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Abstract

A course on American Racism might be thought to benefit mainly white students. This paper demonstrates how Black social work students in their own idiosyncratic way derive special benefit from such a course. Black students in search of a professional identity bring with them personal life experiences of oppression and social alienation. They make an important connection with the use of the immediate present as an effective means to counteract attitudinal/institutional white racism. Learning that the past cannot change, but that feelings about the past can, is liberating and has significance for their developing professional identity.

Comments

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How Do Black Graduate Social Work Students Benefit From a Course on Institutional Racism?

by LOUIS H. CARTER

A course on American Racism might be thought to benefit mainly white students. This paper demonstrates how Black social work students in their own idiosyncratic way derive special benefit from such a course. Black students in search of a professional identity bring with them personal life experiences of oppression and social alienation. They make an important connection with the use of the immediate present as an effective means to counteract attitudinal/institutional white racism. Learning that the past cannot change, but that feelings about the past can, is liberating and has significance for their developing professional identity.

A major organizing objective of the master's curriculum is an examination of racism and strategies for social change. The School of Social work at the University of Pennsylvania requires of all master's degree candidates a two-semester course focusing on American Racism: Knowledge and Analysis for Social Work Practice.

The course is one school's response to the Black Movement throughout the larger community and student activism in the early seventies. Many Black students tend to reject traditional theoretical formulations as irrelevant to the Black experience. Black students at the school took direct action to assure themselves of a relevant professional education. White social work students, in an effort to find their place in the Black Movement and in trying to help their clients, identified the need for Black content in the curriculum as essential to their preparation. Faculty responded positively to both these valuable inputs. The course began with faculty support as an option in 1969 and became a required course in 1970.

The content of the course is developed on three levels: context of racism (e.g., individual and social), consciousness of racism (e.g., level of awareness), and implications and strategies for change (e.g., involvement in social change). The central learning objectives of the course are "to help students develop awareness of individual-

institutional, attitudinal-behavioral systems of racism, to help define the responsibility of social work in relation to these phenomena as they apply to the social worker . . ."¹ Two distinguishing characteristics of the course are the team teaching arrangement of Black and white instructors, with the Black instructor having the lead role, and the white instructor's responsibility for the examination of white racism. An extensive bibliography has been developed and continues to be updated. Novels and plays about Black values, as well as scholarly writings on the subject are utilized.

THE UNIQUE PROBLEMS OF BLACK STUDENTS

Black students in search of a professional identity through graduate social work education bring with them personal life experiences of oppression and social alienation. Beginning with the first day of life, Blacks experience an identity crisis. Differentiation and individuation essential to identity are achieved through the use of social institutions and the social relationships they afford. The systematic exclusion of Blacks from equal access to social institutions denies them an opportunity for integrated socialization experiences and perpetuates an identity crisis.

Black children learn early to reject their Blackness as a central aspect of their being, inasmuch as society makes Blackness the criteria for restricting, if not rejecting participation in social arrangements. The result is an endless search for positive identity. "Racism limits the viability of Negro families in hundreds of ways—it prevents the newborn child from having an equal chance of being born in a healthy condition . . . even if he surmounts these obstacles, racism prevents him from having access to jobs that maximize his abilities."² Erikson assessed the plight of Blacks with regard to their identity crisis thus:

but what if the "milieu" is determined to let live only at the expense of permanent loss of identity . . . The Negro, of course is only the most flagrant case of an American minority which by the pressure of tradition and the limitation of opportunity

is forced to identify with its own evil identity fragments, thus jeopardizing whatever participation in an American identity it may have earned. . . . Three identities are formed: (1) mammy's "honey child"—tender, expressive, rhythmical; (2) the evil identity of the dirty, anal-sadistic, phallic-rapist "nigger"; and (3) the clean, anal-compulsive, restrained, friendly, but always sad "white man's Negro." . . . The Negro's unavoidable identification with the dominant race and the very sensual and oral temptations emanating from the race held to be inferior (whence came their mummies), established in both groups an association: light-clean-clever-white, and dark-dumb-dirty-nigger.³

