# Dealing with Institutional Racism on Campus: Initiating Difficult Dialogues and Social Justice Advocacy Interventions

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*The authors describe social justice advocacy interventions to initiate difficult discussions at the university where they are employed. They emphasize the need to foster difficult dialogues about the problem of institutional racism among students, faculty members, and administrators where they work. The Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) model is also discussed.*

Over the past forty years, diversity and social justice theorists and researchers have helped to expand our understanding of the complex problem of racism in the United States. This increased understanding has resulted in greater awareness of the various ways that racism is manifested in this society (Ponterotto, Utsey, & Pedersen, 2006). The expanded knowledge-base in this area has resulted in the initiation of many difficult discussions about the complexity of this problem and the need to ameliorate racism in educational, business, political, and community settings.

Constantine (2006) describes the multifaceted nature of racism in the United States. In doing so, she explains how intentional and unintentional as well as individual, cultural, and institutional forms of racism are manifested in our nation. She describes individual racism as both "intentional and unintentional acts of discrimination that White individuals exert on others who are not members of their racial group because of their belief in their own cultural, emotional, intellectual, social and moral superiority" (Constantine, 2006, p. 34). This form of racism is clearly reflected among Ku Klux Klan members and self-identified skinhead group members whose overt behaviors reflect their hatred for Persons of Color. Although this type of racism garners much attention by the media when displayed publicly, it represents only a small percentage of the many ways that racism is perpetuated in our contemporary society (Constantine & Sue, 2006). Indeed, this problem is much more

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pervasive and difficult to address when perpetuated in cultural and institutional forms.

## Cultural and Institutional Racism

Cultural and institutional forms of racism are typically expressed in covert ways by individuals in schools, colleges, universities, businesses, and other organizational entities. The former type of racism occurs when White cultural biases and values (as reflected in art, music, religion, standards of beauty, educational content, preferred styles of emotional and linguistical expressiveness) are held up as being better than the cultural norms and values of People of Color (Jones & Carter, 1996). Comments made by President George W. Bush regarding his view that persons from Latino/Latina descent should sing the National Anthem in English is an example of how cultural racism can be reflected by an individual (Rutenberg, 2006).

Institutional racism, on the other hand, is "any institutional policy, practice, and structure in government agencies, businesses, unions, schools and universities, places of worship, courts, and law enforcement agencies that unfairly subordinate People of Color while allowing White persons to profit from such actions" (Sue, 2006, p. 24). Researchers have noted that various forms of White superiority, which are consciously and unconsciously expressed behaviorally by many White persons in organizational power positions, fuel the on-going problem of institutional racism (Lipsitz, 2002; Sue, 2001).

Most forms of institutional racism are often disguised in standard operating procedures (SOPS) that are applied equally to everyone in institutional and organizational settings. Student affairs practitioners may be able to identify such forms of racism in the universities where they work. The use of culturally-biased test scores (e.g., SAT, GRE scores) as a major criteria used for student admissions, the perpetuation of culturally-biased curricula, and the under representation of Persons-of-Color in the administration and faculty positions reflects some of the ways that institutional racism is perpetuated in university settings.

## Consequences of Racism

Researchers have described the adverse impact of the various forms of racism. This includes empirical findings that correlate heightened levels of depression (Brown et al., 2000; Noh, Beiser, Kasper & Sidney, 1999), increased hostility (Utsey, 1998), lowered life satisfaction and self esteem (Broman, 1997), feelings of trauma and helplessness (Ponterotto et al., 2006), and a broad range of physical health problems to the different types of racism that non-White persons routinely experience (Chunn, 2002).

Although these research findings increase our understanding of the effects of racism on Persons of Color, it is important to note that research in this area has recently shifted attention to the negative consequences racism has on White people as well. For instance, research findings indicate that Whites experience feelings of anxiety, guilt, shame and confusion surrounding issues of racism (Ponterotto et al., 2006).

Student affairs practitioners can play important roles in addressing the complex problem of racism and the adverse impact it has on People of Color and White persons alike. However, this requires a willingness to: [1] initiate difficult discussions about this multifaceted problem and [2] implement theoretical models like the Privileged Identity Exploration Model (PIE) (Watt, 2007) to effectively address the various forms of racism described above.

