorating.

If I had to participate in videoconferencing as a child, I would have been terrified. I can't help but think about the scores of children (and adults) who at this point have no choice but to participate in schooling and work by way of inviting their classmates and colleagues into at least a portion of their home. As a diversity consultant who teaches and trains others about implicit bias—and *specifically* the negative ideas we espouse about people who are experiencing poverty—I worry about the psychological effects and downright trauma of having those who learn and work alongside us having a requisite glimpse into our homes, making inferences about our social class, and subsequently judging us for it. I worry.

My childhood home was not glamorous. Even now I wonder what small corner of the house I would have been willing to let others see. As a matter of fact, I didn't have a laptop until the end of my senior year of

high school, so my first concern would have been the embarrassment of having to borrow a laptop or request one from the school. Dr. Paul Gorski has also written about the digital divide, or the incredible disparity in access to technology hardware and internet access, and the COVID-19 has only highlighted that gap. But that is a different article…

As embarrassed and ashamed as I would have been allowing even a portion of my home to be seen by my friends and teachers, I think of my other school friends. I think of my friend who was homeless throughout most of our K-12 schooling together. I think of my Vietnamese and Hmong friends who lived in homes with as many as 20 fellow refugees. I think of my African and Asian friends who lived in small homes in large groups with extended family members. I think about my classmate who was raised by a single mom and shared a room—sometimes a bed—with her younger brother until we became freshman at Harvard.

During this unprecedented time of virtual meetings, distance learning, and the new normalcy of videoconferencing, I am thinking of my fellow brothers, sisters, and non-binaries who either experienced poverty growing up, or who still feel uncomfortable sharing portions of their personal lives on Skype. People can see what is behind us, and that makes us nervous. As I move toward my online interview next week, I plan to rearrange the books on my shelf, angle the camera just-so, and hopefully maintain a sense of parity and dignity as total strangers peer over my shoulder and make judgments about where I live, how I live, and what I can afford. They will see the paint on my walls, the drapes on my window, and perhaps even a glimpse of my neighborhood if they truly "Zoom" in.

If you have never given serious thought to how you are presenting socioeconomically online, then what a blessing. But if you are like scores of people like me who grew up in a less than glamorous home, and even now, a home that is decorated entirely from other people's garbage, then please refer to this article often, with a fresh set of "nosey" eyes, and with the understanding that for some of us, videoclassism is real, and videojudgment is a terrifying proposition. When all this is over, we will return to physical settings with you, and you will have that much information to use against us about who we are. You will know our homeless shelters, our crowded apartments, our small and humbly decorated homes, the "auntie" or grandma's house we live in as part of a non-traditional family, or any number of our dirty little secrets. And that makes us uncomfortable.

From where I sit, here is a non-exhaustive list of at least FIVE recommendations for interrupting videoclassism and checking the implicit bias that many of us will fall into as we videoconference with our peers and colleagues:

1. Be Introspective: Check Your Class Status

The first, most helpful thing you can do for class-anxious videoconferencers like me is to be introspective about your own class status. Did you own the technology you needed to videoconference or did you have to travel to a public library, visit a more technologically-wealthy friend, or borrow equipment from a school? Were you anxious about which room of the house you would position as your background? Are you afraid of being judged negatively by the atmosphere, artifacts, or actors (family members, children, animals, etc.) that may appear in your video?

2. Be Empathic: Check Your Thoughts

During the videoconference, we should be asking ourselves what we are viewing, learning, and thinking about the other person based on what we can see. Do we approve of their attire and "outbreak" hair? What inferences are we making about what they can and cannot afford? Where are we allowing negative assumptions and implicit bias to distract us from the content at hand? As an expert trainer on implicit bias, I can tell you that practicing both introspection and empathy during videoconferencing will positively impact your ability to "catch yourself" and identify biased thoughts. Only when you make repeated efforts to check your thinking can you work toward more productive, less judgmental thoughts and behaviors.

3. Be Content-Focused: Check Your Comments

If I were a child videoconferencing with my friends or teachers, I would have been altogether frightened by the idea of people posing questions. If my Asian mother and Black father were nearby (which was inevitable, given the modest size of my childhood home), what questions about my heritage and multiraciality would I have had to answer? Multiple parts of my home were unfinished given the nature of how my home was built during our hurried return from the Iranian Revolution, so would someone have asked me about exposed drywall? Would a less-than-kind classmate have bullied me online by making an inappropriate comment about the secondhand smoke and tar on my walls? When participating in a videoconference, be mindful of the comments and questions you pose that are OUTSIDE the purview of the conference itself. It is of course appropriate and deeply humane to pose questions about someone's health, or even toilet paper supply, but be careful about extraneous comments relating to the things, people, or situations they may or may not have. At any given moment, we are all doing the best with what we have…

4. Be Open: Check Your Knowledge about Class and Poverty

As an educator, I implore you to continue historicizing poverty in the United States to better understand and contextualize how class functions in this nation both contemporarily and historically. There is a reason many students live in low-income neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty. My own father

purchased a plot of land in a state where interracial marriage was legal, therefore revealing the intersections of race and class and the unfair limitations thereof. In a meritocratic, individualistic society, we often make judgments about what people have and why. And if we find that they don't have something, we overlay our own assumptions about how they haven't worked as hard, or pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, or been more resilient. As someone who has been living her life BOOTLESSLY, I would encourage you to read any number of resources about the clash of race and class in this country. Then you might better understand redlining, restrictive covenants that extended well into the 1970s, and all manner of racist and classist laws that have kept me in the neighborhoods I am confined to.

5. Be an Accomplice: Check Other People Who Class-Shame and Videojudge

One of the most impactful trainings I lead is, "Moving from Actors to Allies to Accomplices." In it, I challenge participants not only to govern their own behavior, but to stand in solidarity with others who cannot and should not always have to shoulder bullying, classism, and all manner of discrimination alone. If you find yourself participating in a videoconference call with someone who is making inappropriate comments, teasing, or cyberbullying someone else, I urge you to at least be an ally and disrupt that behavior in real time. If, however, you wish to be an accomplice, or someone who acts in anti-classist ways in public or private, in partnership or alone, I would ask that you look for ways to support students and colleagues who are experiencing poverty. Donate your time, support, and resources to anti-poverty programs and solutions. Vote for candidates who, like Andrew Yang, JUST suggested assisting Americans with cash payments as a method of addressing equity and forwarding the country, and NOT just during a global pandemic. Most importantly, deftly share this article with the offender and everyone you know. Because sometimes, the sharing of good, honest scholarship is the most revolutionary act of solidarity we need.