

**ADDRESSING RACISM
AS A PSYCHO-SPIRITUAL DISORDER**

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Given the current statistics of racial hate crimes in the US, and the pervasive experiences of racism in the daily lives of minority groups in this country, as Clark et al point out in the October 1999 issue of *The American Psychologist*, it is a psychologically interesting question why the study of the phenomenon of racism does not hold a more central place in psychological research. Voices are even heard among humanistic psychologists, not to mention the rest of academe, that racism is no longer an issue since the 60s, and is simply being played by minority groups as a trump card. What accounts for this level of denial on a national scale, given the staggering statistics, and what is the role of humanistic psychology in understanding and responding to this phenomenon? This paper proposes that there is a need to take the psychological conversation on race beyond racial identity formation theory, and the discursive construction of racial boundaries; beyond the discussion of race as a critical risk factor in health demographics, or even as a social justice issue.

Racism is a disease of the soul. It is a pervasive individual and social psychological disorder which has not yet been identified as such in the literature on psychopathology, just as a few decades ago alcoholism was not recognized as a disorder. Yet it affects more people than our current understanding of it allows us to recognize; in fact, it is woven into the very fabric of this society, which makes it part of the air we breathe, and the culture into which we become socialized from childhood. That is why, much as institutional and public policy measures since the 1960s have begun to redress the social imbalance, they fall far short from being able to address the real issue. This paper adopts a radical approach to the understanding of racism (Rutstein, 1993, 1996, 1997), and describes a grassroots form of transformative humanistic practice, based on this approach, which has become known nationally and internationally as Institutes for the Healing of Racism. Since this grass-roots practice is still widely unknown in the psychological community, I propose that it deserves some serious consideration and further research, in order to assess its potential long-term effect on individual and community transformation.

Racism as a psycho-social phenomenon

In 1993, in a book named as outstanding book by Gustavus Myers Center for the Study of Human Rights in North America, Nathan Rutstein wrote:

Most white Americans equate racism with the activities of the Ku Klux Klan, the Skinheads or neo-Nazis who direct acts of violence at people of color. They don't realize that the disease manifests itself in more subtle ways... Racism is institutionalized racial prejudice... The United States of America was founded by men who believed that people of color were inherently inferior to whites. They created a collective consciousness, from which institutions were born, that

reflected their racial views: Schools, courts, legislative bodies, businesses, the arts and sports, and even churches were infected... Racism is a natural outgrowth of a multicultural society that's ignorant of the principle of the oneness of humankind. (P. 7, 35, 40)

Our collective consciousness is deeply ignorant of the principle of the oneness of humankind. Our whole social life is organized into opposite groups, and human alienation is pervasive. As Stan Charnovsky, president of the Association for Humanistic Psychology, wrote, "Segments of our grand, multivariate nation become marginalized by alienation. The extremes lead to violence..." (p. 20). But it is not only the minorities, those who are on the outside, that are hopeless and powerless. Those who are on the inside, the so-called dominant groups, are just as hopeless; only they often do not realize why they are so driven and hungry. Charnovsky is profoundly right when he says that "our world is out of sorts"; and so is our psychological culture, which reflects the larger reality.

Where collective consciousness does not operate out of an understanding of the oneness of humankind, the soil is fertile for fears, and all kinds of -isms develop. So, to insist today that racism is a thing of the past, as Rutstein (1993) points out, is "like proclaiming an end to cancer without providing a cure" (p. 29). And to simply study it objectively, in terms of group statistics, is an expression of the same psycho-spiritual disease - a fundamental breakdown in human relatedness. In that sense, a psychology that approaches racism in this soulless manner is guilty of dehumanization.