So dehumanizing is the Black experience that it is not possible for some Black students to acknowledge the stress of their deprivation as the motivation for professional social work in protest. This difficulty in part stems from the oppression in their educational experience prior to graduate social work education. Starting from "experiential knowledge rather than from systems of concepts or abstract categories"⁴ is endemic to the Black experience. Though many educational institutions are granting credit for life experiences, most white institutions still fail to acknowledge Black experience as a special source of knowledge. Therefore, affirmation of a positive identity for Blacks is further retarded by having to assimilate white values and norms, a proviso for negotiating white institutions. The term "educationally deprived," which is a white concept, implies that Blacks must abstract within a white frame of reference in order to "belong." Labeling becomes an oppressive form:

The practice of cultural imposition leads Black graduate students to see how totally their careers are determined by white academic standards and to develop a sense of abject powerlessness in the department which allegedly is trying to help them advance as professionals . . . both the blindness and the insensitivity to the existence of alternative constructions of American life are typical of academic tradition . . . the majority are struggling to retain and develop their Black perspective in an anti-Black environment.⁵

The response of a Black graduate social work student characterizes the unique nature of the problems of Black students;

the realization that one is on the lower rung of the "social ladder"; the recognition of the self-hate experienced daily; the awareness that this self-hate is induced by a white oppressor who methodically stripped all the trappings of manhood, who methodically murdered the essence of a man's being and self-worth; to triumph over them is indeed a unique reality for the Black individual.

Learning to trust their relationships with white institutions, considering that Blacks are barred from equal access to the institutions which comprise the external world in a way that would stimulate helpful interactions, places a heavy demand on Black students. Negotiating white institutions has essentially required of Blacks a compromise of their values. Many have become accepting of, and resigned to compromise as paramount to their survival and "security" in this oppressive system:

In the past it was fairly easy for the colonial-racist mechanisms driven by ethnocentrism, easily to co-opt most of the Blacks who entered white universities... these Black intellectuals were engulfed in a sea of whiteness and some of them ultimately came to identify with the colonizer, believing that the elite white colleges and universities, far from being racist, were the realization of the melting pot idea. While some went on to the point of today denying that they are in any way "Black," as compared with "Negro," others responded to the pressures by joining the American Individualism bandwagon, or later, the liberal white entourage...⁶

Helping Black graduate students to surmount their denial of their Black experience and instead to affirm it is frequently a point of conflict resulting in growth. There is increasing consensus among Black faculty that Black students are liberated in their discovery that they *do* have the conceptual ability to meet the demands of professional education, contrary to what they have been taught to believe. Assertiveness and self-worth are discovered and understood as central to professional identity. Black graduate students are valuing their ideas enough to articulate them.

MEETING THE PROBLEMS OF BLACK STUDENTS THROUGH COURSE OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Initially the Black instructor is viewed by

the Black student as "suspect" for having compromised with a white institution. However, when credibility is established, the Black instructor becomes a role model for utilizing Black anger creatively. Interchange with sympathetic white students who also reject aspects of institutional intent as oppressive (though for different reasons), enables Black students to a fuller awareness of the potential to influence change through coalition.

Important conceptualizations evolve for the Black student from the classroom exchange between the Black instructor and white students, as shown in this student comment:

In response to a disruption of class by students reporting late and bringing foodstuffs, it became necessary for the Black instructor to remind the class of their commitment to time, as well as the purpose of the class, that did not include brunch. An irate white student projected that the instructor did not mind the lateness or coffee, but was angry for what the white man had done to him for over 300 years. The instructor acknowledged being around for 42 of those 300 years, but since he had not experienced the other 258 years, the student's attempt to maintain control and power by keeping the instructor preoccupied with a past that could not change had faltered.

