Chapter 9
De-colonizing Multicultural Counseling and Psychology: Addressing Race Through Intersectionality

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Essentialist notions of race, such as the characteristically US Black/White racial binary, portray race as something individuals have. An intersectionality approach, on the other hand, views race as a system of inequality and as a vector of privilege and oppression that interacts with other systems and vectors, like those related to gender and class, to advantage or disadvantage groups of people. Essentialist notions of race in supposedly "multicultural" counseling and psychology paradigms are colonizing; that is, they help perpetuate practices that support inequities and injustices stemming from institutionalized White racism and White supremacy. Intersectionality, on the other hand, can be a decolonizing corrective to essentialist notions of race.

In this chapter, I examine the roots of the US's brand of racism, critique the colonizing nature of essentialist notions of race in supposedly "multicultural" counseling and psychology, point the way toward a more critical, transformative multiculturalism, and present intersectionality as a metadisciplinary framework incorporating a critical perspective on race that can decolonize multicultural approaches to counseling and psychology. Finally, I apply intersectionality in a case example featuring a domestic violence intervention with an economically disadvantaged Black couple.

Colonial and Early American Roots of the Essentialist Racial Binary

The essentialist understanding of traditional US racism portrays Black people as inferior to White people. Blackness and its opposite, Whiteness, are understood as inherent elements within an individual person. These constructions of group identity emerged from historical material circumstances and social interaction in the

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early 1600s. The principal influences on American White racism came from English plantation owners in the West Indies. In an effort to stabilize their labor force of indentured European and enslaved African workers in the extremely prosperous colony of Barbados, the planter class instituted the Barbados Slave Code of 1661, declaring that people of African descent were slaves for life and that the slave status was hereditary according to the condition of the mother. This strategy provided incentive to indentured European laborers, as they gained "White" privilege, to remain loyal to the institutionalization of slavery.

Many formerly indentured laborers of European descent, experienced in Slave Code enforcement, migrated north to the American mainland to seek a better life. They helped establish and maintain White supremacy as the symbolic order of the new nation (Gupta et al. 2007). The descendants of enslaved Africans became, in effect, an internal colony within the USA (Conwill 2007).

Essentialist Notions of Race as Colonizing

Reactions against counselors and psychologists who dare to speak out against the remnants of these historical systems in the form of White racism and White supremacy can be brutal. Of course, these reactions do not stand up well to analysis and appear, for the most part, to be an evidence of the racism they mean to deny. For example, when Derald Wing Sue received an award for his contributions to the study of multicultural issues in psychology, Thomas et al. (2005) unleashed a diatribe against Sue's (2004) critique of White privilege and ethnocentric monoculturalism. They dismissed Sue's anti-racism advocacy as "race-baiting," as though the lack of such analysis is less critique-worthy than the analysis itself.

The attack was astounding in its lack of understanding racism, especially in its social and institutional forms. For example, in response to Sue's critique, the authors stated defensively, "one is damned regardless of whether he or she makes distinctions between people of different races or treats them all the same" (p. 50). Making the distinctions and using them to advantage some and to disadvantage others is the real issue, I argue. The authors used universal statements to produce a Straw Man argument, as in this statement: "[e]vidently, Dr Sue and all other people of color have a more enlightened worldview than White psychologists and they have superior empathy skills, as well" (p. 50). They also presented an *ad hominem* argument:

> All of these charges are offered as though White people constitute a homogeneous, racially biased, and unfairly privileged group with few within-group differences. To propose such universality among White people suggests an extremely limited life experience. It also constitutes what can only be labeled as racial bias, since it would be grossly inappropriate, if not professionally unethical, for a White psychologist to level such charges against members of any other race. (p. 51)

Thomas et al. (2005) used obvious psychological projections in crafting their argument. Despite the publications of noted authors on White, middle-class, male

privilege (e.g., Liu et al. 2007; McIntosh 2002) dating back more than 25 years, Thomas, et al. complained that Sue did not spell out what he meant by what they called "unearned 'White privilege'" and insinuated that it was Sue who grew up in isolated backwaters. Ignoring the history of ostracism endured by the people of color in the American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association for decades, the authors contended, "it is extremely rare in the multicultural literature for dissenting opinions to be published. Stated bluntly, advocates of multiculturalism, ironically, are less likely than most psychologists to tolerate intellectual diversity" (p. 50).

