

Instances of Personal and Institutional Discrimination

Class: SW3110

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“I’m sorry. These are the guidelines I must follow,” is a covert reply when institutional discrimination occurs. Institutional discrimination is injustices that are built into the structure of systems and institutions. The inequalities may exist when stereotypical beliefs and disadvantages are generally organized into rules, policies, laws and objectives of the institutions.

I was seventeen years old the first time I experienced institutional discrimination. I was caring for my first daughter, finishing high school and working a part-time job. I needed child care for my daughter. The high school I attended had a daycare inside but the daycare required I pay cash for their services or seek assistance from the government. Being a young mother I could not afford to pay cash for daycare services. I tried to apply for daycare assistance through The Family Independence Agency (FIA), now known as The Department of Human Services (DHS). Unknowingly, I needed to be eighteen years of age to apply for assistance. So here I was a mother, living independently but not emancipated by the state and could not seek assistance without my parents. Needless to say, my mother did not want to fill out the application. She felt they (DHS) required too much of her information and she did not want to provide it. My grandmother and some teachers had already expressed to me the inequality amongst African Americans versus Caucasians and men versus women, now the burden of being a teenage mother was another challenge for me to overcome. I was at my lowest point and I felt the system was not designed for people like me.

In my eyes this was institutional discrimination based on age and gender. I was operating in the same capacity as an adult. I had my own home, car and was employed. The only difference between my mom and I was the amount of our income and our age.

I believed this type of discrimination existed because during the construction of the daycare assistance guidelines, people in my situation were excluded from the status quo, during this time being a teenage single mother was taboo. Time has since evolved and more single mothers are at the forefront and sometimes the sole provider of the home. However, I do not feel the supply for assistance matches the demand. Being in such a needy position without any assistance available, made me work even harder to avoid turning into the statistic that society thought I would become. This also aided in my desire to become a social worker in an effort to help young women in need like myself.

In addition to the system not being designed for a young single mother like myself, once I was approved for services I also received direct discrimination from my case manager. One day I went into the office to ask about my case. I was wearing \$500 worth of clothes and accessories. Dressed in a designer skirt set that I borrowed from a friend and a pair of \$300 shoes that my mom purchased for my birthday a year prior, my case manager gave me the look of death and simply stated "from the way you're dressed, you shouldn't be asking for assistance." I was in such disbelief that all I could say was "huh." She replied without hesitation, "If you quit purchasing those designer clothes perhaps you wouldn't need assistance." According to the NASW Code of Ethics social workers are never supposed to judge but this is exactly what she was doing. She had no idea if I bought the clothes myself or if someone gave them to me. I felt she had already formed an opinion about me and had it made up in her mind that I was not worthy of assistance. This experience alone conveyed to me that I should never judge people based on appearance because no matter how clean I was and even though I

was dressed in expensive garments I did not have a dime in my pocket or in the bank. I did not even know where my daughter's or my next meal would come from. This was enough to discourage me but I did not let it. Instead I made a vow to myself to be in a position to help women in my situation and to never become the case manager that I encountered.

When I initially set out to write this paper, I kept saying to myself, "I don't discriminate and I wouldn't participate in discrimination of any type." That was until I thought about a time I worked as a manager of an Outreach Program. As the manager I was in charge of interviewing and hiring employees. A former co-worker, who was in legal trouble, asked if we hired felons. I told him yes because I knew we hired felons in the past and had some employed with us currently. I explained to him that he would need to get a police clearance indicating he had no warrants and he would be fine. After getting the police clearance and interviewing with my manager and me, we made a joint decision to hire him. After five days on the job I was informed that we had to let him go. The explanation was we couldn't hire people with the type of felony possessed, which was fleeing and eluding. In my opinion the felonies that some of our current employees possessed were far worse than my former co-worker. My friend had more experience in relation to the job than any of our current employees. I thought this was really unfair and he deserved a second chance; not because he was my friend but because he made a mistake, just as everyone else does or has. His came with the price of not being able to find stable employment.

A lot of companies discriminate against hiring people with felonies. The decision not to hire felons or certain felons is a risk according to some employers. Which may be true in some instances and a lot of employers are willing to take that fifty-fifty chance. Unfortunately, this type of discrimination leaves a lot of African American males in an endless cycle, which includes jail, quick money, jail and quick money again. I know several men who say “when I get out of jail I’m going to find me a job.” It is not until they get out in the world that they realize it is easier said than done and after about a year of being released they are back to illegal activities to provide for themselves and their families.