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Appreciating the Complexities of Race and Culture

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"Ah wuz wid dem white chillum so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six years old. Wouldn't have found it out then but a man come long takin' pictures without askin' anybody…So when we looked at de picture and everybody got point out there wasn't nobody left

except a real dark little girl with long hair standing by Eleanor. Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be, but Ah couldn't recognize dat dark chile as me. Ao Ah ast, 'where is me? Ah don't see me." ……"Dat's you, Alphabet, don't you know yo'ownself?"….Aw, aw! Ah'm colored! "Den deyt all laughed real hard. But before Ah seen de picture Ah thought Ah wuz just like de rest." (Hurston, 1990, p.8-9)

This fictional narrative from Zora Neale Hurston's 1937 novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, vividly illustrates how a child of color's blissful unawareness of her race is shattered at age six, which so often occurs with the children our nation at an even younger age. The narrative struck a cord with me as it reminded me of my childhood, being surrounded by friends of all colors and often unaware of our racial differences. It also reminded me of my introduction to racial consciousness in coming to America in the early '80s to attend college. Coming from a very multiethnic Caribbean Island, I was caught off guard during my first conversation with my roommate. She asked me 'what I considered myself'. I very naively replied that I considered myself a freshman. She laughed and proceeded to explain that she was inquiring about my race. I looked down at my golden brown arm and having been informed that in America you are either black or white, I responded, "Black, I guess". My hesitancy wasn't because I was

ashamed of my black heritage, but more so because I had never consciously placed myself into a category that was based on my physiognomic features. I had previously defined myself as a person of Dutch nationality, born and raised on the island of Aruba with a multiethnic heritage consisting of ancestors who had immigrated or had been traded to the Caribbean from four different continents. Diverse races and cultures had surrounded my daily life on the island and to now place myself in a racial category was very uncomfortable. Moving to America, "the land of equality", was quite an eye opener in the area of race for a young college student fresh off an island. It was a major culture shock to witness the white and the black sections of our college cafeteria. Luckily, my cafeteria buddy was white, so we sat smack on the dividing line. I remember being called "nigger" when driving through a white neighborhood one afternoon and it felt like a knife was being driven through my heart. I was often shocked into reality of my skin color, when people would make assumptions about my background or experiences by merely looking at my visible characteristics. It became apparent to me that America was programmed to place people in racial categories and very little attention was given to cultural backgrounds. Here began my exposure to the American Racial Categorization System, how this country was so

intent on placing people in categories whenever you applied for anything at all. The ‘other’ category was sometimes available, and sometimes not. Some years later, living in South Africa during the final years of Apartheid, I clearly saw the effects of racial categorization and the class system, with the Black Africans placed at the very bottom of the ranks; the Coloreds or people of mixed race, next; Indians, Asians and then at very top, the White Africans. That system not only severely affected the self-esteem of the non-white African, but also created a strong dividing line between the racial and ethnic groups that has led to much hatred, intolerance and strife. I have seen similarities here in the U.S. Although the racial categorization system has evolved from the “one drop” rule or “the rule of hypodescent”, which is when people with any known African ancestry were put in the Black category (Daniel, 1992a as cited in Spickard & Fong, 1995), to allowing multiethnic citizens during the 2000 Census to check off more than one racial category (Sue, 2004), it still has a long way to go as we are socialized from a very young age to see people by their external characteristics, rather than to see them from their core. Even with the growing multiethnic populations in the United States, we still have a long way to go when it comes to unlearning our tendencies to see people as black or white instead of seeing race as something of greater complexity.

