

## Chapter 5



# SURVIVING MONOCULTURALISM AND RACISM

## *A Personal and Professional Journey*

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THROUGHOUT MY LIFE, I have been constantly reminded that my racial and cultural heritage are quite different from many in this society. Some of these reminders have been quite pleasant and validating; many, however, serve to invalidate, diminish, and strike at the core of my racial identity. As a person of color, I have been exposed to prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. Surviving monoculturalism and racism has helped shape not only my personal identity but my professional one as well. In this chapter, I would like to share with you some of the lessons I have learned about prejudice and discrimination, especially as it relates to growing up culturally different in a predominantly monocultural society.

### BEING DIFFERENT IN A MONOCULTURAL SOCIETY

- My first recollections of racial taunting occurred to me when our family moved to the southeast district of Portland, Oregon, a predominantly White community. Prior to moving, we lived in Chinatown where my brothers and I attended Chinese schools. I recall my first day at the new school.

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**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** This chapter is based on the 1999 Presidential Address given to the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues (Division 45 of The American Psychological Association) in Boston, Massachusetts, August 1999.

During the recess and lunch hours, groups of White students would encircle me, calling me a "Chink" or "Chinaman," pull the edges of their eyes back to make them slanted, and make strange sounds (OOAAH YEEEEEE) which they thought was how we spoke. Although this experience was most painful and humiliating, I was soon to experience a more devastating one.

- I was standing in front of my third-grade classroom speaking to my brother Stan in Chinese. The teacher stepped out to close the classroom door when she overheard our conversation. Giving me a disapproving look, she turned to me and stated, "Derald, you're in America! When you're in America you speak English. Get into the room now." Words cannot describe the shame and humiliation I felt. What had I done wrong? Why was speaking Chinese bad? The feeling of shame was magnified because it came from a teacher, a role viewed with considerable respect by Chinese culture. When I returned home that afternoon, my mother spoke to me in Cantonese. I remember being curt with her and stating angrily that I never wanted to speak Chinese again because that was the reason why people wouldn't accept us.

At the time of the incidents, I could not fully understand the meaning and impact they had on me. All I discerned was that being different was undesirable. It led me to conclude that these differences were seen as "bad," "deficits," and something to be avoided. As a result, I tried my best to become invisible and/or to blend in with everyone else. Further, when you realize that language is the carrier of one's culture and when one is made to feel ashamed of his/her own language, it is little wonder that many persons of color grow up feeling there is something wrong with them. These early experiences, however, have taught me two valuable lessons that now form the basis of my work.

### *Lesson 1*

Monolingualism and monoculturalism are valued in this society. People who differ in race, culture, and ethnicity are constantly given messages that they are "deviant" and "abnormal." Later in life as I began to study psychology and human behavior, I came to realize that "ethnocentric monoculturalism" was an extremely powerful, insidious, and pervasive force that was institutionalized in all aspects of U.S. society. In our profession of psychology, for example, I have found that the standards of practice and codes of ethics for psychologists are culture-bound and that they unjustly portray racial/ethnic minority cultural values as unhealthy and potentially abnormal. Take, for example, Asian American culture, which values collectivism and the notion of interdependence, where the psychosocial unit of identity resides with the family, group, or collective society. At the other extreme are Western values of individualism, independence, and the separation of the self. Most persons of color, because of their collectivistic orientation, may be perceived by Western standards as dependent, immature, and unhealthily enmeshed in the family.

## Lesson 2

Societal pressures for conformance, assimilation, and acculturation (melting pot myth) can do great harm to the culturally different in our society. It may lead to seeing one's physical, behavioral, social, and cultural characteristics as a handicap to be overcome, something to be ashamed of, or something to be denied, and it may lead to negative racial/cultural attitudes, feelings, and behaviors. This was certainly true for me during my early years where I yearned to be either invisible or tried to behave "White" in order to gain acceptance from my schoolmates or peers. I tried to dissociate myself from the Chinese community, prided myself in "speaking good English," and worked out with weights constantly to combat the image of the "weak and frail" Chinese characters portrayed on television.

### STEREOTYPES AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HARM

- As a freshman entering Washington High School, I was assigned a counselor, Mr. Knutsen, a well-respected math-science teacher. During the second week of class, he called me into his office and advised me to take a sophomore honors course in physics. Mr. Knutsen stated that he had looked at my past school records and was going to make an exception in having the first freshman ever to take the experimental science course. While I felt flattered, I was also very apprehensive about my ability to compete against advanced sophomore students. Noticing my hesitation, Mr. Knutsen turned to me and said, "Derald, I know you're worried about whether you can handle the course. I want you to know that I have faith in you. You won't have any trouble because *you people are good at that!*"

I remember my conflicted feelings: grateful to the counselor for his desire to help me and yet strangely uncomfortable. For some reason, I felt trapped. It was only years later that I realized the basis of these feelings. Mr. Knutsen harbored strong stereotypes of Asian Americans: He perceived us as good with numbers and good in the sciences and technology; I was later to discover that he also believed Asians to be "poor in people relationships," "inarticulate," and to "make poor managers." For many years I believed these stereotypes about myself. Were it not for an opposing experience in college, I might today be an unhappy physicist or chemist.