What follows is a description of two interventions (at the department and college/university levels) that we initiated on our campus to address the problem of institutional racism. These initiatives were intentionally designed to stimulate difficult dialogues about racism in ways that would help ameliorate this problem on our campus. A brief description of both interventions is followed by a short analysis of the positive and negative outcomes that ensued from these efforts.

### Department Level Intervention

We initiated discussions about racism within our own counseling department in the mid-1990s and continued through May of 2001. During faculty meetings, we began to raise question about whether or not our own faculty intentionally or unintentionally perpetuated institutional racism within our department. We prompted the faculty to consider the ways in which racism might be present in our curriculum (through the use of racially-biased counseling theories in our training program), our student evaluation methods (by using culturally and racially-biased assessment strategies in grading students), and inherent in the cultural-racial composition of our faculty (e.g., 8 of the 9 faculty members were White males of European descent). These difficult discussions inevitably reflected many of the issues discussed by Watt (2007).

The first theoretical assumption of Watt's (2007) PIE model acknowledges that engaging in these types of difficult discussions is a necessary part of unlearning social oppression. Up to that point in time, our departmental faculty had never discussed how they might be unintentionally perpetuating institutional racism. We believed that had we not embarked on this discussion, we would not have

become consciously aware of some of the potentially racially-biased policies that existed within the department.

Watt's second theoretical assumption emphasizes that predictable defense reactions are likely to be manifested among persons who are engaged in such difficult discussions. We noticed identifiable behaviors that were displayed by many of the faculty members participating in these difficult discussions as being consistent with those described in the PIE model. This included the use of denial ("I don't think we have that problem here"), rationalization ("Every program at every university has some of these problems"); and deflection ("I think we have many very strong points about our program that you are failing to address").

While we worked hard in responding to these defensive reactions over the course of several difficult discussions about institutional racism in our department, we were unable to effectively deal with the manner in which some faculty members persisted in exhibiting defenses. The most common defense reactions that we were unable to effectively address involved the consistent use of denial and deflection during these difficult discussions.

Despite these defensive reactions, a number of positive outcomes resulted from these difficult discussions. One such outcome resulted in a concrete strategy faculty members agreed to use to address the complex problem of institutional racism in the department. This involved several faculty members agreeing to endorse the set of multicultural counseling competencies that were developed by the *Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development* (AMCD) in 1992 (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) and formally endorsed by the American Counseling Association in 2003 (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2003). In this sort of "endorsement," the departmental faculty acknowledged their support for the "spirit and principles of the multicultural counseling competencies" and agreed to explicitly list and intentionally address the specific multicultural counseling in each of their course syllabi.

There were also several negative consequences that occurred as a result of initiating these discussions. Most notably was the heightened level of contentious interactions between colleagues. Oftentimes, we were accused of acting in a "non-collegial manner" because we presented our views on the problem of institutional racism in our department. When asked to explain what "non-collegial" meant, some faculty members gave vague replies such as they simply did not like how we were presenting the information about institutional racism to the departmental faculty. This type of response is typically found in the research, which indicates that there are often comments aimed at shifting the focus away from the problems associated with

institutional racism to the way that this problem is being presented (D'Andrea, & Daniels, 2001; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Ponterotto et al., 2006; Sue, 2006).

### College/University Level Intervention

In August 2000, one author filed a formal complaint with the dean of the College of Education (COE) regarding the various ways in which institutional racism continued to be perpetuated in the college where we worked.  In explaining how this problem continued to be perpetuated in the COE, the author pointed to: [1] the racial-ethnic disparities that existed among administrators, faculty members, students, and other staff persons in that part of the university; [2] the cultural-biased epistemology that dominated the courses taught at the COE; and [3] the continued practice of using culturally-biased tests as a major criteria for student admissions in various departments in the college.