According to Sue (2003, p.11), “the U.S. population is undergoing a radical demographic transformation that is often referred to as the diversification of America or literally the ‘changing complexion of society’.” When in 1995 teenage golf pro Tiger Woods, made the statement that it would be an injustice to his Thai, Black, Chinese and American Indian heritages to be singled out as Black, most observers thought he was deluded (Goodman, 1995 as cited in Spickard & Fong, 1995). Since then his multicultural consciousness has been taken more seriously (Spickard & Fong, 1995). I have found that Black Americans often want to know ‘what I consider myself’ and I have often quickly responded with ‘Black’, sensing that they may think I may be denying my black heritage, if I were to talk about my Asian, British and Italian ancestry. White Americans have often in our first conversation referred to me as “girl” and I have even received remarks that they didn’t know there is such a thing as a black Dutch person. These experiences have often caused me to feel displaced, not being able to fit comfortably into one category and often driven to deny my cultural heritage. I have realized along the way that the U.S. classification system strongly influences the way we think about race and culture. Little sensitivity tends to be shown toward the complexities of race and culture. Instead of inquiring about ones cultural background, inquiries are made

about what category one places oneself in. It will do us good to learn from countries like Aruba and Suriname, which from my experience have had more complex and subtle racial systems and often promote a 'blending' of cultures.

Categorizing American ethnic groups into distinct categories also has its affects on self-definition and self-esteem. Williams (1999) in her narrative described how as a biracial child newly in America, she was quickly robbed of her innocence and unself-consciousness by the racism she encountered living in a predominantly White neighborhood. She grew up searching for ways to affirm her racial identity, knowing something about being White, but not knowing what it meant to be White and Black at the same time. Williams described how she journeyed from nonconsciousness about her Black identity to immersion in it, and eventually to having the "courage to claim her own experience despite resistance and judgment from others, [which] allows biracial people like [her] to begin to forge an authentic self "(Williams, 1999, p.3). She concludes that race and culture defy simplistic schemas and that people of multiethnic origins cannot be "neatly placed into a racial/ cultural category, nor can another person determine the nature of [their] experience with racism on the basis of that information" (Williams, 1999, p.5). Living up to social expectations by

calling oneself “black” instead of claiming a biracial identity, is fuel to diminish self-esteem (Phinney, 1996; Steele, 1990). Jackson (1999) in his narrative describes how the racist acts he experienced first as a very young Black American boy have left deep scars in his mind and spirit that are still healing. He is very aware of the fact that “racism is not just resident in the mind of adults, but the seeds are often planted in the virgin minds of children” (Jackson, 1999, p.4). He suggests that those of us in the helping professions do self-evaluative inventories in order to prevent projection, transference, and counter-transference of our racist tendencies onto our clients (Jackson, 1999).

As counselors, we need to be trained to think outside of the racial boxes when assisting others. In general multicultural classes we are given the characteristics of each ethnic group to learn how to become more culturally sensitive helpers. The characteristics and possible challenges of people of multiethnicities are often not discussed, and therefore, armed with our newfound stereotypical knowledge, we tend to make assumptions about people by placing them in the designated categories, especially if we have not had the experience of interacting with people of different cultures. One multicultural counseling class will not suffice to make us culturally

sensitive counselors. Traveling to other countries, living among and interacting with people of all colors, are other very effective means to becoming culturally competent counselors. We need to make it our goal to train ourselves to look beyond the outer layers and be interested in the core and culture of our clients. Then we will “allow clients’ stories about the richness and texture of their lives to unfold” while suspending our assumptions about their experiences (Williams, 1999, p. 5). In the nineteen years that I have lived in various U.S. cities, I have been very fortunate have found great acceptance among friends of all colors, usually those who have either experienced the same cultural background or those who were interested in understanding the complexities of my cultural background. Very rarely have I found that among those who were so enveloped in their monoculture and uninterested in understanding the worlds outside of their own. At times I have allowed these encounters to affect my self-esteem and lose appreciation for my uniqueness. Being new to the counseling field, I have attended a handful of counseling conferences, which were mostly attended by white women counselors. I am impressed with the receptivity of these professionals of the challenge of becoming more culturally sensitive. It is also my hope that these counselors are truly applying themselves to understanding the complexities of their clients of color backgrounds and are taking advantage of the opportunities to learn from

counselors of color, by being interested in their experiences. Such interactions will certainly equip us to becoming increasingly more competent as we serve the ethnically diverse clients of our communities.

References

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