## Lesson 3

The power of preconceived notions, images, and stereotypes may trap and track individuals into directions not of their own choosing. Furthermore, victims of pervasive stereotyping may come to believe in them. Throughout high school and most of my college years, I avoided classes in humanities and social sciences because I truly believed I could not handle "people oriented" courses. It was only late in my junior year of college that graduation requirements forced me to take several psychology and anthropology courses. To my surprise, I found them not only fascinating but

received excellent grades and encouragement from my psychology professor. As a result, the image I possessed as being socially inept, withdrawn, and unable to understand people began to crumble. I changed my major to psychology and have never regretted that decision. Even though my own personal outcome was a positive one, I often wonder how many youngsters of color are bombarded with false images of themselves, tracked into dead-end career paths, or drop out of the system altogether because they are not given a fair chance or have been victimized by a self-fulfilling prophesy.

## GOOD INTENTIONS AND THE INVISIBILITY OF RACISM

### *Lesson 4*

Even the most well-intentioned teacher, counselor, or person inherits racial biases. No one is immune from inheriting the racial prejudices of his or her forebears. Since Euro-Americans are products of their cultural conditioning, they are often socialized into oppressor roles. In many ways, they are also victims. My many experiences with White folks make me realize that they were not born into this society with a conscious desire to be bigoted or racist. My counselor, Mr. Knutsen, was not a mean and evil person intent upon harming me or any other person of color. He was not consciously aware of the stereotypes he harbored, nor was he aware of the negative consequences it might have had on me. Indeed, what makes this situation so problematic was that Mr. Knutsen meant well, his intention to help me was honorable, and he spent extra time and effort to bend the rules to "benefit me." This is precisely why it is difficult getting White folks to realize that their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors may oppress and hurt others. Because they experience themselves as moral, decent, and fair-minded individuals, they find it intolerable to view themselves as oppressors.

## MICRO-INVALIDATIONS AND MICRO-ASSAULTS

- Arriving in Washington to keynote a conference, I hailed a taxi at the airport. The driver started an analysis of the controversial outcome of the Holyfield-Tyson heavyweight fight the day before. We were engaged in a very interesting discussion when he made an offhand comment: "You know, you speak excellent English."

Later that day, after finishing my keynote address before a large primarily White audience, several attendees approached me to ask questions and make comments. One White woman asked me, "Where were you born?" I replied, "Portland, Oregon." She smiled and restated her question. "No, no, I mean, where were you really born . . . what country?" I answered, "The United States." She looked embarrassed and quickly left the podium.

That evening, I went to dinner with a White colleague, Dave, whom I considered an enlightened friend. As we entered the restaurant, the hostess

seemed to stare past me, despite the fact that I was at the front of the line. She chose to ask Dave, who was behind me, "How many for dinner?" I tried to tell myself that she might have mistaken me as part of the party who had entered the restaurant just ahead of us. As we were seated, the waiter brought our menus to the table and placed the wine list on the plate of my companion. Dave was asked to select the wine and allowed the honor of tasting it first. All this was done in a very matter-of-fact manner, but it was clear the waiter considered Dave the person in charge. Later that evening, I leaned over to Dave and commented about what had happened. To my chagrin, Dave, in a chiding tone, said, "Derald, don't be so oversensitive."

### **Lesson 5**

People of color grow up in a society that constantly invalidates them. The overt and intentional acts of bias and discrimination can greatly damage both the psyche and the physical health of minorities, but it is the daily slights, invalidations, and assaults that may in the long run prove much more harmful. As an Asian American, I continue to be viewed as an alien in my own land. Both the taxi driver and the conference attendee were probably "good people" who either meant to compliment me and/or were curious about me, but their comments and questions reveal a biased mind-set: Only White, blue-eyed people and/or those who fit a certain image are considered "real Americans." All others who are of a different color are perceived as not "real citizens" of this country. Admonitions such as "if you don't like it here, go back to \_\_\_\_\_ [China, Mexico, Africa, etc.]" reveal ethnocentrism of the most damaging kind. These slights represent what is called "micro-assaults." Such assaults occur when people of color are perceived as aliens in their own land, when their physical, linguistic, racial, or cultural differences are considered undesirable or deviant, when their experiential reality is invalidated, or when persons of color are accused of being overly sensitive and paranoid for raising issues of potential bias. Most racial/ethnic minority groups have been exposed to many forms of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination; some are overt and deliberate, but most are unintentional "micro-assaults." This term refers to individual acts that alone may appear quite benign or of low impact, but collectively, over an extended period of time, can do much psychological harm to marginalized groups in our society.

