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The Black Instructor: An Essential Dimension to the Content And Structure of the Social Work Curriculum

by LOUIS H. CARTER

How can the use of minority faculty be more than visual tokenism for both minority and nonminority students? Is there a role for minority faculty in developing curriculum and in faculty development? In answer to these questions, this paper describes the use one faculty member has made of his Blackness as an essential dimension to the content and structure of the social work curriculum, and its impact on students' professional development. The attitudinal aspects of racism are explored in the context of the relationship of students and the Black instructor, resulting in the conceptualization of racism as a practice issue.

As educational institutions search for meaningful ways to introduce racial content into the curriculum at all levels, social work educators must assume responsibility for content that will speak to a multiracial class of students. Perhaps one of the most significant influences today on the social work curriculum is the Black educator who provides a perspective that recognizes institutional racism as a major contributor to social problems.[1]

DEVELOPMENT OF COURSE ON INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Eight years ago I accepted an invitation to teach a newly instituted course, Racism: Implications for Social Work, at the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. The course was an outgrowth of the Black movement and student activism in the late sixties. 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. Black students rejected traditional theoretical formulations as irrelevant to the Black experience. Both were valuable inputs that received faculty endorsement and support. The course began as an option in 1969 and was made a requirement in 1970. In the present curriculum design it is a core course.

The course developed around three conceptual levels: context of racism, consciousness of racism, and implications and strategies for change. The course objectives were "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 in a professional role."[2] There were three major characteristics of the course: an extensive bibliography, co-teaching arrangement of Black and white instructors, with the Black instructor having the lead role, and the white instructor's responsibility for an examination of white racism.

THE SPECIAL DIMENSION OF THE BLACK INSTRUCTOR

A dilemma for Blacks in becoming absorbed in white institutions is to overcome their suspicion of the delegation of power by whites.[3] Initially, the lead teacher role made me feel that I was having my "place" assigned, when in fact it was a relinquishing of power by the white power structure. "Black power" in the classroom stimulates creative tension, enabling students to derive maximum benefit from this course. One student amplified this point:

> I saw the black professor as someone who was there to manipulate me into submission for my whiteness. I didn't see him as a person, a black person whose experience I could not know. I saw him only in terms of what he would do to me. As a person he did not exist. I saw the white woman who was coteaching the course in the role of policewoman. She was there to keep this black man's anger from being too destructive, since he couldn't be trusted to be responsible.

What is the nature of the power that the student perceives and seeks or sometimes fears in a teacher? The power that is feared is easy to identify; it stems from the teacher's right and responsibility to assess the student as learner. This has heightened meaning in a professional school because such assessment may shape the career goals of students and affect their future.[4] The added dimension for the white student is that a Black instructor is assessing the student's capacity to participate in a white institution, and this is truly relinquishing power, especially for students who have not experienced being taught by a Black instructor.

The problem with relinquishing power to a Black instructor was highlighted for me in an early session, and affirmed the concept of the Black instructor as "course content." It was necessary to remind the class of their commitment to time as well as to the purpose of the class, which did not include brunch. An irate white student responded that I did not mind the lateness or coffee, but that I was angry for what the white man had done to me for over 300 years. I acknowledged having lived 42 of those 300 years, but since I had not experienced the other 258, his assumption was grossly inaccurate; his attempt to maintain control and power by keeping me preoccupied with a past that could not change had faltered. It became more than the difference of teacher-student; my Blackness and the students' struggle with their whiteness in relation to it, was clearly the core of contention. It was difficult for students to acknowledge that they could learn from me, or that I had indeed set the tone for self-exploration. "In a society where Black is perceived as submission, Black initiative radiates psychological and intellectual arrogance, for it dares to act without permission or sanction of the white majority."[5]

Equally important is the awareness that Blacks cannot deal with 300 years of oppression except to believe that change is possible in the here and now. This concept embraces a school of thought with tremendous promise for the liberation of oppressed peoples.[6] Recognition that it is difficult to accept that Blacks *do* expect of whites was also helpful to the class awareness of attitudinal and behavioral patterns reflecting racist overtones. The added dimension for the Black instructor is the responsibility to deal simultaneously with the content, the meaning for the individual, and the class response, since each impacts upon the student's learning.

