
The Culture-bound Counsellor as an Unintentional Racist

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Abstract

Racism has been discredited as a scientific and biological term but highly visible racism in schools, universities, and social institutions demonstrate that racism remains an important political and psychological concept. Historically, racism has been given as an ideological, political, social and economic justification by one group to exploit others. This exploitation is not always done intentionally and many unintentional racists believe themselves to be fair. It is suggested in this article that we tend to underestimate the extent of personal and institutional racism by neglecting "unintentional racism" and by presuming that scientific objectivity will protect us from being racist.

Résumé

Le terme "racisme" a été discrédité dans le contexte scientifique et biologique mais il est évident que le racisme existe visiblement dans les écoles, les universités et les institutions sociales et que le racisme demeure un concept important sur le plan politique et psychologique. Historiquement, le racisme a été utilisé comme justification idéologique, politique, socio-économique pour l'exploitation d'un groupe par un autre. Cette exploitation n'est pas toujours intentionnelle, et beaucoup de racistes involontaires se croient équitables. Il est suggéré dans cet article que nous avons tous tendance à sous-estimer l'importance du racisme personnel et institutionnel en négligeant le "racisme involontaire" et en supposant que l'objectivité scientifique nous protégera d'agir d'une manière raciste.

The current trend of racism in schools, universities and public institutions continues to gain visibility in spite of efforts by those same institutions to eliminate racism and to discredit it as a legitimate point of view. It is important to understand how racism can continue to flourish in spite of all the public rhetoric against it.

Counsellors who presume that they are free of racism seriously underestimate the impact of their own socialization. In most cases this racism emerges as an *unintentional* action by well-meaning, right-thinking, good-hearted, caring professionals who are probably no more or less free from cultural bias than other members of the general public. Racism is defined as a pattern of systematic behaviours resulting in the denial of opportunities or privileges to one social group by another. These behaviours are observable, measurable, verifiable, and predictable.

Racism can refer to adverse behaviour of individuals or of institutionalized social groups. Overt racism is intentional, where a particular group is judged inferior and/or undeserving. Covert racism is unintentional, where misinformation or wrong assumptions lead to inaccurate assessments or inappropriate treatments. Covert unintentional racism is less likely to be changed because there is no awareness of dissonance between intention and action. The unintentional racist may behave in

ways that are even contradictory to that person's underlying intended motives (Ridley, 1989).

Sedlacek and Brooks (1976) contend that most racism is unknowing or unintentional where people are unaware of the racist effects of their behaviour. The key to changing the unintentional racist lies in examining basic underlying assumptions. These culturally learned, basic, underlying but typically unexamined assumptions, control our behaviour, our perception, or our understanding of rational behaviour and our definition of "truth."

Racism brutalizes and dehumanizes both its object and those who articulate it. It is, therefore, a problem for the total social context where it is articulated and where it promotes exclusionary practices. Racism has come to represent a pervasive force of exploitation by one group against another group where the protection of self-interest becomes more important than fairness, equity, justice, and truth.

The author discusses the issue of racism in the western counselling context. First, what is the role of science and scientific thinking with regard to the construct "racism"? Is there scientific evidence for racial classification? Does "scientific racism" condone and/or support examples of institutional racism? Second, how useful is "race" as a construct in understanding how culturally different individuals or groups find harmony? By putting conflict in racial terms are we making the conflict harder or easier to solve or manage? Third, to what extent can we include unintentional with intentional racism? Does racism always require an intent to be racist? When we speak of racism are we referring to the consequences of both intentional and unintentional action?

THE ROLE OF SCIENCE

We depend on scientific objectivity to protect us from unintentional racism. However, we can not expect science to save us from our own culturally learned assumptions. In at least some cases, the very research on which we have depended to identify data-based truth has contained implicit, unexamined assumptions which have continued this unintentional racism. Segall, Dasen, Berry and Poortinga (1990), in a recent review of human behaviour in global perspective, point out the continuation of unexamined assumptions with regard to research on intelligence. They suggest that "much of the writing and thinking about race and intelligence has been sloppy, irrational, politically motivated, and extremely costly in human terms" (p. 100). The controversy surrounding Jensen's (1969) research on intelligence and racial identity has demonstrated how both sides of the argument cite "scientific" evidence in support of their position.

