

Racism and Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model

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Abstract

This paper examines the face of racism in the United States of America (USA) based on self-reflections. The dynamics of oppression and discrimination resulting from racism will be analyzed against the backdrop of empowerment theory. The paper also suggests the use of Racial/Cultural Identity Development model (or conceptual framework) developed by Sue and Sue (1990, 1999) in understanding the stages of development the oppressed people experience as they struggle to understand themselves and the dominant culture. The role social workers could play in improving relations between the racial minority culture and the dominant culture is also discussed.

Keywords: Racism, Discrimination and Oppression, Empowerment, Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model

Introduction

As casteism (prejudice resulting from the view that one's caste is superior to other castes) is one of the major issues in India, so is racism in the United States. According to Barker, racism is "stereotyping and generalizing about people, usually negatively, because of their race; commonly a basis of discrimination against members of racial minority groups" (as cited in Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2013: 239). Racism is not just an issue but an ideology that justifies actions perpetrated against racial minorities. Marger asserts, "racism is an ideology, or belief system, designed to justify and rationalize racial and ethnic inequality" (as cited in Chaney & Robertson, 2013: 25). In my observation, the fundamental difference between casteism and racism is this: while casteism is not [necessarily] based on observable physical characteristics, racism is based on observable physical characteristics; for example, skin color. A black person and a white person can be easily identified as belonging to two completely different races.

The United States is a race-conscious society; therefore, interaction among people of different races could be said to be influenced by racial identity (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2015: 11). A society in which people are divided by racial identity suffers from poor social health. Social health involves healthy interpersonal relationships among people, despite differences (Koshuta, n.d.). But, racism is antithetical to social health. Racism also leads to discrimination and oppression of racial minorities (e.g. African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans). Marsiglia and Kulis (2015: 169) explain that "The term minority is not used in a numerical sense but... in a sociological sense to describe the group's lesser power... compared to the white majority". In the following section, I will elaborate on discrimination and oppression faced by racial minorities from the standpoint of empowerment theory.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment theory is “grounded in a conflict model based on Marxist thought and a mandate for social action and consciousness raising derived from the work of Paulo Freire... [and] address[es] the dynamics of discrimination and oppression” (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2006: 92-93). Both Karl Marx and Paulo Freire addressed the issue of oppression (although their starting points may be different) and advocated action for liberation. Oppression experienced by racial minorities in the United States since the time of European invasion in the late 1400s (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2015: 172) warrants action. But, in order to be able to act in such a way that racial minorities may be liberated from oppression, they need to be empowered. Therefore, the concept of empowerment is applied here for racial minorities who have little or no power. It is not that they do not have inherent power but that they have been deprived of their power.

According to empowerment theory, “... society consists of stratified groups possessing different and unequal levels of power and control over resources” (Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2006: 94). Whites [seemingly] have more power and control over resources than racial minorities. There is a widespread notion that anyone can pull oneself up by one’s bootstraps (that is, whoever takes efforts can succeed without any external help) but this is far from reality. Research shows that racial minorities are at the lowest ebb in their social, economic status and health despite efforts to improve their lot (Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins & Altschul, 2011; Bronson & Nuriddin, 2014; Fenaro, Thorpe Jr., McCabe, Kelley-Moore & Zhen, 2006; Strunk, Townsend-Rocchiccioli, & Sanford, 2013; Ventres & Fort, 2014).

Blume and Lovato (2010: 190) are forthright in their conclusion as to why racial minorities are struggling the way they are: “... Many ethnic minority groups have a history of disempowerment... Many clients of color experience racism and prejudice, often on a daily basis. A large number of ethnic minorities are economically challenged...”. Disempowerment is a history because discrimination has been a history; economic challenges are a reality because racism has been a reality.

Discrimination and oppression of racial minorities take different forms. One such form is housing discrimination. Tatum argues that only those who haven’t been paying attention to “housing discrimination” and about “documented racial bias in lending practices among well-known banks” deny the existence of racism in the United States (as cited in Rothenberg & Mayhew, 2014: 125). Lending institutions redline some areas occupied by racial minorities; this practice prevents minorities from securing mortgages for housing. Even if they were successful in securing mortgages, they end up paying more than their white counterparts.

The other form of discrimination and oppression is police brutality against racial minorities. Chaney and Robertson (2013: 482) discuss extensively how police treat racial minorities brutally. They raise a valid question when alluding to, data obtained from the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted biennially by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the years 1994 through 2004... Police brutality is improper and unjust... a plausible concern becomes how in a society that ostensibly emphasizes egalitarianism, can a milieu exist which allows police malfeasance to thrive?.

Even a cursory look at the statement included in the Declaration of Independence which reads as follows: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” (The Declaration of Independence, para. 2) would underscore the idea that egalitarianism is a foundational principle of United States. Nevertheless, it is a sad reality that this principle is yet to be implemented fully. There are hate crimes committed against racial minorities. Thomas (2007: 1085) quotes, “there are 844 active hate groups, often choosing egregious violence to advance

their agenda... there are 165 active Ku Klux Klan groups...”. The primary purpose of these groups is to spread hate against racial minorities.

