

The Color of Racism ©

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My paternal grandmother was a domestic worker, a position many black women held during the 1940s and 50s. She took me with her to work during the summer. It took us three hours from where we lived in the city to get to her job in the suburbs by 8 a.m.

I watched my grandmother clean, cook, wash, and iron the clothes belonging to the white family who employed her. I played all day with the children of the family and their friends from the neighborhood while she worked.

A local company regularly sponsored a contest to select the “family of the week” who used their product. The family chosen would be featured in a television commercial advertising the product. My grandmother and I arrived one morning to discover the family awake and dressed. They had won the contest and were excitedly waiting for the TV crew to arrive to film them for the commercial. My grandmother went about her tasks with deliberate normalcy. The camera crew arrived and gathered the family in the living room to capture a picture of an “all-American” family of the 1950s. I had been told by them over the years that I was a member of the family, so ... I stood there with the rest waiting to say “cheese” for the camera. I was gently told by the cameraman to stand to the side. My grandmother explained to me that the picture was to be just them.

This suburban neighborhood where my grandmother worked is one of my early memories of an all-white environment where I felt most different from those around me. The feeling of being an “other” contradicted my experience at home and in my community. This early childhood incident, one of several, was the beginning of my awareness of experiencing the question W.E.B. Du Bois raises in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published in 1903: *How does it feel to be a problem?*

American Portrait, Incomplete

The analogy of the photo raises the question: Who is included in the picture of those whom we call Americans, and who decides who will be a part of this portrait? Albert Memmi wrote in his classic *Racism* (University of Minnesota Press, 2000): “Racism is the generalized and final assigning of values to real or imaginary differences, to the accuser’s benefit and at its victim’s expense, in order to justify the former’s own privileges or aggression.”

Many of my students do not initially notice that the word “color,” which is commonly assumed to be a key component of racism, is missing from Memmi’s definition. For him the power to assign a prejudicial value to any characteristic of another human being – and then deploy the instruments of science, law, religion, institutional structures, and government for one’s own benefit and at the expense of its victims – is central to the way racism functions in the contemporary world as a force of discrimination. The physical features or other characteristics of people – their gender, sexual orientation, or age – are but a few of the attributes we use to discriminate against other people for our perceived benefit.

More elusive, though, is the persistence of racist values. Racist views of African Americans have been codified in our laws, supported by data classified as “scientific,” rationalized by religious leaders and institutions as the will of God, and used to form economic and political policy. It persists despite overwhelming evidence that African Americans are not inferior to other ethnic groups, particularly white Americans. It persists as an ideology, a kind of “blood knowledge,” (see Jonathan D. Jansen’s *Knowledge in the Blood*, Stanford, 2009). Like DNA in our blood, racism is transmitted by the culture at large, affecting African Americans as well as everyone else.

Prejudice Old and New

This pernicious mental habit stood behind the movement that questioned the citizenship of President Obama. It’s there in the incidents in New York, where a prominent black American movie actor/director was frisked by a deli store employee who assumed he was shoplifting. The racism against African Americans time and again reveals its peculiar tenacity: American society has a difficult time letting go of these impulses despite the contributions of blacks to the nation. Black men are often assumed to be armed, dangerous, angry, and therefore subject to harassment, arrest, or even murder by the police or armed civilians. The election of a black president has not lessened whites’ negative attitudes toward black Americans.

The violent objectification of people extends to the abuse of women, children, and the LGBTQ and Asian American communities. It can be heard in the public debate about immigration reform.

Racists deny the humanity of those whom they hate and fight to keep them out of the picture of America. Yet hating other people is not a genetic disposition. We learn to hate others, and our hatred of them is reflected in the formal and informal rules that govern how we interact with one another. My generation is the last one to have lived under legal segregation in America. But each generation has the responsibility to be vigilant in identifying and challenging racism in its own time.

Mental health communities should share in this vigilance. Fundamental to the teachings of world religions is that we are made in the image of God. Gardner C. Taylor calls this the “biography of the human soul.” (*The Words of Gardner Taylor*, Vol. 5., Judson Press, 2001). Ultimately racial hatred is a form of self-hatred, blinding us to our own humanity and the humanity of those we hate. Paul Tillich says in *My Search for Absolutes* (Simon and Schuster, 1967): “From the point of view of the holy, we do not belong to ourselves but to that from which we come and to which we return – the eternal ground of everything that is. This is the ultimate reason for the sacredness of the person and, consequently, for the unconditional character of the moral command not to destroy our essential being which is given to us and which we may disregard and destroy.”

We sometimes forget: We are all connected. There is only one race and it is human. Howard Thurman in *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) reminds us that haters and the victims of hate are caught in a mutual web of fear and deception. Only the love shown by others who do not try to escape the demands of love can cast out the darkness of hatred. This is part of the work and witness of mental health care.

As providers of mental health care we are to withdraw from any practice of thought or habit that objectifies other people. We are called to distance ourselves from situations of oppression. Expanding our consideration of how racism functions today – how it includes but also goes beyond color prejudice – can make us more responsive to its traumatic and tragic effects.

I believe human beings are basically good despite the harm we do to one another. The picture of America that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream painted is not just deeply rooted in an American social ideal. The freedom and justice about which he spoke and for which he and others died are the freedom and justice impulse in all human beings.

This dream cannot be possessed or monopolized by any one group of people. The dream reframes our picture of one another – a picture framed with the four borders of love, justice, freedom, and community. The dream invites us all to receive courage from it so we can make it real for all people. It urges that we love and respect ourselves and one another for who we are, to accept each other as part of the picture of America and to dream about what we can become and contribute to the world. In this sense caring for our own and the mental health well-being of others aids in the client capacity to dream for themselves.