There are many other examples of research on intelligence in multi-racial societies where one group has been politically and economi-

cally dominant and where the less powerful groups have been targets of discrimination justified on the basis of “racial differences” in intelligence. These attitudes toward culturally different groups can be traced to “scientific racism” (Guthrie, 1976; Williams, 1978) and Euro-American ethnocentrism in psychology (White, 1984).

Sue (1981) has described the “genetic deficiency” model which promoted the idea that whites were superior to blacks and other non-white populations for biological reasons. These beliefs have been traced to the early scientific writings of Charles Darwin (*On the Origin of the Species by Means of Natural Selection*, 1869), Sir Francis Galton (*Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences*, 1909), and G. Stanley Hall (cited in Williams, 1978). The scientific arguments for racial discrimination persist particularly in the literature about culturally biased tests (Lonner, 1985; Lonner & Sundberg, 1985).

Lifton’s (1986) book on *The Nazi Doctors* is overpowering in its documentation of how some of the most advanced and distinguished scientists of that time could be so profoundly misled by their unexamined assumptions about racial discrimination with disastrous consequences. Literature is full of examples where good people do bad things. There needs to be more emphasis on the unexamined underlying assumptions behind rational and logical thinking to make sure that our scientific intellectual rockets are pointed in the right direction before ignition.

The scientific response to racism has tended to be simplistic. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 provides a good example of how powerful unintentional racism can be. Nathan Glazer (1975) took the position that when the government outlawed racial discrimination then racial minorities would be able to advance themselves much as European immigrants had, so that each individual would be judged according to merit, and be given equal opportunities. Ronald Takaki (1987) attacks that view as simplistic. Merely prohibiting racial discrimination will not create equal opportunities in a society of unequal groups.

Structures of inequality such as poverty, inferior education, occupational stratification, and inner-city ghettos required the government to act affirmatively and to promote opportunities for racial minorities based on group rights. The ideas of individualism and meritocracy actually reinforced the reality of racial inequality, for they in effect blamed minorities themselves for their impoverished conditions (Takaki, 1987, p. 11).

Science has provided reliable and valid data to help solve many of the problems in the modern world. We have come to depend on science to solve all of our problems, because science has come to represent values of objectivity, fairness, and truth. However, the scientific method can only be as objective, fair, and truthful as the original underlying assumptions defining a particular area of scientific inquiry. The weakness of science is certainly not in its methods but rather in the assumptions—both inten-

tional and unintentional—of the scientists using and applying those methods.

The counselling literature has usually been critical of “bad science” in the counselling research resulting from overreliance on test scores because of their presumed objectivity, overuse of standard intervention strategies because of their convenience to the counsellor, and overdependence on a single theory of counselling because of its familiarity to the counsellor. Each of these examples has disregarded the client’s cultural context. However, even “good science” presumes cause/effect relationships in all change, linear thinking as more rational than non-linear thinking, and objectivity modelled on the hard sciences as ideally suited for the soft sciences such as counselling. Even good science presumes culturally learned assumptions about process and content which may distort the counsellor’s understanding of a client’s cultural context.

USEFULNESS OF A RACE AS A CONSTRUCT

There is a great deal of controversy surrounding the use of the construct “race.” Helms (1990) and others have emphasized the importance of race and racial identity as a meaningful construct. Other authors (Atkinson, Morton & Sue, 1989; Pedersen, 1988) have argued against the continued use of race as a category because of its pseudo-scientific associations with a biological classification which has been discredited by anthropological and other biological sciences. Miles (1989) in his concise history of racism as an idea provides a critical analysis of the controversies surrounding the topic of racism. Miles’ book makes a strong case for the usefulness of racism as a concept that helps us understand why racism persists in modern society.