Black students make an important connection with "use of the immediate present" as an effective means to counteract attitudinal/institutional racism.⁷ Learning that the past cannot change, but that feelings about the past can, is liberating and has significance for their developing professional identity. Blacks cannot deal with 300 years of oppression except to believe that change is possible in the here and now—the manageable present. "It is not only possible, it is desirable to ignore his past and work in the present because contrary to almost universal belief, nothing which happened in the past, no matter how it may have affected him then or now will make any difference once he learns to fulfill his needs at the present time."⁸

The Black graduate student's "immediate present" is the development of a professional role that will help make white insti-

tutions more accessible to Blacks. A dilemma for the Black student in accepting this charge is reflected in the following comment: "The course has rendered me profoundly tired. My tiredness stems from the emotional strain of listening to my white colleagues attempting to assuage their guilt by means of public penance.... I am put off by white students looking to me for answers to their dilemma...." This student's emotional drain subsequently was understood to be his inability to find creative expression for the anger generated by interaction with whites. The dilemma frequently is whether to exploit present opportunity to find a positive identity through the professional, or to hold onto that of the familiar, restrained, friendly, but always sad "white man's Negro."

Projection about Black anger from white students in relation to the Black instructor's expectation of them enables Black students to comprehend more fully that whites need the help of Blacks in overcoming behavioral aspects of white racism. Relationship with whites is not readily conceptualized by Blacks as a strategy for combating institutional racism, because the feeling content inherent in relationships is not understood, and therefore not valued.

The Black scholar can no longer afford to ape the allegedly "value-free" approach of white scholarship. He must reject absolutely the notion that it is "not professional" ever to become emotional, that it is somehow improper to be "bitter" as a Black man, that emotion and reason are mutually exclusive.... Emotion and reason may not only go together but may in fact be stimulants to each other. If one is truly cognizant of adverse circumstances, he would be expected through the process of reason, to experience some emotional response.⁹

In the process of "integrating" their blackness, Black graduate students can and hopefully do develop an awareness of substantial depth, to wit, the adverse effect of racism on their psychosexual development and the resulting ambivalence about their sexual identity, an ambivalence that contributes to their vulnerability for exploitation. Black male students discover the

self-destructiveness of identifying with the "white masculine mystique."¹⁰ One Black male student's response illuminates this point:

six weeks in a racism course has heightened my awareness of racism as well as sexism. This awareness of sexism within me, has me struggling with redefining my entire sexual role.... I have to love Black women. That's something I have to come to grips with. Her struggle has been my struggle, her strength has caused mine. In loving myself I have to love her.

Black women students also acquire an understanding that their rejection of Black men is a response to the deviousness of white racism. "I have accepted you, taken you back. Embraced you, empathized with your pitiful plight, because I know how THEY have used you."¹¹

PROJECTION: AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT FOR BLACK LIBERATION

Important to the Black student's experience and creative use of Blackness is understanding the concept of projection.¹² Contrary to their protests, Blacks tend to believe the labels and categorizations imposed by white "social scientists," and accept themselves as pathological.

The concept of racism as projection offers enlightenment and hope for Black graduate students. The realization that Blacks do not have to be what is assigned them by whites, but can have a major role in defining themselves in spite of institutional oppression, has far-reaching implications for professional use, as evidenced by this student's response:

The classes where projection has been the topic for discussion have been of tremendous help to me both in how I relate to racism and how it affects my current practice. I gradually became aware of the times this concept has been operating within my agency as well as with some of the members and myself.... My initial meeting with what was to be my field placement agency, constituted my interview for the job.... The chairman who is white asked me how I felt working with an integrated group headed by a white chairman. ... I answered her that my idea of functioning as a part of this organization was not related to race but to who could get the necessary work done to

make their objectives a reality.... At the time this occurred I felt inadequate to deal with the question and was dissatisfied with my response. Three months later I realized why I was feeling that discomfort. In truth the chairman was saying, "how am I as a white person going to relate and work with a Black Organizer?" With this awareness, I am better able to work with the group and deal objectively with their racist attitudes, without the focus remaining on me.

Another Black graduate student's perception of racism as a projection embedded in service is reflected in the following excerpt:

In my practice experience at my agency, I have seen the racist use of projection as a way of denying his own racist practice of being indifferent or apathetic toward his racial counterpart. Consequently, when the racist is confronted with a racial problem his indifference created, he finds himself ineffective and lacking knowledge as to how to resolve the problem.... An example of this is the Black patient who is committed to the mental institution for showing signs of emotional drain or despair. When the Black patient is seen by the white clinician, the Black patient is quickly diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic. In *Black Rage*, the co-authors, Grier and Cobbs speak of this problem: "In sum, let us enter a plea for clinical clinicians who can distinguish unconscious depression from despair, paranoia from adaptive wariness, and who can tell the difference between a sick man and a sick nation."

