


Racism in Our Midst: Noose Found at Teachers College

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In the last few months, nooses have been carefully and deliberately placed in various locations across the country to convey messages to African American individuals and those who support them. They have been found hanging from trees, on doorknobs, and in backpacks. The latest (I wish I could confidently say last) of these nooses targeted one of our dear colleagues, Dr. Madonna Constantine, who found it hanging on her office door at Columbia University Teachers College. The question poses itself, are these random acts of hatred perpetrated by a few troubled individuals?

When I enter my classrooms and speak about racism, many of my White students, and a few of my students of color, expend substantial energy to argue that racism is an issue of the past, that the transatlantic slave trade or the Japanese internment camps happened a long time ago, and that we should all move on and bask in the progress that our society has made. As I listen to these arguments I think about my typical week. On Monday, I hear someone remark that we should not be concerned about the well-being of Native Americans, because there are very few of them left and they will all be completely gone soon. On Tuesday, I hear someone state that all Mexican Americans are perverts. On Wednesday, a Black student reports that a drunken roommate addressed her using the "N" word. On Thursday, a South Asian American friend reports to me that she was told to go back to where she came from while walking to work. On Friday, I witness an African American colleague being


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Major Legislation Being Considered by Congress and Pennsylvania General Assembly

Advocates for professional psychology have been very busy this fall on both the federal and state levels dealing with legislation that could have a very substantial impact on the delivery of mental health services.

Pennsylvania was at the center of national attention as advocates tried to ensure the support of Pennsylvania's United States Senator Robert Casey for mental health parity. Parity legislation has been a bi-partisan effort spearheaded by Senators Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Pete Domenici (R-NM), and Michael (Enzi) (R-WY). However, some groups in Pennsylvania were concerned that the Senate mental health parity bill would overturn state laws protecting patient health, such as Pennsylvania's Act 106, which restricts the use of utilization and review for drug and alcohol services. Senator Casey withheld his support for mental health parity until he had received assurance that Act 106 would not be usurped by any federal mental health parity law.

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Nominations Due for PPA Officers

PPA has a robust record for effective governance. We have been fortunate to have talented psychologists willing to spend their time and energy in guiding the association to realize its mission. Can you be among them, or do you know of colleagues who could be? We need all members' help to continue our strong governance tradition. This spring we will elect a new president, a secretary, and the chairs of the Professional Psychology, Program and Education, and Public Interest Boards. Please take a moment to review the descriptions of these positions on page three and nominate yourself or another psychologist. The Nominations and Elections Committee, chaired by Past President Dr. Richard Ievoli, will seriously consider all such nominations.

dismissed, yet again, as she raises a question at a conference. On Saturday, I wake up to find out that a young African American man was shot on my street because the police "thought" he had a gun. On Sunday, I opt to access my White privilege (McIntosh, 1988), the seemingly invisible protection my skin color grants me. This privilege allows me to distance myself from the racism that goes on around me (since it doesn't target me), so that I may regain my balance before beginning a new week. Most of these incidents, of course, do not end up being reported in newspapers or television programs, despite the fact that they are part of the daily experience of many.

So I ask myself again, are these random acts of hatred perpetrated by a few troubled individuals? How many acts done by how many people can be construed as "random?" Interestingly, a colleague reported that when the first signs of the Nazi ideology began to make themselves felt in the early 1900s, many minimized them as the work of fanatics, best left ignored. When I think about the frequency of racist incidents, I begin to question the number of exceptions I have to make to my concept of what is "normal" in order to continue classifying these racist instances as out of the ordinary or non-systemic. As I try to make more and more exceptions to my definition of normality, it becomes difficult for me to believe that the individuals we find comfort in classifying as "racist," and therefore "different from us," are acting independently of a larger social structure that repetitively fosters the prejudicial ideology we are all exposed to and upon which these individuals then choose to act.

I see racism embedded in most of the social institutions that shape our perceptions of ourselves and others – from our educational system with its history books that continue to ignore the contributions and perspectives of people of color, to our laws that in many instances conveniently neglect to classify racist acts as crimes, to our media that far too often mirror back to us our very stereotypes thus reifying them. The objections of well meaning Whites who argue that people of color are "oversensitive" and make "much out of nothing" simply demonstrate how embedded racism is in our lives and

therefore how difficult it is for many to detect it. It is not surprising then that many of us use these readily available racist ideologies (the only ideologies to which some individuals are exposed) to scapegoat people of color and displace upon them our own dissatisfactions, inadequacies, and frustrations.

As Cushman (2000) argues, some social and postmodern psychological literature seems to imply that racism is a consequence of our innate tendencies to categorize, generalize, and so on. Such tendencies would then make the development of racist ideologies inevitable. Cushman goes

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on to unapologetically state that "the racism that concerns us in the United States is not universal, ahistorical, or inevitable. It is the product of an intersection of local customs, power relations, and institutions.... It facilitates the exploitation of [others and economic control].... First lines are drawn to separate groups; individuals then respond to them psychologically" (pp.609-610). In order to fight racism, which has now so publicly targeted a member of our professional family, we must recognize its true origins and not allow essentialist arguments to discourage us in our path or make us complacent. Should one still believe that tendencies towards racist ideologies are simply human (such as tendencies towards aggression), one would nonetheless want to work on recognizing, containing, and tempering them.

In our role as psychologists, we have multiple reasons to oppose racism. Racism negatively impacts the physical and mental health of our clients (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001), our therapeutic relationships (Fuertes & Brobst, 2002), diagnostic conceptualizations (Roysircar, 2005), and the course of treatment (Ridley, 2005). Thankfully, as psychologists we also have multiple occasions to oppose racism. The guidelines on multicultural education,

training, research, practice, and organizational change published by the American Psychological Association (2003) in fact call us to broaden our roles and become advocates for our clients by promoting systemic change within our field as well as within the organizations with which we come in contact professionally. Examples of blatant racism remind us how crucial it is to combat what we might think of as "innocent racism," such as stereotypical remarks or jokes. Our efforts in this direction should not be dismissed as "politically correct" but recognized as important forms of resistance.

The American Psychological Association and the American Counseling Association, among several other professional associations, have written condemning statements in response to the events at Teachers College. We must not simply read these statements but make sure that our actions support and sustain the efforts that have been made to fight racism from its conception. It is only such an intentional and sustained action that will bring about the social changes that so many of us are seeking.

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