This action led to the initiation of a new set of difficult discussions with administrators at our university.  By taking this action, we hoped to expand the difficult discussion of institutional racism outside the department to a college and university level.  We also hoped that this intervention would prompt university administrators to devise organizational changes that reflected the institution's commitment to diversity and social justice.

To assist the administrators in dealing with the charges included in the formal complaint, we developed an organizational evaluation tool entitled "A Cultural-Organizational Audit" (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2000).  This instrument was intentionally designed to assist the dean in assessing how the COE might be unintentionally perpetuating institutional racism.  The first author also offered to provide reading materials and to consult with the dean about the types of positive interventions that could be used to address the problem.

In fact, the filing of the formal complaint did result in a series of consultation meetings between the first author and the dean.  Over the course of time, these discussions eroded into what we perceived as less than productive collaborative meetings. The tensions that increasingly ensued in these discussions were, in part, a function of what we saw as defensive reactions by the dean which appeared to rationalize and deny specific examples of racism that were indicated by the first author in these consultation meetings.

Subsequently, the first author became the target of numerous unsubstantiated complaints that the dean said came from students and faculty who allegedly expressed displeasure about the ways the first author addressed issues related to social justice and anti-racist advocacy in his courses and during faculty

meetings. These actions represent the sort of retaliation that is not uncommon when individuals initiate difficult discussions about institutional racism and other social justice issues among power brokers in organizational settings (Ridley, 2005). The first author proceeded to file a number of complaints with the faculty union, the Chancellor's and President's offices at the university as well as with the state and federal Civil Rights Commissions alleging retaliation for bringing the issue of institutional racism to the attention of university administrators.

A number of positive and negative outcomes resulted from these actions. This included: [1] an increased level of discussion about the complex problem of institutional racism among key administrators at high administrative levels in our university; [2] an increased probability of having this complex problem more effectively addressed by governmental entities that are independent from university (e.g., the state and federal civil rights commissions); and [3] the escalated risk of having more institutional attacks and retaliation for our continuing efforts in this area.

## Summary

College student affairs professionals have a responsibility to promote the healthy development and well-being of students. To do so, these professionals must address students' intrapsychic needs as well as the toxic ecological-environmental conditions that adversely impact their developmental potential. This article directs attention to the important role advocacy can play in addressing the complex problem of racism as it is manifested in institutions of higher education.

The authors realize that many college student affairs professionals view the complex problem of racism as either being irrelevant for the work they do or too overwhelming to effectively address in society in general or at the universities where they are employed in particular. This article is designed to increase college student affairs professionals' understanding of some of the practical advocacy strategies that can be used to ameliorate this problem in college settings and, in doing so, contribute to the eradication of this destructive social pathology in our society at-large.

One of the fundamental challenges that needs to be addressed in doing this work involves assisting persons in the dominant cultural-racial group, who are situated in power positions (e.g. administrative, policy-making positions) in college settings, to explore how their own privileged identities contribute to this complex problem. Such an undertaking includes initiating difficult discussions regarding the connections that exist between various forms of institutional racism and the perpetuation of cultural-racial privileges that are

bestowed on persons in the dominant cultural-cultural group in our society. Specific interventions that we used to stimulate difficult discussions regarding the complex problem of institutional racism at our university are described in this article. As numerous multicultural-social justice counseling advocates have pointed out, discussions related to such issues predictably result in heightened defensive reactions from others, particularly when these interventions directly or indirectly encourage the exploration of power-brokers' privileged racial position in our society. Many of the ideas presented in Watt's (2007) PIE model were helpful in addressing the defensive reactions manifested by many faculty members and administrators who took part in these difficult discussions at our campus. Watt's description of the eight common defense modes and suggestions for managing these defense modes are particularly helpful in this regard.

Working to eradicate racism in our society in general and on college campuses in particular is an important and challenging undertaking. It is hoped that our discussion of the types of difficult discussions we initiated, the interventions implemented, the challenges and different forms of retaliation we encountered, as well as the positive outcomes that ensued from these efforts will lead other student affairs professionals to boldly face this complex problem in the colleges and universities where they work. Doing so is an essential part in the overall struggle to promote peace, justice, equality, and full democracy in our society at-large.

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