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- Reactions

## **Race and Racism: The Efforts of Counseling Psychology to Understand and Address the Issues Associated With These Terms**

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I write about race in America in hopes of undermining the notion of race in America.

*Rodriguez, 2002, p. xi*

The essence of this reaction is aptly captured in the foregoing quote. More to the point, this paper focuses on race and racism with the underlying hope and expectation that in the near future the terms *race* and *racism* will be more accurately understood and, when necessary, more appropriately and selectively addressed by the field of counseling psychology. With respect to the term *racism*, it is hoped that the efforts of counseling psychology on behalf of social justice will reduce inaccurate and unacceptable race-driven attitudes and behaviors that comprise this “ism.”

To this end, the goal of this reaction is to provide a more accurate understanding of the terms *race* and *racism* and the psychosocial issues associated with these terms. To accomplish this goal, the reaction is divided into three sections. The first section critically examines the terms as they are most frequently defined, used, and/or misused in the literature. The second section presents the changing population demographics that serve to bolster the continued use of the term *race*. For perspective, special attention is given to a sociopolitical phenomenon that is undermining the accuracy, validity, and generalizability of existing statistics that are reflective of and/or associated with racial identification. The third section reviews and critically discusses the respective Major Contribution articles. This section not only underscores and reacts to the racial issues discussed in the respective papers but, more importantly, highlights research, educational, and applied efforts that are or should be directed to racial issues.

### EXAMINING THE TERMS *RACE* AND *RACISM*

Never has there been a greater need for understanding the psychology of race, diversity, and multiculturalism than now. (D. W. Sue, Bingham, Porché-Burke, & Vasquez, 1999, p. 1063)

The changing population demographics, the concomitant changes in the sociopolitical reality of the United States, and the increase in racially motivated events and actions (see D. W. Sue, 2005) can only result in the continued use of the term *race* (see Lopez, 2004). Given this fact, counseling psychologists must have an accurate understanding of this term if they are to effectively work with the so-called racially diverse U.S. population. Unfortunately, such understanding is much too often lacking; and, according to Atkinson (2004), *race* is one of the most misunderstood and misused words in the English language.

Working from this perspective, the terms *race* and *racism*, as they are herein understood and used, are first defined. With respect to *race*, no empirical, biological justification for its use exists. At present, *race* is essentially a sociopolitical creation that serves a purpose for those who use it. According to Johnson (1990) the only justification for continued use of the term is to document the effects of racism and the progress in its eradicating (e.g., Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005 [this issue]).

For Atkinson (2004), *racism* is based on beliefs and reflected in behaviors that accept race as a biological entity and maintain that racial groups, other than one's own, are intellectually, psychologically, and/or physically inferior. From this point of reference, racism applies only to racial differences; in reality, however, the concept has also been applied to cultural and ethnic differences. Furthermore, note that racism is not restricted to overt behaviors (i.e., acts of violence or blatant acts of discrimination). A more comprehensive definition of racism holds that racism also involves the everyday, mundane, negative opinions, attitudes, and ideologies and the seemingly subtle acts and conditions of discrimination against minorities (i.e., those social cognitions and social acts, processes, structures, or institutions that directly or indirectly contribute to the dominance of Whites and the subordinate position of minorities; Van Dijk, 1993, p. 5).

### RACE: A DEMOGRAPHIC REALITY OR A SOCIOPOLITICAL CREATION?

As noted above, the population of the United States is undergoing significant demographic changes that are apt to continue well into the 21st century

(Bennett, 1995). These changes clearly emerge when one examines census information that quantifies the number of persons in the United States who place themselves into one of its racial categories: White, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, other race or, more recently, the companion category that gives a person the opportunity to self-designate as “ethnically Hispanic.”