Miles (1989) acknowledges that the term racism is discredited as a scientific biological term and negatively loaded as a term of political abuse. It is this *political* implication of the term racism which gives the construct of “race” a “natural” reality. Racism has played an important role in the history of civilization. Miles takes a historical view of the concept going back to the fifteenth and sixteenth century, when it used to be applied primarily to differences between Europeans and Muslims. Secondly, Miles (1989) also links the concept to the capitalist mode of production bringing in the close relationship between racism and socio-economic development. Thirdly, Miles describes how racism flourished as a philosophical construct to justify social and political progress especially in Western cultures. These three factors provide the context in which racism is best understood as an ideology to categorize people and for the attribution of meaning that justifies action.

Racism is also described by Miles as extending beyond the colour barrier. There are certainly differences between the experiences of many

“white” and other “non-white” peoples. Colour itself has been used to justify some universal and inevitable judgments of inadequacy against less powerful groups. Miles, however, rejects the argument that racism is an exclusive creation of, and essential feature of, European or “white” cultures. If whites are the origin and cause of the racism problem and therefore lack the capacity to understand, analyze or explain racism, then even those who expose and resist racism are themselves racist in denying victims the right to act autonomously on their own account.

If racism involves prejudice plus power and if racism is defined by the consequences of an act rather than the intention of the actor and if power can be defined in many different ways according to each cultural context then any prejudiced person in power could act to cause racist consequences. Racism has been used as a highly emotional term to describe the actions of a majority toward minority cultures. If and when minority cultures become more powerful they are also likely to behave in ways that will result in racism.

UNINTENTIONAL RACISM

The concept of racism has broadened as we have become more aware of its complexity in recent years. Ridley (1989) points out some underlying assumptions about modern racism that demonstrate its pervasiveness.

First, racism is behavioural. It is expressed in what the person does rather than how that person feels or thinks. Attitudes are important in motivating people to behave differently but even well-intentioned attitudes will not make up for the pain among victims of racism. Second, racist acts can be performed by prejudiced as well as non-prejudiced persons. There is no causal relationship in which racism depends on prejudice as its antecedent. Well-intentioned but misinformed persons can still behave in racist ways. Third, racism is not the sole responsibility of any single ethnic group. Anyone can be racist. Fourth, the criteria for judging an act as racist lies in the consequences rather than the causes of the behaviour. Consciousness-raising is not enough to eliminate racism, and will not by itself prevent racist acts. Fifth, racism is perpetuated by the power or powerlessness of groups with respect to one another.

The expanded importance of racism as a concept has resulted from both a political and a moral interpretation. The original definition of racism has been expanded from the colonial setting of white over black to a wide variety of situations where exploitation occurs. Miles suggests that the term “racism” needs to be more narrowly defined to facilitate analysis. While Miles does not deny the reality of colonial and moral exploitation as an example of racism he asserts that some of the complexity and sophistication of racism as a technical term is lost if we think of it as an historical abstraction. Miles links racism to the process of seeing history in racial terms, where the powerful are separated from the power-

less and where those in power are presumed to have the right or even the responsibility to exclude the powerless from consideration.

As an ideology it is necessary to acknowledge the political reality and complexity of racism, avoiding simplistic applications to far distant historical events. It is essential to view racism as a political and economic force and consider its consequences through including some and excluding others' access to power. Racism may include contradictory and multidimensional ideas in an unthinking and unexamined justification for action.

The counselling implication of unintentional racism is to increase a counsellor's self-awareness, reduce the counsellor's reliance on self-referenced criteria, and to demonstrate that good intentions are not enough. In order to be skilled and accurate, counsellors will need to examine the consequences of their decisions in the client's cultural context.

EXAMPLES OF UNINTENTIONAL RACISM

There are several ways in which unintentional racism can interfere with counselling. Ridley (1989) has identified several examples in his analysis of racism process variables.