The projection or displacement about Black anger and the attempt of students to exploit it perpetuates racist ideology. I discovered that the degree to which white students had not found a creative use for their guilt, they projected or displaced about my anger. Through such encounters, the concept of projection and displacement[7] came alive for many students in relation to racism and its implications for practice.

Racist attitudes among social work students are deep-rooted, and have become an integral part of their value system. This is in direct conflict with social work values, and hence the struggle to come to terms with these feelings. One student's initial response to the course with great intellectual integrity bore witness to this dilemma:

> The director of the department is black as well as my supervisor. This was the first time I had ever worked and had been *directly dependent upon a black* person. . . . I am a student learning the profession of social work; I am also a human being who has been taught by my family, neighbors, schools, and society to discriminate. Having reconciled this conflict of feeling and claimed what is mine, I am now ready to entertain ways of helping people and institutions to change their racist behavior.

I accepted this student's aspiration with compassion and with an awareness that the gap between the mind and the heart is often wide, which was evidenced by the fact that she did not identify me as the course instructor on her paper, but rather listed the white coinstructor.

The discovery of "white liberalism" as a racist institution by the students was important and furthered the attainment of course goals. The students saw liberalism as an apology for their whiteness, which contributed to their inaction. With this new awareness, they began to see their role as going beyond defending the Blacks' right to be angry, and to become involved in institutional change. One student captured this:

> Stereotypes are something I was raised with and they're most difficult to combat. I have found that I devote so much attention and energy to myself and my prejudices that I miss seeing things that occur right in front of me that I am supposed to have seen. I think this is true of the feelings most white liberals have to the extent that it is an institution itself.

On another level I saw students discover significant attitudes and stereotypes contributing to racist attitudes. Our relationship made possible this quality of exploration and projection:

> I realized that I had internalized the myth which says that all Negro men have great sexual prowess; that they are powerful, uninhibited lovers and that their secret wish is to have all the white girls they can. Black men were sexual beings first, human beings second. To say I picked up this idea and held fast to it because it was one of the many racist notions which my society floated around, would be only half of the truth. I knew intellectually it was a lie—emotionally, however, it stuck tight because it served to fulfill my own neurotic needs and feelings of inadequacy as a woman.

The two preceding quotations are potential pitfalls for the Black instructor, who must accept these responses in the context in which they are given. Maintaining sufficient distance from the explosiveness implicit in them in order to be helpful to the student and the class requires sensitivity and a high level of integration. Only then can the Black instructor respond to the student's need for objective clarification of their attitudinal discoveries.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

In addition to the racism course, I was assigned to teach a social work practice course. A student from the racism course told me of his initial reaction when he learned that I would be his second-year practice teacher and adviser. He had to revisit his racist attitudes, and projected that the school wanted to eliminate him by assigning him to my class. Our subsequent discussions revealed that he really felt the added dimension of my power as a screening agent for the profession. The student knew he had intellectualized his use of the racism course and was left with much anxiety from his unresolved racist attitudes, which were threatening now to his survival as a student. He understood that my purpose was not to take responsibility for his racist attitudes by demanding that he change, but that I would make him aware of and support that which was compatible with the expectations of the profession. He was left to choose his own course of action. A major assignment later in the term asked the students to write about some aspect of practice that raised questions for them and to demonstrate their developing competence in handling it. This student's paper was entitled, "Men in a Woman's Profession." He used this assignment to project his feelings about being a male who was entering social work. Women had become a depository for his inadequate feelings in lieu of Blacks, as was the situation in the racism course:

> Social work is a profession of love and compassion, and it follows that these qualities are most inherent in the female, who is more sensitive and responsive. I am reminded of this when in my classes females carry the class. . . . for men, I think nothing is worse than to feel impotent at being felt or heard.

There was much to learn from this student about teaching the racism course and how to make the experience alive and sustaining. "How much of teaching ability is an art which cannot be 'learned,' and how much of the ability to teach is both teachable and learnable is a question which will not be settled through rhetoric. Clarity and conviction will emerge with the accumulation of understanding about the teacher-learner transaction."[8]

The student struggle to make the racism course more than an intellectual exercise was at times painful. A class of predominantly white women from time to time identified sexism as their priority in the early stages of the course, rather than confronting the issue of racism. In reality they were searching desperately for a personal frame of reference for change. The discovery that women and men, Black and white, who come to social work have in common the white, male power structure as an oppressor, went a long way toward the realization of the course goals.