Relative to such information, the Census Bureau (Grieco & Cassidy, 2001) shows that non-Hispanic Whites comprised 69.1% of the total U.S. population in 2000, followed by Hispanics at 12.5%, Blacks at 12.3%, Asians and Pacific Islanders at 3.7%, and American Indians at 0.9%. According to the bureau, barring unusual changes in current birth and immigration rates, non-Hispanic Whites will decrease to 62.0% of the population by the year 2025, while Hispanics will increase to 18.2%, followed by Blacks at 13.9%, Asian Americans at 6.5%, and American Indians at 1.0% (National Populations Projections, 2002). The Census Bureau projects that by 2050, non-Hispanic Whites will barely constitute a majority of the population at 52.8%, whereas Hispanics will make up 24.3% of the population, followed by Blacks (14.7%), Asians and Pacific Islanders (9.3%), and American Indians (1.1%). According to Atkinson (2004), although projections provided by the Census Bureau suggest that racial and ethnic minorities will constitute a numerical majority some time after 2050, this majority will actually occur sooner given the fact that the bureau has a reputation for undercounting and underprojecting persons of color.

In addition to presenting statistics that have tended to undercount racially designated persons in the United States, the accuracy of these statistics, in general, has continuously been questioned for various reasons (see Ponterotto & Casas, 1991). A recent challenge to the accuracy of the statistics involves the manner in which the concept of race continues to be addressed and understood, which, according to Lopez (2004), is essentially tied to the politics of race and demography in the United States. For example, hoping to have a better gauge on the use of the “other race” category by Hispanics, the Census Bureau introduced two changes in 1980.

First, a companion item was added to the race question that inquired of all Americans whether they were ethnically Hispanic. Second, a system of racial self-reporting was adopted. Instead of census enumerators assigning racial identities, the bureau asked every person filling out census forms to identify his or her own race. Suddenly, the “other race” population exploded, increasing 10-fold, and 97% of those claiming to be “other race” also identified themselves as “Hispanic” (Lopez, 2004, B11).

This result went contrary to the bureau’s expectation that ethnicity and race questions would be answered independently of one another and that, in

turn, a more accurate and meaningful counting of Hispanics would be obtained.

This expectation was not met. Consequently, about 6% of Americans, or more than 1 in 20, count themselves as “other race,” and the overwhelming majority of these are Latinos. Like it or not, according to Lopez (2004), nearly half of the Latino population considers itself a race. Concomitantly, the proportion of Latinos claiming to be White has steadily declined, from 64% in 1980 to just under 50% in 2000. Finally, to complicate matters further, the proportion of Latinos who identify themselves as “Hispanic” on the ethnicity question and as “other race” on the race question has steadily gained among all Latinos, from 34% in 1980 to nearly 47% in 2000 (Lopez, 2004, p. B11).

Certainly the notion of a new race emphasizes the fact that such categories primarily reflect social ideas and practices, not natural, immutable divisions among humans. The Latino community’s insistence on being considered a race also challenges the conservative mantra that the United States no longer needs such categories because the country is moving quickly toward race blindness (Lopez, 2004, B11).

However, according to Lopez (2004), the bureau should not challenge the appropriateness of Latinos designating themselves as “other race.” Instead, the bureau should study and publish data on those who consider themselves members of a Latino race. This approach means gathering the same sort of information collected about the other races: basic population numbers on age, gender, family size, and geographical location as well as statistics on educational attainment, home ownership, income levels, and so forth.

The United States should be portrayed as it actually is. “After all, those of us who see ourselves as members of a Latino race number nearly 17 million—and counting” (Lopez, 2004, p. B11). Unfortunately, the probability is high that the inaccuracies and somewhat confusing and misleading statistics in the census are also reflected in the counseling psychology literature. If such is the case, the counseling profession must accept that fact that many studies that have solely relied on racial ethnic categories are plagued with both limited utility and generalizability (Beutler, Brown, Crothers, Booker, & Seabrook, 1996).

### **A REVIEW OF THE THREE MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS**

Delgado-Romero, Galvan, Maschino, and Rowland (2005 [this issue]) sought to improve and enrich past efforts to examine the inclusion and treatment of race and ethnicity in counseling psychology research. The fruit of

their work clearly provides evidence that counseling psychology continues to inadequately address these two constructs.