Culture Wars: The Ploy of "Blacks Are Just One Ethnic Group Among Many"

Over time, many reactionary forces rallied against challenges to the US brand of internal colonialism that racialized people of African descent. At the beginning of the Black Power movement, for instance, Daniel Moynihan's *The Negro Family: the Case for National Action* (1965) conflated race and culture and intimated that Blacks would not fare better economically until American White society and Black culture changed. Moynihan was the Assistant Secretary of Labor under the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Moynihan and his colleagues hoped to divert attention away from Blacks' outcries against White supremacy by introducing culture and ethnicity into the White/Black binary discourse. During the 1960s' backlash against the push for Black civil rights, they encouraged Whites to see themselves as European ethnics who also had suffered injustice in the US, with an attendant right to redress wrongs. Through invidious comparisons between Blacks and people of other racial or ethnic identities, they ushered in the age of the hyphenated American, as Kilson (1975) illustrated, with the people of White ethnicities purported to have risen from poverty through individual effort and industry:

> Unlike the ethnicity of White social groups, black ethnicity lacked until recently the quality of authenticity—that is, a true and viable heritage, unquestionable in its capacity to shape and sustain a cohesive identity or awareness. Anti-African attitudes, widespread among most Afro-Americans until recently, were fundamental to this situation. Thus, black ethnicity has the status in American society of a curiously dependent cluster: it borrows from White society much, though by no means all, of its culture-justifying ingredients. (p. 243)

The above statement wilts in the face of the historical record. It masks the White intentionality in the disruption of African cultures, solidifying a permanent class of formerly enslaved laborers (Pitman 1926). Their specious reasoning ignored panoramic job discrimination, the destruction of successful Black communities, and state-sponsored Black prison labor forces, among other conditions—the same conditions ignored by Thomas et al. (2005) in their attempted dismissal of Sue's work.

Culture Wars in Multicultural Counseling and Psychology

By the late 1960s, counselors in the Association for Non-White Concerns and psychologists in the Association of Black Psychologists committed themselves to resisting peers who attempted to derail the struggle against White racism and White supremacy. They charged members of their own professions as culprits in the oppression of Black citizens. They directed their efforts primarily and directly against their parent organizations and exposed tainted psychological theories and national practices based on White supremacy. They rebuked peers who acted out their Whiteness on the basis of alleged superiority or who assumed that all persons with dark skin felt inferior because of their color.

Their charges were serious. Downplaying the significance of White supremacy and adopting the rhetoric of cultural differences, with race as just one factor among many that are vying for attention, ensures inadequate attention to racial injustice and, by extension, it ensures the perpetuation of racism. Avoiding contestations about White racism and White hegemony by emphasizing Black resilience and Black middle-class success narratives similarly obscures the real, underlying issue of White racism. It is, in effect, "playing nice" with the White people who might fear the implications of racial justice. Unfortunately, such an approach dominates discourses on multicultural counseling and psychology today.

To press this assessment, I present a commentary on Vontress and Jackson's (2004) "Reactions to the multicultural counseling competencies debate." spurred on by Arredondo et al. (1996) a decade earlier. I choose to focus on it not because of its singularity, but because it includes several elements of the "Blacks are just one ethnic group among many" argument.

Vontress and Jackson (2004) expressed sentiments common among many people who oppose social activism in the counseling and psychology professions:

> We maintain that mental health counselors should look at all factors impacting a client's situation. Race may or may not be one of them. In general, race is not the real problem in the USA today. The significance that clients attach to it is the most important consideration. Individuals who perceive their race to be an impediment to achievement in life usually create for themselves a self-fulfilling prophecy…
>
> We agree that in the USA, the dominant racial group has defined historically minority groups, especially African Americans. For example, White Americans usually define Tiger Woods, the son of an Asian mother and an African American father, as Black, even though he does not define himself as such. He identifies with the cultural and racial heritages of both parents. His view of himself is healthy, because how people feel about themselves as human beings is more important to their well-being (sic) than how other people perceive or define them. (p. 76)

Putting aside the circularity of their statement that race is not the real problem and their blaming of victims for acting on their perceptions, Vontress and Jackson's (2004) position normalizes an expectation of heroic triumph by Blacks who are healthy enough to perceive a problem with racism and to attribute self-induced failure to those who do not expect miracles. Race is about how people see and treat each other differently as members of an advantaged or an oppressed ethnic group. Race is about the laws and practices that affect life chances and opportunities based

on those differences. In the educational setting, Vontress and Jackson's argumentation would have us ignore racist teacher expectations, academic tracking, and limited access to social power (Rust et al. 2011). This is solipsistic reasoning about race and a complete disregard for the reality of racism under the guise of "cross-cultural" practice.

Vontress and Jackson continue:

> The Dimensions of Personal Identity Model is an impressive, creative, and useful contribution to the psychotherapeutic community. However, it is unfortunate that it and the competencies are restricted in application to four identifiable minority groups in the USA. People in our nation come from almost every country in the world. They, too, present themselves to mental health professionals as clients. (p. 78)

Vontress and Jackson (2004) also criticized the "exclusivity" of multicultural competencies that focus on US "minority" groups, arguing that the "majority of clients needing help in adjusting to American society" are those "countless immigrants from all over the world who require and should receive counseling too" (p. 75). These other immigrants, however, are not actually countless, nor are they a majority. Many were privileged in their homelands and had the resources to emigrate comfortably.

