II.4
Race
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Never let the fox into the henhouse to feed the chickens.

(An African proverb)

UNESCO (1967), emphasizing the similarities between human groups, has declared: 'All men living today belong to the same species and descend from the same stock'. This renders the notion of 'Race', as applied to *homo sapiens*, baseless and meaningless. Notwithstanding, the belief that humanity comprises different racial groups continues to dominate the thinking and behaviour of reactionaries and liberals alike. Race has acquired a social reality (racism) manifest in the ways the presumed inherent worth of the 'races' is all too often used as a basis for formulating policies and differentially allocating power and resources. The stubborn belief in 'racial differences' shows that understanding the nature of race or racism requires a multi-level analysis, rather than a simple, reductionist approach. Racism must be studied as something more than a biological notion or a psychological phenomenon – racial antipathy. In short:

> *In order to undermine racism it is not sufficient that biologists should expose its fallacies. It is also necessary that psychologists and sociologists should demonstrate its causes. The social structure is always an important factor . . .*
>
> *(UNESCO, 1967, statement 10)*

The institution of social work is a microcosm of the social structure. Thus, understanding the influence of race on social work should aid understanding its dynamics in the wider society. Historically, social work has been influenced by race theories, beliefs and assumptions. These, in turn, have generally biased and distorted social workers' perceptions, assessments and treatment of black service users and their needs . This paper discusses some of the ways in which race continues to influence social work today. It uses social workers' preoccupation, in recent years, with black children's self-concept, their putative 'negative self-identity', as an illustration of their insensitivity to the adverse structural (socio-politico-economic) circumstances facing black service users; they tend to use race in various ways as the ultimate explanation for black people's problems and needs (Owusu-Bempah, 1994).

Professional interest in the self-concept arises from the belief that self-knowledge permits the comprehension of one's future and place in the world. It is believed that individuals' conceptions of themselves influence their aspirations and behaviour. Amongst social workers the interactionist views of Cooley (1902) and Mead (1934) about the self-concept provide the major rationale for this belief. These theorists' ideas have spawned literature suggesting that they are pertinent to the study and understanding of the nature of black people's self-concept and psychological functioning. Cooley's idea of 'the social looking-glass self' which presents the social environment as analogous to an undistorted mirror through which we receive feedback about ourselves, is

claimed to be especially applicable. Clark and Clark's (1939, 1947) misidentification studies and subsequent studies based upon them have reinforced this view. Consequently, social work continues to be influenced by the myths and assumptions about black people's self-concept (Owusu-Bempah, 1994).

In social work, nowhere is the notion of race more perceptible than in the child care system. The literature in this area is replete with claims that black children (over-represented in the system) have more psycho-social developmental problems than other children. These problems are commonly attributed to 'self-hatred' which, in turn, is explained in terms of racism and the children's lack of awareness of the 'black culture'(e.g., ABSWAP, 1983; Small, 1991). For obvious reasons, the latter explanation is particularly favoured by the Children Act 1989. Although it is yet unknown what the best explanation of the problems is, the accepted solution is to 'work on' the children's self-identity. Writers and practitioners still insist on the 'need' to improve the self-identity of black children (e.g., Maxime, 1993a), losing sight of the inherent racism of such practice. Ironically, some advocate it as a necessary anti-racist strategy for social work even with black adults (e.g., Thompson, 1993). According to Coleman (1994), some SSDs have taken these suggestions seriously and have established special clinics to 'repair the damaged self-identity' of black children in their care.

Unsurprisingly, programmes used to achieve this are also race-based. They include providing the children with information about their 'black' cultural background, including information about black historical figures and/or counselling them to identify with 'the black community' and to take pride in their 'blackness' (e.g., Maxime, 1991a, 1993b; Banks, 1993; Coleman, 1994). It is claimed that this will neutralize the damaging effects of the racist feedback they receive from the white community about themselves, their 'racial group' and 'culture'. This claim is unwarranted. If the white community is the pathologizing agent, then it is this agent, those whose nocuous attitudes and behaviour they are victims of, which must be neutralized. Providing therapy to these children is sheer victim-blaming. Historically, biological or genetic factors have been evoked to justify the plight of black people. Today psychological (e.g., self-identity) or cultural factors provide the excuse. These children cannot be expected to find comfort in whatever explanation is offered for their difficulties, if it remains at the level of the individual (the child or the family) and fails to undertake to tackle the racism in the larger society, if it leaves the culprit free to carry on victimizing them; and it matters not a hoot the skin colour of its proponents.

The programmes assume that the children experience 'identity crises' because they have favourable attitudes to white people and the white community. For example, Maxime (1991b) described a ten-year-old black girl as psychologically disturbed, simply because she preferred

Five Key Points

1. To understand the notion of 'race' and its influence on social work, we need to start with an examination of the social structure.
2. Race continues to dominate social work theory and practice.
3. Social work training and practice with black service users must be grounded in tested theories about race, and not in racial myths, assumptions and stereotypes or folklore.
4. Black social work service users suffer discrimination on the grounds of 'race'.
5. Racism damages the life chances of black people more than it does their self-esteem.