Providing a methodologically focused explanation for the inadequacies identified by these researchers, S. Sue (1999) has argued that a major factor that contributes to such inadequacy is the practice of scientific psychology itself. Specifically, Sue contends that while the principles of psychological science involve both internal and external validity, in practice psychology has tended to emphasize internal validity in research studies. Because many psychological principles and measures have not been cross-validated with diverse populations, psychologists conducting ethnic minority research often are faced with the challenge to demonstrate rigorous internal validity. Thus, according to S. Sue (1999), giving greater emphasis to internal as opposed to external validity has differentially hindered the development of ethnic minority research. Furthermore, if stronger research knowledge on ethnic minority groups is to be forthcoming, it is important that "(a) all research studies address external validity issues and explicitly specify the populations to which the findings are applicable; (b) different research approaches, including the use of qualitative and ethnographic methods, be appreciated; and (c) the psychological meaning of ethnicity or race be examined in ethnic comparisons" (S. Sue, 1999, p. 1070).

As noted above, Delgado-Romero et al. (2005 [this issue]) report that race and/or ethnic-focused studies continue to fail to provide data that might inform participants' experience as racial and ethnic beings (e.g., level of adherence to attitudes and values, long-held traditions and practices, etc.). Unfortunately, failing to include such data has contributed to a plethora of studies, including those that consider acculturation and identity level and that have too often presented simplistic and often erroneous findings.

A cogent argument for the inclusion of data that go beyond the mere placement of research participants into racial or ethnic categories and/or broad identity or acculturation levels is provided by Kim, Atkinson, and Yang (1999), who argue that the mere use of broad behaviorally focused measures fail to provide useful information that can be used to the benefit of potential clients by both researchers and practitioners. Exemplifying this point, Kim et al. contend that acculturation measures have generally focused on assessing behaviors while failing to expand their purview to assess values acculturation (Cuellar, Arnold, & Maldonado, 1995). Neglecting to assess cultural values, researchers have failed to measure an important aspect of the acculturation construct: "traditional ideas and especially their attached values" (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952, p. 181).

The value and generalizability of research on race and ethnicity will greatly increase when the variables in a study go beyond the mere identification of race and/or ethnicity. Furthermore, the value and/or utility of the

research will greatly increase when counseling psychologists take action to ensure that their work is not solely driven by heuristic motives but that it more pragmatically seeks to address social justice needs. For instance, instead of more studies on the counseling process itself (e.g., client-counselor similarities and identification processes), the profession should address areas that, although previously identified, have only recently begun to receive the attention they merit: sociopolitical factors (e.g., racism, stereotyping) that affect the psychosocial development of racial-ethnic minorities, the identification of the true sources of behaviors that are attributed to cultural factors, life-span issues, normal development of racial-ethnic minority children, family dynamics (i.e., family roles, sex roles, socialization practices), the differential incidence of varied mental health problems (e.g., alcoholism), and effective HIV interventions (Casas, 1985).

All life events are formative. All contribute to what we become, year by year, as we go on growing. As my friend the poet Kenneth Koch once said, "You aren't just the age you are. You are all the ages you ever have been!" (Rogers, 2003, p. 34)

Finally, while categorical classifications and associated statistics are necessary to identify and/or compare diverse racial and ethnic groups across psychosocial characteristics and settings, they are insufficiently informative and, moreover, vulnerable to misinterpretations and misunderstanding. Specifically, by giving unquestionable credence to such global statistics in both research and practice, counseling psychologists are vulnerable, but not limited, to the following three problems (Raley, Casas, & Corral, 2004): (a) Statistically significant group differences are not useful to the professional who must recognize and respond to the local and individual needs of a person; (b) without careful thought, or in the absence of alternative information, professionals may find it easy to think of group conditions as sources of individual pathologies; (c) regardless of statistical significance, big, discrete categories are not easy to operationalize, at least not in a useful way for professionals.