It is difficult to understand criticism of a framework to address the mental health needs of the people who suffer from racism. Vontress and Jackson's argument appears to be that competencies for each small immigrant ethnic minority group should have been foregrounded rather than multicultural competencies focusing on the people of color. But is the real issue when it comes to multicultural counseling and psychology in the current sociopolitical climate whether a dominant group should be served or whether people from disenfranchised groups should receive equitable service and attention?

Toward a More Critical Multicultural Counseling and Psychology

Virulently potent forms of racisms and apartheids use culture, ethnicity, religion, and other factors as coded signifiers. In this way, the true nature of racial oppression often is disguised. Hispanic people identified by others as Black do not escape double jeopardy as Black Hispanics because they identify themselves simply as Hispanics. Similarly, exclusionary practices against Haitians as potential carriers of HIV or discrimination against Muslims as potential terrorists or blood quantum laws meant to determine Native American tribal membership can mask racism. A most grievous form of racism, for instance, is that directed against Dalit women in India and other countries in South Asia. Defenseless against the triple jeopardy of being poor, of being women, and of being Dalit, or "untouchable," and locked inexorably in a descent-based caste system over many centuries, Dalit women suffer violations traditionally reserved for them, such as extremely derogatory verbal abuse, naked parading, dismemberment, rape, ritualized prostitution, being forced to drink urine and eat feces, branding, pulling out of teeth tongue and nails, and

accusations of witchcraft (which often are followed by violence, sometimes including murder). These intersectional forms of oppression call for multicultural counselors and psychologists who can think outside the Black/White binary.

Problematizing Race

A more contemporary line of thought problematizes race in terms of the emergence of transnational subjectivities in new forms of globalization (Conwill 2007). By problematize I mean that we examine understandings about race with questions like: *Who frames these understandings? For whom are the understandings framed? Why are they being framed in a particular way at this particular time? Who benefits from these framings? Who is harmed by them?*

Let us consider, for example, the essentialist historical notion of the "one-drop" rule: any amount of African ancestry, no matter how small, is enough to make a person "Black." When we problematize this belief, we do not simply swallow as fact the US racial paradigm that pathologizes Blackness and, say, the sexual intimacies between Black men and White women. Instead, we examine the international colonial division of racialized labor and the system of oppression it birthed and continues to propagate. Decolonizing begins with an acknowledgment rather than a denial of the hegemonic functions of racism. Counselors and psychologists who claim a "multicultural" view but look the other way, claiming they do not want to "get political" or talk about words like neoliberalism, allow White racism and White supremacy to "run the table." They colonize rather than decolonize. Problematizing allows us to step back from essentialist statements on race, re-evaluate their meanings, and complicate our thinking.

This acknowledgment can lead us toward the development of strategies for countering the colonizing, nationally and ethnically chauvinistic practices that often pass for "multiculturalism", toward decolonizing multicultural, counseling and psychology practice. By taking an intersectional view we can adopt one countermeasure against defensive posturing around racism, a step closer to authentically multicultural counseling and psychology practice.

The Treatment of Race in Intersectionality

In an intersectionality approach, race is one vector of advantage and disadvantage. Along with gender, sexual orientation, class, and other vectors, race is seen as a system of oppression rather than an essentialist component of individual personhood. As an outgrowth of critical studies, intersectionality directs inquiry into how these systems interact to produce differences in people's lived experiences, thereby privileging some and repressing others. This understanding is what Thomas et al. (2005) lacked when they complained that Sue did not explain what White people would need to do to earn their "privilege."

At the 2001 World Congress Against Racism (WCAR), Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa, many discussants addressed the issue of violence against women. They used the metaphor of intersecting streets to theorize intersectionality. A most clear and concise précis of intersectionality can be found in Section 119 (Gender) of the Declaration and Program of Action of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) Forum at WCAR:

> An intersectional approach to discrimination acknowledges that every person be it man or woman exists in a framework of multiple identities, with factors such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, disability, citizenship, national identity, geo-political context, health, including HIV/AIDS status and any other status are all determinants in one's experiences of racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerances. An intersectional approach highlights the way in which there is a simultaneous interaction of discrimination as a result of multiple identities.

In the following sections, I use the management of domestic violence in the lower-class Black community as a paradigmatic exemplar of the intersectionality of gender, race, and class, illustrating how essentialist notions of race that dominate much of what is called "multicultural" counseling and psychology falls short of the sorts of complex understandings required to achieve social justice practice. I use this example because domestic violence is a major cause of health problems among Black women.