Institutional oppression could be studied and strategies for change developed from several vantage points. To minimize sexism and the masculine mystique —"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"[9]—agencies, that for several years had resisted student intervention on the question of racism, yielded to looking at oppression in the form of sexism, only to discover racism as its companion. Moreover, a personal frame of reference proved to be the most effective means for dealing with white guilt, which often immobilized white students in their effort to effect change. Altruism gave way to self-interest in change, allowing for a highly creative and productive use of guilt. Power to influence one's own destiny is a strategy in itself.

For Black students, the Black instructor as course content provided a role model and stimulus for professional growth that came with self-affirmation. The discovery of their own perpetuation of racism because of their vulnerability by virtue of their Blackness and their defensiveness about it, was significant. A prerequisite to the acquisition of knowledge for use was a positive feeling about one's own Blackness:

> Being Black, I have experienced the classical characteristics; I thought white people were superior; I harbored a low opinion of my abilities and potential, and denied my blackness. I understand the reasons for my behavior and thoughts, 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.

With less preoccupation with himself and his past, this Black student conceptualized racism and implications for practice thus:

> The racist cannot deal with his own inadequate feelings in relation to his racial counterpart, consequently, he finds comfort in projecting that the hatred exists outside himself. In my field practice, I have experienced the racist use of projection. . . . When a Black patient is committed to the mental institution for showing signs of emotional drain or despair, the white clinician quickly diagnoses him as "paranoid schizophrenic."

Having developed a personal frame of reference for change, student responses to a central aspect of this course—strategies for change—were evidence of the value of this experience for professional use. Assignments were structured to involve field placement agencies in this process. Five years ago the course on racism was made a requirement for field instructors in order to provide them with a conceptual framework to support the practice for social change emphasis. Students were asked to identify written and unwritten practices and policies in the agency, including funding sources, board composition, staffing patterns, and service delivery patterns, that tended to exclude or in any form oppress Blacks and other minorities:

> When I first started my field placement at the state hospital, I didn't take notice of the fact that all of the patients in the program where I work are White. I have started to look around me with new awareness. The best jobs that Blacks have around the hospital are as nurses' aides, with the exception of a few Black nurses. Most of the menial jobs, in the kitchens, on the grounds, in the shops, are held by Blacks.

With this awareness, the student was able to engage the agency in an analysis of the situation and assist it in a process of change to remedy its perpetuation of institutional racism. This is no easy task for an agency, because in many situations it may encounter conflict with the community, boards, or funding sources.

Racism imbedded in service perhaps is the most difficult to identify and eradicate. On entering first-year field placement in a large community mental health center, one student experienced the invisibility of Blacks even in the formulation of the legislation that created the program for which it was designed:

> Implicit in the enabling legislation was the understanding that mental disability is inextricably bound up with physical, psychological, social, and economic factors which either cause, exacerbate, or result from mental problems. Since blacks have been excluded from the political process, the enabling legislation was formulated and implemented by White interests based on White values, and was not addressed to the racial situation.

This student's field placement concentrated on administration in the clinic, and provided an excellent opportunity to learn about the administrative process in relation to service delivery, practices, and policies, through initiating and sustaining the process of change.

The social distance created by racism and presented in the helping situation, if ignored, contributes to the institutional oppression of Blacks. White practitioners must see themselves as part of the Black client's problem, recognizing the demand it makes on the Black client to respond to an offer of help. A skillful application of theory reflecting sensitive analysis and knowledge of this form of institutional racism was demonstrated by one student:

> I find it hard to confront black clients with the functional limits of the agency, which is essentially a dehumanizing insult to their ability to grow within their relationship to the hospital. I think this relates to my fear of becoming involved with blacks. . . . Previous workers have described the mother of a recently admitted black boy as a borderline psychotic with little potential for change. I was willing to go along with this charade in the previous sessions, taking the excuse provided by the woman's rambling style of speech. . . . I told her I noticed that she seemed uncomfortable talking about her son, and acknowledged that it would be hard, but necessary. Whereas she had been laughing inappropriately, slurring her words, and looking around the room, she began to speak clearly and looked straight at me.