Rutstein shows compellingly how this collective consciousness, which is still embedded in the structure of our society, becomes internalized in subconscious ways by the individual, and manifests itself differently in different social groups. In even the most well-intended whites, it is present as a subtle superiority complex, which is easily detected by people from minority groups. On the other hand, members of the minority groups suffer from internalized racism, which expresses itself in a deep distrust for people from the dominant group, chronic self-doubts, and a tendency toward self-protective isolation. Each group manifests its own defenses, and each group is largely in denial of the fundamental dis-ease in its behavior. In our efforts to establish an Institute for the Healing of Racism on the campus of State University of West Georgia, we encountered both forms of expression of racism. Yet, many white middle-class faculty reacted with "Healing what? There has to be something to heal?", while black professionals objected to the suggestion that they, too, carry internalized racism. Most people on both sides insisted that they were just fine, thank you, and it is those others, the students, who needed help. The students were the only ones who openly recognized their racial segregation on campus, and the silence surrounding the whole issue in a still quite segregated Southern town. They responded warmly to our efforts, and could not understand why more faculty were not involved. In the meantime, faculty in the most related social disciplines watched from a distance, and questioned the professional qualifications and integrity of motives of the initiators. Some of these people are central figures in progressive professional associations, committed to social justice. This is just one small example, I believe, of the depth of our own alienation, and the psycho-spiritual dis-

ease that has become the norm.

In connection with this general defensiveness, Beverly Tatum, professor of Psychology and Education at Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, MA, (1999) writes:

For many educators, few words elicit a more visceral, defensive response than the accusation of racism... But the strained nature of U.S. race relations is such that whenever white educators are interacting with students of color and their parents, there is often the fear of the “r” word... Cultural racism-cultural images and messages affirming the assumed superiority of whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color-is like smog in the air-sometimes so thick it is visible, other times less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we breathe it in. None of us would introduce ourselves as smog-bearers..., but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air? ... When we claim to be free of prejudice, perhaps we are really saying we are not hate mongers. But none of us is completely free of prejudice, no matter how much we would like to be. Prejudice is an integral part of our socialization, part of the air we breathe, and it is not our fault... The first step is to acknowledge it is operating (pp. 29-32).

Psychiatrist John Woodall from Harvard Medical School offers an excellent analysis of the scientific grounds on which racism as an interpersonal, social, and institutional phenomenon needs to be seen as a collective disease. He points out that certain principles are always present in healthy living systems, whether on the level of nature, the human body, or society; and that in terms of these principles, racism represents the archetype of social disease.

[H]ealth represents a reciprocal interplay between parts of a system and the whole... [T]his harmony of function does not describe the relations between races and peoples in the world, let alone America’s ethnic subgroups. Not only is there no harmony among the component parts of our body politic, there is barely a concept of a body politic (Woodall, 1996, p. 5).

Further, Woodall explains that in living systems, this harmony of function is expressed in the principle of **unity in diversity**, which is different than uniformity, because it presupposes a dynamic interaction between different elements. In contrast, in racist societies like the US, uniformity prevails, as a result of stilted racial identity notions which betray no real understanding of diversity. For example, the prevailing principle of racial categorization is whether or not one has any other ancestry, regardless of how minimal, than Caucasian. So if your mother, or even grandmother, is Latin-American, and your father is Caucasian, and you were born in the US, you would still have to identify yourself as Latina. Then, we also use such categories as ‘people of color’, as if there exists such a thing as a human being of no color.

Why these stilted categories in the face of the fact that just about every person, if they were to study their family tree, and if they went back far enough, would discover that they are a mix of

different ethnic groups? What is the deeper dynamic of this psychosocial construction that makes it persist in the face of the scientific conclusion of world experts that

all contemporary population genetics and molecular biology underscores that the nineteenth century notion of races as discreet and different entities is false. There is only gradual genetic diversity between group. We all merge smoothly into each other. Nearly all the physically observable differences reflect very limited local adaptations to climate and other specific environmental conditions (Tiger, qtd. in Rutstein, 1997, p. 34)?

And why is this knowledge not part of our general education? Why is not the spreading of this understanding a central task of our most progressive professional associations?

In summary, while racist attitudes on both biological and psychosocial grounds have been consistently publicly addressed for a few decades now, and have been shown to be scientifically, as well as socially untenable, the same collective consciousness persists. None of these intellectual arguments have been able to bring about a change of heart.