'a white family placement as black ones were all too poor' (p. 103). Describing this girl's choice as astute, based upon reality, would be more helpful. Likewise a black child who keeps white company is often seen as having an identity crisis. A satisfactory explanation for why the efforts of black children, living in a predominantly white community, to broaden their social milieu should be regarded as symptomatic of psychological disturbance (Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994) is yet awaited.

The programmes also equate 'non-affiliation' with one's 'racial group' with psychological damage. It may be rather helpful to regard such behaviour as an example of what Erikson (1968) termed: 'negative identification'. According to Erikson, developing a coherent identity requires repudiation as well as identification. That is, he regarded negative identification (or shifting identities) as a normal and important factor in personality development, and so must not be interfered with unnecessarily. Thomas's (1995) notion of 'identity by proxy' supports this view. This notion proposes that pretending to be white ('identity by proxy') is a psychological manoeuvre which some black children engage in to preserve their *real self*, to protect their psychological integrity against racism. This implies that 'misidentification' or group rejection is not a sign of psychological disturbance; rather it appears to be a source of strength. Furthermore, it suggests that the identity crises which black children are often reported to experience may be caused by adults' (notably social workers' and therapists') reactions (or actions) to these types of tricks which the children employ in order to mitigate the general racial antipathy they encounter daily. That is, describing these children as having identity problems and 'treating' them potentially robs them of their protective shield against racism.

Because race is endemic in these programmes they confuse self-identity with 'racial identity'. Self-identity refers to an individual's sense of uniqueness – what sets a person apart from everyone else; 'racial identity' relates to group identity, a racial reference group. They also equate one's personal identity with one's culture (e.g., Coleman, 1994). A stark distinction between the two is that the latter is shared with other members of one's culture; the former, simply, is a unique personal property. Perhaps due to this confusion, black people are also presented as a culturally homogenous group, as belonging to a single, monolithic culture shared by all black people, regardless of their national or ethnic origins. It is hard to imagine where such a culture might exist. This illusory posture regarding the homogeneity of black people is likely to diminish the efficacy of these programmes (or any practice) in meeting clients' individual needs.

Children of 'mixed-race' parentage receive particular attention from social workers. It has become almost axiomatic amongst social workers (and therapists) that they can develop a healthy personality only by identifying with 'the black community' – any sign of identification with their white side is automatically seen as symptomatic of dire psychological disturbance. Programmes to deal with this putative disturbance involve, explicitly or implicitly, denying their white side, a process which many of the children find psychologically painful, damaging and undesirable (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993). This assumption is also puzzling. If it is acceptable for these children to identify with their black side, what is problematic about their identification with, or attachment to, their white side? Who should decide which aspects of themselves should be significant to them, the children or those who want them to see themselves as black? Which 'racial' side of their inheritance they feel comfortable with is largely determined by their own experiences and their subjective meanings to them. Briefly, denial of the 'black' label, or group rejection, is not necessarily symptomatic of a personality disturbance. There exists no evidence to suggest a relationship between black children's attitudes to their race and their self-esteem. On the contrary, research shows that black children learn to compartmentalize their racial attitudes and prevent them from influencing self-evaluation (Rosenberg, 1979, 1989; Thomas, 1995) – neither racial preference nor racial attitude seems to be a predictor of a person's self-esteem. It is undeniable that racism is hurtful to black children (and adults). However, it is not their self-worth, but rather their life chances which are damaged by it. Of course, this in turn is likely to affect their psychological functioning, depending upon the person's comparison-group or aspirations. Nevertheless, our efforts should be directed towards improving the children's life chances rather than their self-concept.

There is evidence to support the above view. For example, Wilson (1987) and Tizard and Phoenix (1993) have reported that African-Caribbean children and those of 'mixed-race' parentage living with their families do not have the identity problems commonly associated with their counterparts in care. They suggest also that children of 'mixed-race' parentage living with their families are as psychologically stable as their counterparts, black and white. Such evidence suggests also that the self-identity of black children in care is no more damaged than that of other children in care, a fact acknowledged by therapists working with these children (e.g., Coleman, 1994). Yet, others have reported 'very high rates of psychological disturbance and feelings of rejection amongst both black and white children in care' (Tizard and Phoenix, 1993, p. 33). We may wonder, then, why the issue of identity problems does not arise for white children (Owusu-Bempah, 1994). A simple explanation for this is that race theories hold that white people (including children), by virtue of being white, are superior in all aspects of humanity. It would, therefore, be schismatic to attribute any form of weakness to them, *vis-à-vis* black people.