Confronted with these problems that arise from a reliance on global statistics, counseling psychologists must turn to other ways of studying, describing, and understanding the real racially, ethnically, and/or culturally identified individual. Drawing on Kurt Lewin's (1936) field theory, Raley et al. (2004) propose a theory of the person and his or her environment that strives to represent the complexity of the environment and the interdependence of any person's multiple contexts. These researchers contend that in applying this theory the so-called environment should not be treated as if it were a collection of independent influences acting on individuals, nor should the individual be perceived as an independent actor exerting his or her agency within

or upon the environment. Instead, individuals should be perceived as being embedded in a life space comprising an individual interacting with the environment. In other words, the individual and the environment should be perceived as interdependent and mutually constitutive (Raley et al., 2004).

It's no secret that I like to get to know people – and not just the outside stuff of their lives. I like to try to understand the meaning of who people are and what they're saying to me. (Rogers, 2003, p. 135)

In the Major Contribution article entitled “Examining White Counselor Trainees’ Reactions to Racial Issues in Counseling and Supervision Dyads,” Utsey, Gernat, and Hammar (2005 [this issue]) used a qualitative method to examine the reactions of White counselor trainees to hypothetical, provocative cross-racial counseling and supervision dyads. The findings from the study suggest that White counselor trainees struggle with actively acknowledging the importance of racial issues in U.S. society. According to Utsey et al., when these struggles go unacknowledged and unaddressed in training, they are likely to inhibit trainees from dealing effectively with intense feelings that may accompany such issues. For instance, feelings of guilt related to White privilege and the mistreatment of other racial and ethnic groups in U.S. society may cause some Whites to displace feelings of anger and hostility toward such groups because of their knowledge that they benefit from and have benefited from undeserved favorable treatment. Counselors who are not fully cognizant of and sensitive to the ways in which they import racism into the counseling relationship may be unable to effectively meet the mental health needs of racially and ethnically diverse individuals (Utsey et al.).

Complementing and supporting their findings, Utsey et al. (2005 [this issue]) identify past research that has established the importance of openly addressing issues related to race and ethnicity within counseling (Knox, Burkard, Johnson, Suzuki, & Ponterotto, 2003) and/or supervision (Ladany, Inman, Constantine, & Hofheinz, 1997). For example, Cardemil and Battle (2003) report that a counselor’s willingness and ability to engage a client in a dialogue focusing on racial issues are essential for creating a safe and trusting therapeutic environment that can facilitate the development of a good working alliance and, in turn, reduce the potential for a therapeutic impasse, premature termination of therapy, or resistance to supervision (Helms & Cook, 1999).

However, to attain a comfort level that allows for open and honest discussion about race and ethnicity in the therapy session, counselors must first confront their own biases, assumptions, and prejudices about other racial-ethnic groups (Pinderhughes, 1989). To this end, counselor training programs must assume a more proactive stance in preparing trainees who have



the attitudes, knowledge, and skills to effectively address issues of race and ethnicity in therapy and supervision dyads. Unfortunately, the preponderance of evidence shows that getting individuals to address such issues and in turn facilitating necessary changes in behavior are difficult to accomplish. For instance, past cognitive-based research has amply shown that racial and ethnic biases (e.g., stereotypes) are so entrenched and beyond consciousness that any efforts to eradicate or correct them are ineffective (Wampold, Casas, & Atkinson, 1981). From the perspective of social justice, such evidence should not impede counseling psychologists from continuing to look for the kinds of training, intervention, and advocacy models that can more effectively deal with the issues inherent with race and racism. The model described by Goodman et al. (2004) merits further study and replication.

Though Americans prefer to dwell on parables of white virtue and black advancement—culminating in the flowering of goodwill all around—events periodically force us to widen our gaze and to focus on terrain we would rather not see. (Cose, 1997, p. xiv)

Working from the perspective that racist incidents are prevalent and can impact survivors psychologically, physiologically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially (Loo, Singh, Scurfield, & Kilauano, 1998), Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005 [this issue]) identify and examine how the trauma of racist incidents parallels the traumas associated with rape and domestic violence. However, despite their prevalence, racist incidents receive insufficient attention in assessment and treatment (Scurfield & Mackey, 2001) and, one could easily assume, training itself.