Psycho-spiritual dynamics of racism

At the heart of the difficulty in making substantial progress in dealing with racism, is the very level at which the conversation occurs. When people are seen as purely biological and psychosocial organisms, something important is missed from the picture. In the therapeutic profession, for example, it is becoming increasingly clear that a spiritual search for meaning is often both at the heart of psychological problems, and the key to successful healing. Hence, working with the soul has been increasingly proposed as an organizing construct in psychotherapy (Elkins, 1995). In the same way, recent advances in psychoneuroimmunology (PNI) have forced researchers to sheepishly admit the influence of mind on the body, and the possibility of the existence of such a thing as human spirit (Bryson, 1999). Recent research in pre-natal consciousness (Wade, 1996) has begun to make a serious dent in our idea that consciousness depends entirely on brain development.

Quantum physics itself is forcing us to transcend our narrowly materialistic view of life, and to move toward understanding material life as forms of expression of energy, much as ancient spiritual traditions claimed. We are beginning to realize that perhaps biology, as well as psychosocial behavior, are expressions of a deeper, energetic, spiritual reality, and that an approach that begins by working with that level brings about substantially different results on the manifest levels of biology, as well as psycho-social behavior. Even hard-core 'scientific' medicine is slowly but surely learning the painful lesson that no real healing can occur without drawing first and foremost on the mysterious resources of the spirit and the powers of the mind (Bryson, 1999; Leifer, 1996; Ross, 1996).

There are now more reasons than ever to reconsider the idea of the soul. As Deputy Director-General of the World Health Organization Adeoye Lambo (2000) points out, our collective life exhibits The Social Breakdown Syndrome, at the heart of which is a profound spiritual crisis of all three faculties (will, love, and understanding), which has resulted in an inner oppression in people.

Man, today, is a victim of his own political, cultural, social, economic, ideological, and psychosocial constraints and his extreme prejudice... (p. 114). The human race today, engaged in a mighty outward and inward struggle for a new and universally binding order of life, stands at a point where two worlds meet, amid an almost inconceivable devastation of traditional values (p. 122).

This inner oppression is the source of racism, as well as of many other forms of social injustice, and expressions of collective despair. So the only way to really address racism is to approach it at this deep level of internal oppression.

What does it mean to address racism at a soul level. Based on extensive clinical experience as a psychiatrist, Danesh (1994), who is currently Rector of Landegg Academy in Switzerland, which offers MA programs in Spiritual Psychology, Moral Education, Peace Studies, etc., developed a model of human psycho-spiritual development that I find particularly helpful in addressing racism on a deeper level. Although widely unknown, this model offers a broader psycho-spiritual paradigm which includes, and is consistent with, current understanding in the field of psychology, while it also leaves room for work on a new level. Danesh sees the human psyche as having three spiritual properties: knowledge, love, and will. At the beginning of life, these properties are just potentialities which unfold through stages in the course of the interaction with all levels of environmental influences, which can foster or thwart, or significantly hinder the process of their unfoldment. In most of us, these three spiritual powers are developed in very different degrees, and are only quite partially integrated. Examples abound in our lives of the major discrepancies between what we believe we know, and what our hearts can actually respond to with love, not to mention what we can really stand behind. Some people seem to be led by their intuitive, direct capacity to love, while their understanding and self-understanding often lags far behind. Others, as a result of more education, have developed their knowing faculty, but their capacity to respond with love lags far behind. And many of us have problems bringing our will to bear on, and support in action, what we know and even what we love.

Hence, while we all exhibit some developmental disparity between our capacities to know, to love, and to exercise our will in making choices consistent with that, severe disparities signal a psycho-spiritual disease. Such is the case with racism. In socio-historical contexts which do not really recognize the spiritual nature of life, hence, the oneness and interdependence of the human family, people are socialized into a collective consciousness which thwarts their ability to fully develop their faculties to know, to love, and to exercise their will. As a result, the majority of people see themselves and others in terms of very limited and secondary realities, and do not really see and understand, love, appreciate, and support others across differences.