In my observation, the rift between blacks and whites is wider than other racial minorities. Police brutality against blacks seems like a common phenomenon. For example, on August 9, 2014 an unarmed black teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri (What happened in Ferguson? 2014). This incident has sent waves of protests across the United States. Despite such protests, police target blacks, especially black males and caricature them (Plant & Peruche, as cited in Chaney & Robertson, 2013: 483). Williams argues, “... some in society apparently not only devalue black people but devalue themselves and their homes just for having [blacks] as part of their landscape” (as cited in Anderson & Collins, 2010: 94).

The blacks when brought into the United States were forced to serve as slaves. It seems as though some whites (or even many) have difficulty accepting blacks as their equals. Therefore, interpersonal relationships between whites and blacks continue to be unhealthy. Turner et al. argues, Black-white relations in America have historically involved relegation and confinement of Blacks to the lowest rank in the stratification system, thereby denying them access to material well-being, power, and prestige. As long as we recognize the limitations involved, we can term the plight of Blacks caste-like (as cited in Robbins, Chatterjee & Canda, 2006: 95). In spite of all these disturbing situations, helping professions, including social work profession, have been actively involved in empowering the racial minorities. An important approach taken by helping professions is preparing professionals to become culturally competent.

Cultural competence warrants social workers (also other helping professionals) to familiarize themselves with the historical and cultural background of racial minority clients so that they are respectful of minorities and advocate for their emancipation. Horevitz, Lawson, and Chow (2013: 142) stress the need for cultural competence vividly: “The core values of social work are well served by a strong focus on cultural competence. The mission and purpose of the social work profession demand respect for cultural diversity and practices that support this ethical commitment”. Social workers come from different racial background. But, majority of them are whites (as cited in Horevitz, Lawson & Chow, 2013: 135). This is helpful because it forces them to open up to their assumptions, views, attitudes, so on and so forth, about racial minorities. I have come across many social workers who are whites who want to empower the minorities so that they respect themselves and their culture, and also appreciate the fact that there are broad-minded whites who seek minorities’ welfare.

Minorities don’t come to the stage of self-appreciation and acceptance of whites that easily but have to go through different stages. Those stages are clearly delineated in the Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model. In the following section, I will enumerate the key elements of each stage incorporating some examples, including some personal examples. The examples provided are not intended to address every single element of the different stages but are intended to address some key ideas of the stages. For each stage, in the first paragraph I will enumerate the key elements and in the second paragraph, I will provide examples.

Racial/Cultural Identity Development Model

The Minority Identity Development (MID) model proposed by Atkinson, Morten, and Sue was later on elaborated by Sue and Sue renaming it the Racial/Cultural Identity Development (R/CID) model. Sue and Sue (2006: 92) refer to the R/CID model as follows: The model defines five stages of development that oppressed people experience as they struggle to understand

themselves in terms of their own culture, the dominant culture, and the oppressive relationship between the two cultures: conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection, and integrative awareness.

Conformity Stage: At this stage, the life styles, value systems, and cultural or physical characteristics of the White society are valued highly by the racial minorities; constantly bombarded by views that Whites and their way of life is superior and all other lifestyles are inferior; they also develop self-depreciating attitudes and beliefs and thus tend to have low internal self-esteem. Because they find it psychologically painful to identify with negative traits portrayed about their group, they divorce themselves from their own group.

When I first moved to the U.S in 2004, I lived in a predominantly white community. I was surprised by the high standards of the community. For instance, once someone asked me as to what prompted me to lock my door. I stood in silence not knowing how to answer. The person told me theft was not an issue in the community. This was extremely shocking to me. On several occasions, I had noticed people who drove car stopping at the stop sign whether anyone noticed or not. I started cherishing white society's standards and began to conform to those standards.

Dissonance Stage: Movement into the dissonance stage is a gradual process. Individual is in conflict between experiences that challenge his or her current self-concept. Despite entertaining the possibility of positive attributes in the minority culture, and a sense of pride in self, feelings of shame, pride and a sense of conflict also develop; dominant views of minority strengths and weaknesses begin to be questioned; certain aspects of the minority culture begin to have appeal; stereotypes associated with other minority groups are questioned, and a growing sense of comradeship with other oppressed groups is felt. There is a growing awareness that not all cultural values of the dominant group are beneficial. This is especially true when the minority person experiences personal discrimination. Growing suspicion and some distrust of certain members of the dominant group develop.

My appreciation for the white society's standards led me to deprecate some of my culture's standards. But this did not continue for long. My appreciation for the white society started diminishing slowly which started off with an incident in which a white woman manifested some stereotypes about India. This woman had visited a remote tribal Indian community several years back. Based on her experiences she had wrongly concluded that the entire country was like the tribal community lacking infrastructural facilities. Despite efforts to change her views, she seemed to hold on to her stereotypes and spread them to others. There were similar incidents in which some showed disrespectful attitudes towards racial minorities and their countries of origin. On one occasion, a black student was in tears because of some offensive remarks made against her by a white student. These incidents caused dissonance in my views about white society.