Social work theory historically does not include consideration of racism and other social pathologies as they have affected and influenced practice. Their formulations, although cornerstones of our theoretical beginnings, do not take into account the meaning to minority populations, and therefore, have not served the needs of inner-city consumers of service. In this context, another student questioned the theoretical formulation applied to Black clients in a psychiatric setting:

> Although somewhat aware of the unresponsive nature of the psychoanalytic theory to the understanding and diagnosis of the Black Experience, I did not realize my contribution to the perpetuation of this form of institutional racism until I became absorbed in an intake study of a black family. . . . As we proceeded with the interview. it became increasingly apparent that the established outline assumed that all people experience an adolescence of soul searching, have a courtship with the person they will eventually marry, then have a marital relationship before children are born. I altered the "script" a bit in order to describe her experience in a way that did not point to pathology.

CONCLUSION

Helping social work students develop a theoretical framework for practice that encompasses the social pathology of institutional racism requires the emotional climate generated by the Black instructor. Unlearning racist attitudes resulting from socialization in an oppressive, racist society calls upon the emotional as well as the intellectual resource of the student. "The component responses of learning include emotional feelings and thoughts as well as physiological and motor reactions. The first two categories are open to subjective observation, they are private events and as such constitute special problems in learning theory."[10]

For both the Black and white student, the process of unlearning requires giving up the security of what has been sustaining in human relationships. In this context, the Black instructor is an added dimension to the content and structure of the social work curriculum. A white student's response illustrated this point:

> I saw myself in a class led by a black instructor for the first time in my life. I realized that this situation had never been a part of my white educational experience. I could accept a white expert on racism, but why could I not accept the natural and right idea that a black man should teach whites about the Black Experience? I now realize that Blacks usually never come this far in the white man's educational system. In addition, I had never met a black man so intense in his convictions.

Has the emergence of the Black educator spanned the gap between ideal and action and achieved the integration espoused more than twenty years ago by Grace Coyle?[11]

If social work as a profession is to survive with credibility, it must address itself to distributive justice and make a firm commitment at all levels of its enterprise. Social work education has a major responsibility to provide relevant theoretical formulations to insure maximum impact from this profession to counteract oppressive institutions. This may require a revisit to its knowledge and value base!

NOTES

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

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

3. Power has been used in many contexts. A significant reference here would be Sterling Tucker, who stated that "White Power is not always as blatantly overtly discriminatory. Sometimes it operates quietly and quite respectably. . . . White Power is the system under which we live in America. Whites have pushed black men into leadership positions and have manipulated them ruthlessly over the years to accomplish their own ends." Sterling Tucker, *Black Reflections on White Power* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdamans Publishing, 1969), pp. 70–75.

4. Helen Harris Perlman, "And Gladly Teach," in *The Social Work Educator*, ed. Joseph Soffen (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1969), p. 113.

5. Willie V. Small, "A Black Practice in Foster Care Service" (Paper presented at the Fifth Annual Conference of the National Association of Black Social Workers, New York, 1973), p. 8.

6. The immediate present, a theoretical formulation by Jessie Taft, stated that "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), p. 6.

7. "To live we must put ourselves out into and upon our surroundings; we must if we are to survive find the answers to our needs, in parents, in friends, in being able to conquer the spacial world in which we are placed. 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." *Ibid.*, p. 3.

8. Perlman, *op, cit.*, p. 2.

9. Lucy Komisar, "Violence and the Masculine Mystique," in *Psychosources*, ed. Evelyn Shapiro (New York: Bantam Books, 1972).

10. Derek Jehu, *Learning Theory and Social Work* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 24.

11. "Some of us faculty members, as I observe us, are in fact better at one or another of these phases of the profession. Some of us focus more naturally on 'must know,' i.e. on intellectual mastery; some on 'must do,' i.e. professional skills; some on 'must be' and 'must feel.' These differences I think are quite natural and inevitable and in fact represent that variety of emphasis and temperament necessary within any faculty to get the blend and balance for the whole." Grace Coyle, "The Role of the Teacher in the Creation of an Integrated Curriculum," in *A Source Book of Readings on Teaching in Social* Work (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1965), p. 5.