What is the nature of these pathological distortions in knowing and seeing, in the capacity to love, and in the exercise of will, that breed racism? Prevailing collective knowing shows a very limited understanding of the nature, organization, and meaning of life. In individual, as well as in collective development, much of what appears as rational thinking has been shown by brain research to be lower brain rationalizations bending the capacities of the cortex to more irrational emotional needs (Wade, 1996). Spiritual traditions have always pointed to the unreliability of ordinary human thinking, and the need to cultivate detachment and ego-transcendence through daily spiritual practices, in order to avoid the common tendency toward rationalizing, and be able to truly know. Modern science has taken detachment to mean emotional disengagement, rather than emptying from self as the primary source of cognitive distortions, and has developed a pseudo-objective positivistic approach to human phenomena, which creates the false impression of control, and thus feeds the ego further, rather than de-emphasizing it. So we have ended up believing only what we can prove, disregarding the fact that what we end up proving has much to do with what we set out to look for in the first place (Kuhn, 1970). The invention of the 'scientific' category of race in the 19th century is a prime example of such a paradigmatic process. Unable to see past appearances, scientists set out to collect detailed descriptions of the observed differences between different ethnic groups, disregarding major differences in historical and environmental conditions, and focusing only on the state of things in a particular moment in time. Once a taxonomy was developed, the conclusion was drawn that there are different races which differ substantially in their capacities. As a result of this circular thinking, race became a 'scientific' category, which then other scientists set out to prove genetically.

Why has the category of race continued to exist long after it has been shown to be scientifically inaccurate? For the same reasons for which it was created in the first place. People's understanding could hardly move beyond appearances of differences, and they sought to rationalize their fear of the unknown. Fear is a primitive conditioned emotional response to the unknown, which subsides to the extent to which the spiritual faculties to know and to love are developed. As extensive research in advanced development has shown (Miller & Cook-Greuter, 1994; Mustakova-Possardt, 1996; Wade, 1996), the more we develop our spiritual faculties, the less we are trapped in our biological drives and conditioned reactions, and the more we feel a sense of choice and power. But in order to develop these faculties, we need spiritual education and practice, which foster ego-transcendence and a deeper understanding of life.

Such education and practice are scarce in modern Western life, where tribalism (Daloz, Keen, & Parks, 1996) and religiosity compete with arrogant science, which claims to have the answers, substituting linear logic for the mysterious wisdom of life. In this lop-sided knowing, which has become the social norm, and is often fueled by the need for rationalizations, there is little place for the corrective of inner vision, which constitutes the other half of the human faculty of knowing. This direct way of knowing has the capacity to see and intuit the inner wholeness of life, and to discern those ways that contradict that wholeness; in optimal development, it serves as a counterbalance to the rational-analytical tendency to know things by breaking them down into elements. Direct knowing quickly recognizes the human spirit in every human being

regardless of race or other social identities, and utilizes logical reasoning in much different ways. For example, such knowing realizes that unity in diversity is a fundamental governing principle of life on every level, from the body to galaxies. In any system of life, the components differ in function, not in status, because each element is equally essential to the harmonious functioning of the whole, and none is complete by itself. The same is true about the human family, where each cultural, historical, and ethnic configuration has developed different strengths and a different perspective, as a result of its particular experience; and all different human configurations complement each other, and make up what we know as the wealth of the human world. For our world not to be impoverished and subjected to uniformity, the value of each member group has to be equally recognized and respected. However, this integrated, mature knowing requires contexts that fosters it.

Directly linked to our limited collective understanding of the nature, organization, and meaning of life, as a result of our insistence on the primacy of visible biological and psycho-social behavior at the expense of our ability to see the deeper energetic and spiritual essence of life, is the undeveloped state of our collective capacity to love. Our capacity to love generally falls far behind what we think we know. Academia is the perfect example of that: a lot of knowledgeable and well-meaning people, but a remarkable scarcity of love. How many of our colleagues do we genuinely feel love for? In our culture, this sounds like an absurd proposition. We do not have to love the people we work with; we just have to act nice. In fact, we do not have to love anybody. Our collective standard is very low in that regard, compared to our inner need and capacity. Since people have the inherent spiritual capacity to love fellow human beings, that capacity hungers to be actualized. When thwarted by such an unhealthy collective standard, it expresses itself in over-exaggerated preoccupation with self, thus reproducing and deepening the spiritual vacuum. As a result, we live trapped in our biological drives, and operate out of primitive territorial instinct, although packaged into sophisticated social ways, reserving our still rather underdeveloped and egocentric loving capacity for our immediate family and circle of significant others, where our own needs are being met. Since we do not understand our deeper potentialities, we do not cultivate our capacity for deeper and more all-embracing love, relying rather on fearful self-protective reactions from moment to moment, and an overall survival orientation to life. And since our capacity to exercise our will is directly linked to what we know and how we love, there is a well-documented paralysis of will to make any real changes.