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The course objectives at the School of Social Work state in part: "We proceed on the assumption that all social institutions in American society, including social welfare systems, are to a greater or lesser extent in their structure, function and practices infused with racism and implicated in its perpetuation. We further assume that social welfare agencies and institutions have a primary obligation to take active responsibility to help overcome institutional racism within their own social agencies and in the broader community."¹³

Important to the realization of the above objectives is the nature of assignments that focus on strategies for change. Black students are expected to integrate in field practice the content of the course. An assignment to achieve that end ultimately

expects the students to arrive at a behavioral definition of institutional racism. Students are asked to identify two critical examples or incidents that were encountered in the course of one week of systematic attention to the customary practices and procedures of their field agency. One Black student's response gives some indication of the effectiveness of this assignment:

As the result of questioning my supervisor as to the hospital's use of "C," (colored) to classify Black patient admissions, a change may already be occurring. She recently followed up my concern by saying she is working on removing the "C" and that it would be a long process, including board and administrative approval. (The implications of "colored" being an attempt to keep Blacks preoccupied with a past.)

Another student identified academic racism in testing materials in a public school setting:

A white school administrator discussed with me the I.Q. score of a Black seventh grader. The student scored in the lowest percentile, based on a nationwide percentile score. The administrator was quick to judge the student as an "under-achiever." Our discussion of the testing instrument revealed that cultural differences, the Black experience, was not a variable, making the test biased and racist.

Every Black person is capable of identifying attitudinal racism because of direct experience with it. However, institutional racism embedded in service is not readily identifiable. Assignments exposing Black students to institutional forms of racism manifested in policy enable them to develop insights for social change strategies—insights that are crucial to sustaining Black clients caught up in the welfare system, who are the ones absorbing the brunt of institutional racism. An excerpt from one Black student's research supports this tenet:

in short, _____ program is a microcosm of society, although its goals and functions are noble. In researching the existence of institutional racism in the agency, I found an overabundance of questionable policy and practices. In the seven years of the clinic's existence, there have been eleven regis-

tered nurses and five nurses' assistants, but of the eleven registered nurses, only two have been Black. The neighborhood in which the clinic is located is predominately Black.... An interview with the Chief Nurse responsible for the recruitment of the nursing staff proved to be revealing. There was no job description of staff nurse positions or nurses' assistant, but the salary difference was \$5,000. An interview with the Nursing Recruiter revealed no special effort to recruit Blacks. She was operating from not too current statistics that Black nurses are not available.... The need for affirmative action was pointed up as vital to the program.

PROFESSIONAL GAINS FROM THE COURSE

Though Black students learn to value their own experiences as a source of knowledge to be conceptualized for the use of another, this awareness is hindered by a distrust toward the intent of white institutions. Consequently, the "green-light" for self-affirmation in a graduate school of social work is met with suspicion. The course is one place where Black graduate students' concerns and mistrust can be addressed. The emotional and intellectual climate conducive to the conceptualization of the Black experience within a frame of reference common to all and unique to some, seeks to help the Black student claim a heritage and define his or her own frame of reference.

The black scholar must develop new and appropriate norms and values, new institutional structures, and in order to be effective in this regard, he must also develop and be guided by a new ideology. Out of this new ideology will evolve new methodology, though in some regards it will subsume and overlap existing norms of scholarly endeavor. He must understand the social function of knowledge in general; he must reassess the traditions, values and mores of Western European scholarship; and finally he must achieve a Black perspective of all his training and experience, so that his scholarly tools can become effective instruments for Black liberation.¹⁴

Black students develop an understanding of white racism as a white problem, and accordingly come to feel less the object of the pathology of white theoretical formulations. The educational experience of some Black graduate students is devoid of a Black

instructor, which contributes to their professional identity crisis. The Black instructor dispels the oppressive myth that disseminating knowledge is exclusively a white privilege, and offers new hope for the Black scholar.