### **OVERT RACISM AND MACRO-ASSAULTS**

- On December 15, 1995, my family and I were subjected to one of the most horrendous experiences of our lives. The police in our city obtained a search warrant for our home, broke down the front door, and claimed to have recovered stolen city equipment. They accused my 19-year-old son, who was attending USC at the time of the incident, of taking the equipment without their knowledge or permission. Upon his return from college, he was

arrested on two felony counts and jailed until bail could be arranged. From the time of his arrest until the dismissal of the charges, we were subjected to continual delays in setting a trial date and forced to appear in court no less than nine times. Hoping that my son would plead guilty, the DA's office reduced the charges to misdemeanors. When this did not work, they offered to drop the charges in return for financial compensation. They finally offered to dismiss the charges in return for only 10 days of community service. We refused all offers.

I am not a naive person and certainly not a newcomer to prejudice and racism. Yet when this incident occurred, I hoped that the charges were the result of a monumental misunderstanding that could be quickly clarified. However, the severity of the police actions in breaking down our door and the many contradictory facts that were uncovered made such a belief difficult to entertain. After eliminating every possible reason for their actions, we concluded that it smacked of racism and anti-Asian sentiment.

### *Lesson 6*

Racism is most likely expressed against individuals who violate the normative structures of society and who challenge the system. Let me briefly outline the basis of this lesson.

My family and I reside in a city that is predominantly White; Asian Americans are the largest racial/ethnic minority group, comprising 15% of the general population and 20% of the public schools' enrollment. The community is very affluent and conservative, with minimal knowledge or awareness of diversity and multicultural issues. My wife and I have been very active in the community, helped form the City Asian American Club, did pro bono work for the schools on multicultural education, sponsored community forums on racism, voiced our concerns in the past about police harassment of Asian and African American youths in the community, and spoke against the failed formation of the Caucasian Students Union at the high school. As a result, these activities made us highly visible in the community and potential targets of a backlash.

It became evident that my son had been set up for the sequence of events that followed. Prior to his attending college, he was the volunteer emergency coordinator for the city and worked closely with the fire and police departments. His technical knowledge was very high and he often repaired and serviced ham radios and other communication equipment owned by the city. This equipment was frequently brought over by the fire department; they knew we possessed them. When the break-in and arrest occurred, we were left with many questions.

First, why didn't representatives of the fire or police departments simply pick up the phone and ask for the return of the equipment? Why did the police choose such extreme measures to intrude into the home of a family known in the community and certainly known by both departments? According to a judge-neighbor, the forced entry into someone's home is only done when drugs are involved (which can be flushed down the toilet or

destroyed easily) or if there is clear and imminent danger to someone. Did the police believe we would flush ham radio equipment down the toilet? When the police found that no one was at home, why did they choose to break down our door? Couldn't they have waited for us to return or call us before coming to our home? Do the police always break down doors when they have a search warrant?

Second, we later discovered that false statements had been made. For example, fire department personnel stated that policy forbids the possession of emergency equipment by a private citizen. If it was against department policy, why did the firemen violate their own rules? Additionally, some of our neighbors were willing to testify that they witnessed fire trucks carrying the equipment over. Why did the fire department personnel misrepresent the situation?

The possible answers to these questions are quite disturbing. For example, many of our friends have asked whether such intrusive police actions would have been carried out against a White family. Were we being targeted because of our work in the community? Was this a not-too-subtle message being sent to the Asian American community? While I would never wish such an experience on any family, we have come away from this incident with new insights.

First, my family has always known that our minority status in this society subjects us to various forms of prejudicial actions and stereotypes. Yet to work for social justice and equity and to challenge the prevailing biased practices of a community can invite retaliation of the most extreme kind. It is important for all of us to be prepared and to realize that working for social justice is not an easy task and can take an awesome toll.

Second, fighting racism requires the help and support of many. We could never have survived this terrible ordeal without neighbors, relatives, friends, and colleagues stepping forward. Within weeks of the incident, letters and calls on our behalf from our pastor, the superintendent of public schools, the city Asian American Club, and other neighbors went to both the mayor's and the district attorney's office. Especially effective were letters from my colleagues representing the Asian American Psychological Association, the Association of Black Psychologists, the Rainbow Coalition, and the Society for the Psychological Study of Ethnic Minority Issues. I am especially grateful not only for their moral support but also the strong letters denouncing the police actions and questioning whether racism was involved.