In this general climate of alienation from ourselves and others, people develop narrowly defined identities as members of limited social groups. However, since social configurations are relatively unstable, such narrowly defined social identities have to be protected with vigor, and in opposition to other identities (Mustakova-Possardt, 1996). In times of clashes or uncertainty, identities defined in this way constrict even further. This phenomenon of narrow group identities reflects the lack of a larger context and unifying perspective, and results in an overemphasis on individual differences, and differences among social sub-groups, further Balkanization of identities, and progressive estrangement. As recent work has shown (Mustakova-Possardt, work in progress; Woodall, 1997), this collective environment tends to disable the natural cycle of personality development, and results in a range of pathological developments such as fear,

superiority, narcissism, denial, deep-seated suspicion, and inferiority, which reinforce each other. In the racial dialogue, that results in a “cancerous” (Woodall, 1996) tendency to exaggerate the needs of one group at the expense of another, and a predominant emphasis on legalistic and economic content.

The Institutes for the Healing of Racism (IHR)

The Institutes for the Healing of Racism were started about a decade ago in Western Massachusetts, by Rutstein’s vision for authentic change in race relations. Their effect was so powerful, that the work was taken up by many others, and spread quickly throughout the country. While the effects of the IHRs have not been formally researched yet, their impact has been widely recognized on campuses and in communities. In some cases, such as in Michigan, they have become the project of the whole town community, involving the police, the schools, and all services, and even spreading to corporations, and receiving funding from various foundations.

IHRs work from the premise that until the heart is touched, logic alone makes little difference. What distinguishes the work of the Institutes, is that they are **openly conceptualized as soul work**. They understand racism as a cognitive distortion, fueled by irrational fear, the result of undeveloped spiritual capacities to truly know, love, and will. They also recognize the psycho-spiritual disease of racism as integrated into the very fabric of human society, and therefore internalized by each of its members, regardless of their own ethnic background or the particular behavioral choices through which it gets expressed. IHRs approach racial healing from the point of view that the main reason why people are largely in denial of the extent of the problem is because they do not understand it as a common disease, and are afraid of being blamed. Therefore, the IHRs introduce the concept of racism as a collective psycho-social and spiritual disease, which has affected all of us. In this way, people move beyond blaming or feeling blamed, beyond debating, and a space is created where deeper understanding happens, and hearts are touched. In this way, the Institutes draw on people’s intellectual resources in order to help them see the reality of the disease; they educate, they challenge; but above all they allow souls to really awaken, and experience the joy of true encounter. People are touched and empowered, and they leave changed.

The guiding principle in the Institutes is the principle of the oneness of humankind, which is taught and explored on a range of levels, as an antidote to the pervasive disease of racism. As people work together for a sequence of 8-9 weeks, they begin to both comprehend, see, and experience this principle. One of the most empowering transformations occurs when people discover their internal oppression, and realize how it has been holding them back from fully exercising their spiritual capacities to know, to truly love other human beings, and to stand for what they know and love. Discovering the principle of the oneness of humankind provides the much needed larger context which draws out people’s creative powers, and, as Woodall (1996) explains, calls up and organizes the inborn strengths of the developing personality. In a context of building unity in diversity, there are opportunities for healthy and resilient personal, interpersonal, and social development.

In conclusion, the Institutes for the Healing of Racism represent a unique, and still academically unknown humanistic practice which addresses the intra-psychic and interpersonal roots of racism, and provides a healthier alternative to the current racial dialogue and its underlying psychosocial premises. Since it addresses primarily the human soul, it speaks to people from a variety of ethnic and socio-historical backgrounds, while at the same time it educates and broadens horizons. I believe this approach provides an opportunity to translate humanistic principles and commitments into a less intellectually and economically exclusive, and more globally-oriented practice. Therefore, it deserves further attention and study.

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