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Obstacles to Inter-Racial Understanding: Some Psychological Aspects

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Obstacles to Inter-Racial Understanding: Some Psychological Aspects

Abstract

This presentation will examine the issue of racial prejudice both within and beyond the workplace from a psychological perspective. It will explore insights and illustrations from the field of psychology and related disciplines. Suggestions will be made for how we can monitor and improve our interactions with people of different ethnic origins, so that we may be more confident in our ability to ensure successful building of diversity in predominantly white institutions.

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At the dawn of the 21st century racial prejudice continues to be a blot on the American social landscape. This presentation will examine the issue of racial prejudice in the United States from a psychological perspective. It will identify insights from the field of psychology and related disciplines into the nature of racial prejudice and the psychological processes that are obstacles to inter-racial understanding, and how they operate. The presentation will offer brief illustrations of the operation of some of these processes in relation to prejudices, specifically against African Americans and American Indians. In addition, it will examine the psychological processes that affect people of color's attitudes towards European Americans. Finally, the presentation will suggest practical steps that individuals in the United States -whether in the workplace or anyplace -can take to rid themselves of the effects of racial prejudice. The result of such efforts would certainly include the building of diversity in [hitherto] predominantly white institutions.

There is a rapidly-growing presence of Hispanics in this country (especially since 1960) and it is projected that, by 2005, Hispanics are expected to outnumber African Americans as the largest non-white population (Chideya, 1999, p. 5). Likewise, Asian Americans are also increasing in numbers. Both of these ethnic groups have suffered from racial prejudice, despite the fact that they represent a newer presence in the United States than do African Americans and American Indians. My purpose in focusing on prejudices against African Americans and American Indians is to provide two case studies of peoples that have, as shown by American history, been fiercely victimized throughout several centuries. However, the psychological tendencies I will discuss can occur in any situation bearing the taint of racial prejudice.

Prejudice literally means "pre-judge." However, a prejudice is a particular kind of prejudgment - one that does not change. In this connection, sociologist Gordon Allport (1979) writes: "Prejudgments become prejudices only if they are not reversible when exposed to new knowledge" (p. 9). Racial prejudice, therefore, means to prejudge on the basis of race -primarily skin color -and to maintain such a prejudgment even in the face of evidence that all human beings are equal.

The psychological literature offers a number of insights into the definition of racial

prejudice, how it functions mentally, and how it can be overcome. I will review some of these psychological insights during the presentation.

According to psychological theory, racial prejudice reflects people's tendency to project, which - as stated by counseling psychologists Thompson and Neville (1999) - "allows an individual to attribute onto others characteristics about himself or herself that the person knows or fears is unacceptable to others" (p. 188). Allport (1979) states: "Direct projection is a means of solving one's conflict by ascribing to another person (or group) emotions, motives, and behavior that actually belong to the person who projects them, and not to the person who is blamed for them" (pp. 387-388). Furthermore, Thompson and Neville (1999) point out that projection "prevents many Whites from acknowledging their own negative traits or flaws by relocating them onto people of color. This relocation enables Whites to further justify unequal treatment and maintain a view of White supremacy" (p. 188).

Projective identification, in contrast to projection, is a psychological mechanism in which the person who is blamed "becomes possessed by, controlled and identified with the projected part" (Segal, 1964, p. 27). Psychoanalyst Michael Vannoy Adams (1996) explains the relationship between projective identification and projection as follows: "If some blacks hate themselves, it is because whites hate an interior aspect of themselves and repress and project it onto blacks. In contact with whites, blacks then internalize this shadow from the collective unconscious of whites" (p. 166). Thus, black self-hatred is a classic example of projective identification, in which the projected-upon internalizes the projection as if it were his/her own.

In short, projection and projective identification both operate within American society's collective interchanges between the races. Whites' belief in their own superiority in relation to **people of color is really a defense against feelings of personal inferiority**. When these hidden feelings are projected onto people of color, the latter may experience feelings of despair and inadequacy - due, in part, to projective identification with the feelings of inferiority of whites, and also in part to their own conditioning as marginalized members of society. These factors justify calling racism a "disease."

Various psychological defenses have been employed by whites in perpetuating racial prejudice, and thus the disease of racism, whether consciously or not. These include:

1. The defense of denial
2. The defenses of rationalization and displacement of blame
3. The defense of intellectualization
4. The defense of identification

The above-mentioned psychological defense mechanisms have become deeply entrenched in white society and are transmitted *from* generation to generation through whites' socialization. As with any psychological position, one must first become aware that it exists, and admit its reality. Such is the case with assumptions of superiority on the part of whites. This is the first step towards a solution to the persistent problem of racial prejudice.

The psychological literature suggests, based on the concepts mentioned above, that in order to

overcome racial prejudice whites must be willing to reexamine their own attitudes with open minds. Therefore, they must be constantly on guard against the infection of these attitudes. Most importantly, there is the vital initial necessity of awareness and acknowledgment that the issue of entitlement exists.

The psychological literature also suggests that people of color must make their own effort to overcome the understandable suspicions they harbor. People of color may also engage in projection about whites, having learned to employ their own defense mechanisms *for* coping with racist projections. These will be discussed more fully during the workshop.

The presentation will conclude with some suggested practical steps that individuals can employ in order to facilitate personal and interpersonal growth and understanding-which is an important step towards ensuring that diversity is successfully implemented in [Hitherto] predominantly white institutions.

Presenter

Jenina Lepard is a licensed clinical social worker and certified psychoanalyst in clinical practice at Southpointe Family Resource Center in Lincoln, Nebraska. She was a workshop presenter at the 2002 People of Color conference. She also presented a paper on the mental health practitioner's role in promoting inter-racial understanding at the North Central Sociological Association's 2002 annual meeting in Windsor, Ontario. In 2001, she was closely involved in planning and presenting a conference entitled "Beyond Racism: Building Inter-Racial Equity and Understanding" which was held at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln that September. Ms. Lepard is a graduate of the Rutgers University School of Social Work and the Philadelphia School of Psychoanalysis, and formerly practiced in Philadelphia, P A.