First, the counsellor might contend that all clients are treated equally, regardless of colour. Colour blindness is an allusion for a counsellor who needs to feel impartial, who is uncomfortable discussing ethnic/racial issues, who is insecure about his/her own views about race, or who has several unresolved issues regarding race. The error is to abstract the minority client from the client's specific cultural context, while abstracting the counsellor from the counsellor's cultural context as well. As a consequence, deviations from this abstract normal become pathological. The counsellor is likely to apply a "self-reference criterion" in judging others according to what the counsellor would say, do, or feel under the same conditions.

Second, counsellors might become "colour conscious" assuming that all of a client's problems derive from the client's cultural background. The assumption is that each culture has developed an inevitable and irreversible pattern which is their destiny. Terms such as "culturally deprived," "under privileged," and even "minority" may result from colour consciousness. The counsellor may experience guilt about the treatment of oppressed minorities and feel a need to atone for that guilt, while perhaps overlooking instances of real psychopathology independent of the client's cultural background.

Third, clients may exhibit cultural transference. Clients work through their emotions and experiences by transferring feelings to the counsellor from their background experiences. If a client has had positive or negative experiences with people from the counsellor's cultural group they

will likely transfer those positive or negative feelings to the counsellor. The therapist may fail to recognize a client's positive or negative behaviour as a transference phenomena, and will therefore be less likely to respond appropriately.

Fourth, counsellors might exhibit cultural counter-transference. This refers to a counsellor being influenced by previous positive or negative experiences with people from the client's culture. The counsellor's assessment of a culturally different client might consequently be distorted by irrational projections. Consequently, the counsellor might focus more on their own projections than the client's actual problem.

Fifth, counsellors might misinterpret cultural ambivalence. Cross-cultural counselling is complicated by power and control needs by both the counsellor and the client. Counsellors might respond in either a condescending or paternalistic manner to reinforce learned helplessness and client passivity. A more dependent counsellor might respond to cultural ambivalence with guilt feelings, and might easily be manipulated by a perceptive client. As a result the focus of counselling becomes counsellor-centred rather than client-centred.

Sixth, pseudo-transference may occur when a culturally different client responds defensively to the counsellor's attitudes, which is then interpreted by the counsellor as pathology. In fact, the client's reactions may be based on accurate and real assessments of the counsellor's own unintentional racism. Such defensiveness might be in response to stereotyped attitudes of the counsellor, whether positive or negative, toward the client as a product of a particular cultural background.

Seventh, the counsellor may misinterpret client non-disclosure. Different cultures teach and encourage different levels of self-disclosure as appropriate. If the client is to benefit from therapy it may be necessary to disregard culturally learned patterns of non-disclosure to outsiders from other cultures. However, if the client chooses to self-disclose this behaviour might also be misunderstood as culturally inappropriate.

CONCLUSIONS

There are many changes occurring in society which will increase the urgency of enlightening culture-bound counsellors who are unintentional racists. The increased proportion of minorities in the U.S. and Canada will require much more attention to culturally different perspectives in counselling. The U.S. Immigration Act of 1990 will dramatically increase the numbers of legal immigrants from foreign countries from about 500,000 a year to more than 700,000 a year. The NAFTA agreement between Mexico, Canada and the U.S. will also increase the migration of peoples from one country to the other. The social, political, and economic world order is changing so that the U.S. and Canada occupy

a less powerful, independent position in relation to other countries internationally.

Finally, the diverse variety of special interest groups who are beginning to define their separate cultural identities will each require and demand equal attention. The culture-bound counsellor's competence will come under attack not merely for immoral behaviour but—in some way more seriously—for inaccurate assessment of the multicultural situation. The unintentional racist will require special and remedial attention to fit the multicultural reality of the modern world.

In the past, changes in the counselling profession have always been top-down, driven by a particular theory, a handful of experts or a method which counsellors have “tried on” and found useful. The current revolution in counselling is quite different. A wide range of culturally different consumer groups are changing counselling from a “bottom-up” perspective. In order to respond to multiculturalism, counselling will need to become more consumer-driven and responsive to the cultural context of each client. Only by making culture central to the counselling process can counsellors achieve the level of accuracy and effectiveness toward which the profession of counselling aspires.

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