Third, unfortunately, fighting racism also requires the financial resources to hire the best help possible. Directly after the breaking down of our door and prior to my son's arrest, we were fortunate to hire a nationally prominent African American civil rights attorney who had represented Rodney King. He, in turn, quickly placed one of his private investigators on the case and was able to obtain statements from potential witnesses. With these actions, we communicated strongly to the city that we had the

financial resources to push forward and were willing to risk going to court. In addition, the reputation of our attorney on matters of civil rights was obviously unsettling to the city.

Fourth, Asian Americans face a peculiar situation not often shared by their African American counterparts. The perception that many have of our group is that we are "quiet," "passive," "won't rock the boat," and "avoid the limelight." While many of our cultural values related to subtlety, indirectness, and working toward consensus are extremely valuable attributes in many situations, it may invite retaliation in a strange sort of way. I cannot prove it, but I believe that when the police officers arrived at our home they were consciously or unconsciously influenced by this stereotype and took personal liberties in breaking down our door.

Finally, fighting racism requires *not taking* the easy way out. It would have been much simpler to have my son accept the 10 days of community service in exchange for dismissal of the charges. We would have avoided the large expenditure of financial resources and the many months of worry and anguish. We chose to fight because our son was innocent, because these actions had larger racial implications, and because we had the support of many.

#### COMBATING RACISM AND MONOCULTURALISM: DOING THE RIGHT THING

Because of these experiences, I have become keenly aware of the damaging consequences of racism, the widespread stereotypes about Asian Americans (good in math/sciences but poor in people relationships), how physical differences could be objects of scorn, how our culture and lifestyles are often equated with being non-normative, how minorities are often perceived as aliens in their own country, and how the system can be used to "hurt" or "intimidate" those who fight for social justice. Coping with monoculturalism and racism has helped shape not only my personal identity but has played a large part in my desire to study the causes, effects, and methods to ameliorate overt and covert forms of prejudice and discrimination. These experiences have made me aware of the great psychological toll that racism takes on persons of color. It can result in low self-esteem, feelings of rage, depression or hopelessness, anxiety, lowered school performance, health problems, and countless other negative life consequences. I often wondered what caused racism, why people were so intolerant of others, and what we could do to combat bigotry. These questions have been the focus of my research in the field of multicultural education and psychology.

When I was invited to testify before President Clinton's Race Advisory Board in 1998, I shared with them the results of my work on multicultural psychology and race relations. Among many of the points I made were the following:



- Bigotry and racism continue to be two of the most divisive forces in our society.
- The need to address issues of race, culture, and ethnicity has never been more urgent.
- Most citizens of this nation seem ill-equipped to deal with these topics.
- Racial legacies of the past continue to affect current policies and practices of the present, creating unfair disparities between racial/ethnic minority and Euro-American groups.
- Such inequities are often so deeply ingrained in American society that they are nearly invisible.
- The greatest challenge this nation faces is how we can become a multicultural society that values equal access and opportunity.
- Our greatest hope toward solving the problems of prejudice and discrimination lies in the field of *multicultural education*.

The challenge confronting our profession and the nation is not an easy one. It means major changes at the individual level where each and every one of us (educator, student, employer, employee, law enforcement officer, etc.) needs to confront our biases and prejudices. It means major changes in our institutions and organizations (educational systems, business and industry, judicial system, law enforcement agencies, health care, etc.), where the current policies, practices, programs, and structures serve to deny equal access and opportunity to one group while unfairly benefitting another. It means major changes in our society where public policies that promote multiculturalism are instituted (affirmative action, bilingual education, legislation banning racial profiling, etc.) and those that block multiculturalism are eliminated.

I have also learned that our lives must become a "have to" in being constantly vigilant to manifestations of bias in ourselves and in people around us. While attending workshops and receiving continuing education on multiculturalism are helpful, we must take responsibility to initiate personal growth experiences in the real world. I am convinced that education and training programs must somehow build learning experiences for students that require personal growth through lived reality and experience. Eliminating bias and prejudice cannot be just an intellectual exercise.

In closing I would only remind all of us that race, culture, and ethnicity are functions of every person's development and not limited to "just minorities." As psychologists and educators, we need to recognize that culture is central to everything we do and that we are all representatives of our own cultures. Producing a multicultural society that values diversity is our greatest challenge. How we meet the challenge professionally will determine the viability and relevance of the educational field. How we meet the challenge as individual citizens will also foretell the legacy we leave our sons and daughters. Continuing to deny the importance of multiculturalism is to deny social reality itself. Let us meet the challenge honestly not

only because it is good for our profession and our society but because *it is the right thing to do*.

### RELEVANT PUBLICATIONS

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