Why does race continue to be so significant in social worker–black service user relationships, to the virtual exclusion of structural factors? One possible explanation is that the mythologies concerning race are deeply rooted in (pseudo) science such that they are embraced by social institutions, including social work. Another explanation relates to subjugation and control. In psychology, Bhavnani (1994) has described IQ (historically inextricably linked with race) as a mode of domination, an apparatus for attaching various labels to people for the purpose of control. In social work, as in other social institutions, race has historically served this purpose, and continues to do so (Chase, 1980; Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989; Owusu-Bempah, 1990). It is now 'politically incorrect' to espouse overt racist theories to explain why black service users deserve second-class services, or should be controlled. Invoking 'black inferiority' under the

Three Questions

1 What is the 'black culture', and how significant do you consider it to be to black service users?
2 Consider some of the covert ways in which 'race' is used in social work to disadvantage black service users.
3 Ashley Montagu (1974) has described Race as 'man's (sic) most dangerous myth'. To what extent does this myth endanger social work in a multi-ethnic society?

guise of such an abstract, virtually meaningless psychological concept as (negative) self-identity serves this purpose safely. It does so even more safely and effectively because, as the literature reveals, it has the sanction and active support and co-operation of black social workers and therapists. A third explanation is that the traditional social work model was designed to equip practitioners with tools for detecting pathology, weaknesses and deficiency in clients. Hence, social work training, today, is designed to restrict practitioners' vision and perspective by narrowing interests to 'what is wrong with black service users' rather than 'what is wrong with the system, and how has it contributed to the creation and maintenance of their problems?' Added to the fact that the 'black race' has, for centuries, been synonymous with mental, cultural and moral degeneracy, it is not surprising that social work continues to problematize black service users.

What kind of framework is needed for social work, at least, to minimize the invidious and insidious impact of race upon it? What social work model is needed to provide appropriate services in a multi-ethnic society in the approaching century? Such a framework requires a multi-level – educational, institutional, professional and personal – approach to race (i.e., racism). Regarding education and training, MacDonald (1990) has charged social work training with being 'all too often cluttered by unsubstantiated ideas of dubious utility' (p. 539). We need to acknowledge that race exemplifies such unfounded ideas, whose utility is to limit understanding of the structural causes of black service users' problems and needs and how best to address them. That is, social work educators and writers must cease to provide students and practitioners with groundless ideas about race. Instead, they must ensure that their curricula and writings contain tested theories or views about race, and that invidious distinctions about peoples are not propagated in texts or classrooms under any pretext. Likewise, training programmes 'de-skill' and 'disempower' practitioners wishing to work effectively with black service users through their over-emphasis on race (as distinct from racism) and 'black cultural awareness'. This must cease.

Institutionally, the focus of social services departments has been on describing and explaining 'what is (congenitally) wrong with black service users'. Pollard (1989) provides an alternative approach. Pollard distinguishes between 'alterable' and 'static' variables. 'Alterable variables' relate to factors in a person or the environment which can be somehow manipulated to enhance their functioning. These are contrasted with 'static variables' which represent factors that are not easily changed and which only classify or label people. This would be a more productive approach to understanding and helping black service users generally than the current fad which concentrates on static variables within the individual, such as 'race', to the virtual exclusion of external or environmental factors (alterable variables). In the case of children in care, for example, the 'alterable variables' approach would: (a) identify those children who seem to be thriving in the system and determine what factors are associated with their general well-being; (b) seek to identify those factors within the system which deleteriously affect, as well as those which enhance, their functioning. Alterable factors within the system include institutional policy and practices, as well as the attitudes and behaviour of professionals and carers.

Recently, white social workers have been over concerned with understanding the 'black culture'. However, understanding a culture is not the same as respecting it. Instead, social workers should begin to examine and understand

their own feelings about black service users' *cultures*. They also need to extend their knowledge of the structural causes of black service users' problems and the part they, as beneficiaries, play in those problems in order to counterbalance the barriers to providing them with appropriate services. They need to examine their own cache of cultural, professional, class and gender, etc., baggage which often interferes with their perceptions, assessment and treatment of black clients. This applies to black social workers as much as it does to white social workers.

Many claim that within the context of professional or helping relationships, black clients are best served by black professionals. Others, however, dispute this claim (e.g., Owusu-Bempah, 1989, 1990; Fernando, 1988). In therapy, for example, it has been noted that being black does not automatically ensure a therapist's success in working with black clients. Besides, many black service users do not perceive black social workers as 'black', owing to their professional status. O'Brian, a black male social worker, was made (painfully) aware of this fact by a black male service user:

> *Sir, . . . You see, you are in a position of authority . . . You live in a different Britain to the one me and my family live in.*
>
> *(O'Brian, 1990, p. 4)*

To many black service users, having a black skin does not necessarily make a person 'black'. Rather, a 'black' person or professional is one who not only empathizes with their circumstances, but also can formulate problems consistent with their needs. A 'black' professional has a social-change outlook rather than a problem-solving philosophy; their focus is more on the system than on the service user. They are also able to distinguish between what is a *real* problem and what is merely a system-induced problem. Many of the problems facing black service users are system-induced, and have nothing inherently to do with their 'race' or skin colour. In short, social work practitioners, managers and educators need to recognize and acknowledge that the important factors impinging adversely upon black service users are structural – social, political and economic – rather than biological (race). Race, a red (or perhaps black) herring, only helps to deflect attention from these factors. We must not ignore Race, but, at the same time, we must not let it dominate social work – we must always be mindful of its destructive power.

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Further Reading

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