Overcoming oppressive categorizations imposed by whites is a priority for Black students in the development of a professional identity. An important step in this direction is the acknowledgement and understanding of the negative in relation to categorizations. This understanding is a central benefit of the course to Blacks, as shown in a Black student's response:

being Black, I have experienced the classical characteristics; I thought white people were superior. I harbored a low opinion of my abilities and shamefully did and said things that clearly indicated I was denying my Blackness. I understand the reason for my thoughts and behavior, and with the surge of proud racial identity of Black people, I am adjusting to being called Black, referring to myself as Black, and becoming proud of my heritage.

Black students learn to reject adjustment as a passive concept. Instead, integration provides an experience with the assertiveness necessary to withstand institutional white racism and to press for social change. The nature of the course demands assertiveness from Black students through a reassessment of their assimilated white values.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A basic philosophic stance of the course in American Racism at the School of Social Work is that problems experienced by the oppressed are directly related to the social inequities created by institutional racism.¹⁵

White racism is based on white values and customs and is therefore a white problem. Blacks cannot be expected to assume a major responsibility for changing white institutions. The role of the Black is clearly defined as that of a "professional advocate" who will identify the systematic exclusion and inequities of white institutions. This important role demands a positive sense of self.

The course enables Black graduate students to acquire a new sense of assertiveness—expectation of self and of others. Participation in white institutions must be viewed as a human right rather than a privilege to be earned by compromise.

Assignments as a vehicle for Black students to address racism effectively need to be sensitive to the reality that identifying and eliminating racism is not the priority of many social agencies. Black graduate students are essentially uninvited guests in many social agencies and are easily overwhelmed and immobilized by resistance from white institutions in any effort to identify white racism as a value imposition.

Some Blacks who occupy positions of influence in white social agencies and have carved out comfortable roles for themselves are as intimidated as whites when asked to confront racism. Denial of racism by Blacks contributes to its perpetuation.

An appropriate assignment for Black students to facilitate the development of strategies for social change would be to observe Blacks in positions of influence, in order to identify ways in which they might perpetuate or help overcome racist ideology and oppression.

Awareness that hopefully leads to unified action of Blacks on all professional levels is crucial in counteracting institutional racism.

NOTES

1. Howard D. Arnold, "American Racism: Implications for Social Work," *Journal of Education for Social Work*, Vol. 6 (Fall 1970), p. 8.

2. Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), p. 155.

3. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1963), pp.

241-43.

4. Abraham H. Maslow, *Towards a Psychology of Being* (Princeton, N.J.: D. Van Nostrand, 1962), p. 9.

5. Douglas Davidson, "The Furious Passage of the Black Graduate Student," in *The Death of White Sociology*, ed. Joyce A. Ladner (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 42.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

7. The "immediate present," a theoretical formulation by Jessie Taft states: "the passing present of relationship, on which every helping process depends is a present of immediate, living experience, which both helper and helped would fain remove a little into the safer past, the remote future, or the objectivity of intellectualization, in fact, there must be some kind of content whatever the source, to carry the present meaning." Jessie Taft, "Time as the Medium of the Helping Process" (Paper delivered at the National Conference of Jewish School Welfare, Cleveland, June 1949).

8. William Glasser, *Reality Therapy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 131.

9. Nathan Hare, "The Challenge of a Black Scholar," in Ladner, *op. cit.*

10. "A conception of manhood so central to the politics and personality of America that it institutionalizes violence and male supremacy as a measure of national pride." Lucy Komisar, "Violence and the Masculine Mystique," in *Psychosources*, ed. Evelyn Shapiro (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

11. Gail Stokes, "Black Man, My Man Listen," in *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: New American Library, 1974), p. 111.

12. "To live we must put ourselves out into and upon our surroundings... Science, even psychological science is primarily based on projection, a learning to understand and to control as far as possible the outside forces including social forces." Taft, *op. cit.*

13. "A Statement of Objectives, American Racism: Knowledge and Analysis for Social Work Practice—Role of the Field Instructor," mimeographed (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work, 1974).

14. Hare, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

15. Defined as the systematic exclusion of Blacks from equal access to social institutions. See Louis L. Knowles and Kenneth Prewett, *Institutional Racism in America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 1 & 7.