Resistance and Immersion Stage: The minority person tends to endorse minority-held views completely and to reject the dominant values of society. The person seems dedicated to reacting against White society and rejects White social, cultural, and institutional standards as having no personal validity. There are considerable feelings of guilt and shame that in the past the minority individual has sold out his or her own racial group. The minority individual is oriented toward discovery of his or her own history and culture. Cultural and racial characteristics that once elicited feelings of shame and disgust become symbols of pride and honor. There is a feeling of connectedness with other members of the racial and cultural group. Cultural values of the minority group are accepted without question. Persons tend to restrict their interactions to members of their own group. The minority individual is likely to perceive the dominant society

as an oppressor and also tends to withdraw from the dominant culture and immerse in one's cultural heritage.

As time passed by, I started observing more and more discriminatory and oppressive behaviors of whites against racial minorities. Racial slurs were more common than I had expected. The need to identify myself with persons of similar cultural background was felt more strongly than before. I noticed the same need with other racial minorities. What I noticed as being common among racial minorities was the yearning for "acceptance and mutual respect." I looked for opportunities to connect with persons of similar cultural background and cherished every such opportunity that came on my way. I started comparing my culture's standards with that of white society's standards with regard to certain specific practices (which I shall leave unnamed) and felt that my culture's practices were superior to that of white society's practices.

Introspection Stage: In this stage, the person feels that he or she has too rigidly held onto minority group views in order to submerge personal autonomy; the individual may see his or her own group taking positions that might be considered quite extreme. An attempt is now made to reach out to other groups in finding out what types of oppression they experience and how they have handled this. The individual experiences conflict between attitudes of complete trust for the dominant society and attitudes of selective trust and distrust according to the dominant group's demonstrated behaviors and conflicts.

On a few occasions when I had the opportunity to relate closely to persons from similar cultural background and some racial minorities, I observed contrary behaviors which made me question my earlier judgment about white society. I realized that some whites had more admirable qualities than some racial minorities. Nevertheless, I moved cautiously in relating to whites. Although I related to everyone with whom I came into contact, only after I found people to be trustworthy I related to them closely. There would be mutual sharing of joys and sorrows and also cultural exchanges with due respect for one another.

Integrative Awareness Stage: Minority persons in this stage have developed an inner sense of security and now can own and appreciate unique aspects of their culture as well as those of U.S. culture. Conflicts and discomforts experienced in the previous stage become resolved, allowing greater individual control and flexibility. There is now the belief there are acceptable and unacceptable aspects in all cultures, and that it is very important for the person to be able to examine and accept or reject those aspects of a culture that are not seen as desirable. The person begins to perceive himself or herself as unique without having to accept group values unequivocally. The individual now reaches out toward different minority groups in order to understand their cultural values and ways of life. The individual also experiences openness to the constructive elements of the dominant culture.

The more I observed and interacted with racial minorities and whites, I realized that there were both acceptable and unacceptable aspects in every race and culture. For instance, I was (and have been) very much appreciative of the discipline and integrity of whites when it came to discharging their responsibilities. I have always noticed that when they are involved in road work, they would do it very sincerely whether anyone noticed them or not. They would regulate traffic with extreme care and in an orderly fashion. Similarly, I was (and have been) very much appreciative of the importance placed on family relationships by racial minorities. In my observation, racial minorities don't consider professional help as their first source of help. Instead, they seek the help of their families first and then seek professional help (if needed).

Conclusion

Racism is a serious issue which is detrimental to social health. No society that divides people as superior or inferior to one another can be a healthy society. It's a sad reality that despite the phenomenal technological advancements of the United States, there is still both overt and covert form of racism in the United States. It must however be noted that the United States of today is far from the United States of the late 1400s. There is a lot of improvement in race relations. The election of President Obama, who is a black person, is indeed remarkable in the history of United States. The pace with which changes took place on the South African scene should also take place in the United States. Jones (2006: 887) expresses this concern vividly: Racial Apartheid in South Africa was the standard of racism in the world until it was dismantled in 1991. In three short years, the democratic elections of 1994 moved South Africa from an iconic representation of racial oppression to a symbol of hope and human dignity... I could only contrast this spirit and hope, and bold public declaration of the value not only of diversity, but human dignity and the inclusion of all under "the tent" in the United States.

I am optimistic that the change that took place in South Africa will also take place in the United States. Helping professions, including social work profession, should continue their efforts in improving race relations through curriculum, conferences on cultural competency and scholarship. Social workers are mandated by the profession to be respectful of clients who belong to different racial background. It is important that they show their respect by learning about clients' race and culture so they are able to understand discrimination and oppression stemming from racism, as experienced and perceived by clients. When they do so, they may help clients to be appreciative of both their own race and culture and also of other races and cultures. Those who see the value in each race and culture are the ones who could be devoid of racism. Such persons can enjoy good social health and can also contribute to good social health.

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