Theorizing Intersectionality: Domestic Violence Among Poor Blacks

In order to explain intersectionality, many of the WCAR speakers used the analogy of a woman coming to an intersection and making a choice of which direction to take. This analogy engendered a restrictive perception of a forced choice, with two starkly contrasting options for many women of color in the US (Conwill 2007, 2010). Sokoloff and DuPont (2005) raised a similar objection to this model of intersectionality. The two frameworks are clarified in the following illustration.

One day, through a public service announcement, a domestically abused Black woman becomes aware of community resources to protect her from domestic violence. After her next experience being physically abused at home, she finds herself at an intersection. She can decide to go straight ahead, maintaining her identity as a woman who accepts beatings. She also has the option to proceed down a road marked "Black." This choice might mean staying within the confines of her Black community and talking to her girlfriends and religious advisor for support.

Her other alternative is to turn down the road marked "Woman." Emphasizing her gender oppression, she might seek police intervention or a restraining order. She could retreat to a shelter designed principally by and for White women and hire a feminist lawyer. She might feel, however, that choosing the "Woman" route would be acting "against the race." Depending on the type and level of support in her community, she might even expose herself to disapproval based on the community's principles of racial or ethnic solidarity.

The perceived forced-choice to follow either the "race route" or the "gender route" presents her with a dilemma that has implications for her identity and her acceptance in various communities, where the authenticity of her allegiances could be challenged. This two-dimensional "streets" model of intersectionality can be faulted for neglecting to recognize the simultaneity and mutuality among her gender, race, and class identities that were stressed at the WCAR Forum. It does not provide an option for which, for example, saying "yes" to gender does not mean saying "no" to race. Another metaphor, or model, for intersectionality—one that acknowledges this multiplicativity and indivisibility emphasized at WCAR was needed to move beyond the theoretical problems of the two-dimensional "intersecting streets" model of intersectionality.

Constructing a Metadisciplinary Ecological Model of Intersectionality

In order to lend itself to a more effective approach to understanding and responding to domestic violence theory, the model had to account for gender, race, and class variations, among variations related to other identities, as found in domestic violence studies (Bograd 1999; Sokoloff and DuPont 2005). It also had to represent the dynamic nature of these identities, recognizing how their related forms of oppression intersect with one another.

Many factors contribute to the phenomenon of domestic violence in lower-class Black communities. Hence, the management of domestic violence in lower-class Black communities should be informed by a *metadisciplinary* perspective that synthesizes what we know about domestic violence from a number of disciplines related to an analysis of the interaction of gender, race, class, and other systems of identity and oppression. The metadisciplinary perspective is characterized by a change in order (meta) from a counselor or psychologist's disciplinary knowledge base to an integrated perspective that subsumes the lived experience and shared knowledge bases of the client, the abuser, the provider, the implicated societal systems (health, legal, economic, religious), and so forth. These include the epistemological, formal, methodological, and functional aspects of the management of domestic violence among poor Blacks (Conwill 2001; West-Olatunji and Conwill 2010).

On one hand, the metadisciplinary perspective incorporates an overarching paradigm that can be differentiated from over-determined single-factor, essentializing paradigms. Resorting primarily to the discipline of criminal justice to address domestic violence among poor Blacks typifies the latter approach. On the other hand, the metadisciplinary perspective of intersectionality can be differentiated from a multidisciplinary collage, with the abuser's assignment to jail, anger management classes, Alcoholics Anonymous, court-ordered domestic violence groups, and counseling—all without addressing those societal structures that are deeply implicated in domestic violence in lower-class Black communities. This, I would argue,

is a critical move from a colonizing practice that simplifies conditions through narrow "multicultural" views toward a decolonizing practice that respects complexity.

Poor Black communities function as an internal colony in the USA. In regard to race, metadisciplinary intersectionality does not allow us to spotlight the dramatic differences between White and Black rates of domestic violence and attribute them simplistically to race or culture. Instead, it focuses on how systems of inequity such as sexism, racism, and economic injustice interact with each other to produce complex realities. It challenges hegemonic functions of knowledge production in relation to domestic violence among poor Blacks by exploring status, power, influence, and wealth as it relates to the interpersonal, political, social, and economic order, including provider-client relations. For example, in the management of domestic violence among poor Black couples, a metadisciplinary ecological model of intersectionality can direct inquiry into how family assistance or enforcement of mandated incarceration policies for offenders can affect rates of domestic violence among lower-class Blacks (Conwill 2010).

Summary

Race as an essentialist construct has a colonizing function that helps maintain White supremacy, even in many of the most popular paradigms often described as "multicultural" counseling and psychology. This colonizing function must be acknowledged if multicultural counseling and psychology is to evolve toward an authentic social justice paradigm. Intersectionality is a corrective to essentialist notions of race and can help us progress toward such a decolonized paradigm for multicultural counseling and psychology.

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