One reason for the lack of attention is that the subject is often avoided because racism is perceived as a potentially explosive topic that may elicit strong emotions of defensiveness, guilt, anger, hopelessness, and discomfort in all of us (S. Sue, 1999). D. W. Sue (2005) believes that such avoidance is really a disguised conspiracy of silence aimed at protecting ourselves from truly admitting our own complicity in the perpetuation of racism (D. W. Sue, 2003).

In support of his position, D. W. Sue (2005) argues that “no one born and raised in the United States is free from inheriting the racial biases of their forebears . . . it is impossible for any of us not to have racist, sexist, and homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors” (p. 103). Specifically, he continues that we “find it painful to consciously acknowledge our own racism. Thus, we engage in actions that aid us in self-deception. That is why open dialogue about race and racism is so difficult. We are fearful that whatever we say or do will be perceived by others as racist, homophobic, sexist, or bigoted. No wonder we have so much difficulty talking about race or racism. No

wonder we collude with one another to avoid discussion of race and racism” (p. 109).

The issues addressed by Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005 [this issue]) are so important that D. W. Sue (2005) directed his Presidential Address for the Society of Counseling Psychology to the social injustice of racism and particularly to the role of counseling psychologists in addressing such injustice. To underscore his position, Sue provided the following rationale: (a) “Counseling psychology has been at the forefront in the development of multicultural competence. . . . One of the defining features of cultural competence deals with understanding self as a racial-cultural being and one’s own biases and prejudices. Among one of the most problematic biases is that of racism” (p. 101). (b) “As racism denies equal access and opportunity, counseling psychology must ultimately be involved in understanding the causes and effects of racism and the conditions needed to ameliorate its harmful consequences” (p. 101). (c) “Despite legal, educational, and social attempts to combat racism in our society, it continues to be one of the most harmful and toxic forces humankind has encountered (Jones, 1997; D. W. Sue, 2003).” “It oppresses, denigrates, demoralizes, and potentially harms people of color (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). In addition to lowering their quality of life, it also has mental health and self-esteem implications as well (*National Healthcare Disparities Report*, 2003; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001)” (p. 101). (d) “Racism harms not only those who are oppressed but those who are the oppressors as well (Hanna et al., 2000; D. W. Sue, 2003)” (p. 101).

## CONCLUSION

The Major Contribution toward which this reaction is directed focuses on race and racism, topics that many individuals find uncomfortable and seek to avoid. However, from the content of the papers it is apparent that given the changing demographics and the sociopolitical reality that prevails in the United States, the terms *race* and *racism* and the associated issues will continue, so the counseling profession must better understand and more effectively address racially relevant issues. The papers exemplify the kinds of issues that merit attention from counseling psychology researchers and practitioners.

The topics yet to be addressed and the methods from which to study and understand them are diverse in nature and scope. To provoke thought relative to the work that is yet to be done, Bryant-Davis and Ocampo (2005 [this issue]) take the position that counselors and researchers must grapple with racism and all its negativity by developing research, assessment, and treat-

ment models that can effectively serve clients who exhibit symptoms of racist incident-based trauma. According to Bryant-Davis and Ocampo, such efforts should include the following: (a) epidemiological studies to determine the extent of racist incidents among varying populations, (b) qualitative studies to better understand the complexity of racist incidents by documenting and analyzing the stories of individuals who have experienced such incidents, (c) quantitative studies to identify the correlates of racist incident-based trauma and posttrauma symptoms, (d) quantitative and qualitative studies to identify and assess the risk and resiliency variables that mediate the relationship between racist incidents and the development of posttrauma symptoms, and (e) research on prevention and intervention approaches for use with perpetrators of racist incidents.

As clearly depicted in the Major Contribution, much work remains in reference to race and racism. However, even if a Herculean struggle is required (D. W. Sue, 2005), counseling psychology, with its emphasis on social justice, is in an ideal position to give top priority to undermining the existing notion of race in the United States.

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