
The Pedagogy of the Meaning of Racism: Reconciling a Discordant Discourse

Carlos Hoyt Jr.

Racism is a term on which a great deal of discourse does and should turn in all realms of social work theory, practice, policy, and research. Because it is a concept heavily freighted with multiple and conflicting interpretations and used in a wide variety of ways, the idea and action of racism is not easy to teach or learn in a simple and straightforward manner. It is a term the meaning of which has been the subject of so much argument and mutation that its utility as a clear and reliable descriptor of a crucial form of ideology or behavior is less than certain. In this article, an analysis of the dispute over the proper definition of racism is undertaken, and an approach to teaching about the term is offered in an effort to provide both teachers and students with a clear, consistent, and useful understanding of this important and challenging phenomenon.

KEY WORDS: *oppression; power; prejudice; race; racism*

Having taught courses in which the concept of racism is a phenomenon of critical focus, I have been consistently struck by the challenge students confront when the subject of how to define this term becomes a topic of consideration and discussion. Although several key concepts in the study of diversity, social bias, and social justice are somewhat nebulous and overlapping (for example, “culture,” “race,” and “ethnicity”), there is perhaps no term that provokes the level of confusion, consternation, and conflict that the term “racism” does. As will be seen in this article, this is due to the dispute that has destabilized use of the term for much of its short history and boils down to a sharp disagreement among both professionals and laypeople about whether the original definition of *racism*, the belief in the superiority/inferiority of people based on racial identity, should be revised to exclusively and strictly mean the use of power to preserve and perpetuate the advantages of the dominant social identity group—that is, white people in American society.

In this article, an analysis of the dispute about the definition of racism within academia will be conducted to elucidate the arguments by those who promote the revised definition and those who resist the revision. Following this analysis, based on the strengths and weaknesses of each, a pedagogical approach to teaching the definition of

racism that resolves the dispute will be presented. At the outset it will be useful to provide the definitions of key terms in the discourse on racism. The following definitions, while not copied verbatim from any dictionary, reflect what can be found in standard dictionaries and usage and will serve as the meanings of the terms used in this article.

DEFINITIONS OF CRITICAL TERMS IN THE DISCOURSE ON RACISM

Prejudice—preconceived opinion not based on reason or actual experience; bias, partiality.

Racism—(*original definition*) the belief that all members of a purported race possess characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to that race, especially so as to distinguish it as inferior or superior to another race or other races. Racism is a particular form of prejudice defined by preconceived erroneous beliefs about race and members of racial groups.

If one is to be thoroughgoing a la Muir, then racism is in evidence at the point that one subscribes to the notion of race itself, because belief in race is the fallacious prerequisite for the belief in differences between races (Muir, 1993).

Power—the capacity to exert force on or over something or someone.

Oppression—the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner.

With a clear understanding of these terms as the atomic elements of the discourse on the definition of racism, we can proceed with an elucidation of the problem.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

In my teaching experience, I have found that when asked to share their sense of the meaning of the term racism, students are usually able to supply definitions or descriptions of one or two forms of the term. These are typically either personal/psychological/doctrinal racism or systemic/behavioral/structural racism. Either a *person* is a racist because she or he holds a belief that members of different races are inherently inferior or superior to one another, or a *system* (workplace, institution, society) is racist because it practices and perpetuates discriminatory or oppressive treatment of people on the basis of their racial identity.

Awareness of these forms of racism is commendable, and there is nothing mutually exclusive or controversial about these two manifestations of racism. They both root directly and strongly in the false and pernicious idea that people can and should be sorted into subgroups based on arbitrary phenotypic markers, assumed to have attributes that correspond with the markers, valued on the basis of the possession or lack of possession of the markers, and treated differentially according to the valuations (Province of Ontario, 1994). Things tend to become challenging when the question of *who can and cannot be a racist* (and the factor of power on which that question turns) is introduced into the conceptualization and definition of racism. Advocates of a revision (for example, Pinderhughes, 1989; Tatum, 1997; Wellman, 1993) of the term to feature the element of power typically point out the difference between mere prejudice and racism, clarifying that prejudice is a baseless bias against or for something or someone. We all have our prejudices, and we can be prejudiced about things, ideas, or people. Hence anyone, regardless of color, can harbor prejudicial, even hatefully prejudicial feelings about any race. To be guilty of racism, however, to be a racist, say the revision proponents, one must have *power*, and power of a special sort. For the revisionists, racism is prejudice plus power leveraged at an institutional level to maintain the privileges of the dominant social

group. (Henceforward I refer to this formulation as the $R = P + P$ formulation, meaning racism equals prejudice plus power.) This line of thinking leads to the obvious-seeming conclusion that because in our society white people are the dominant social group, black people, who do not control the levers of macro level, institutional power, cannot be said to be racist.

In my experience (and as is reflected in the writings of authors reviewed in this article), there are usually some students who agree that the $R = P + P$ formulation makes sense (and then interpret disagreement with it as resistance to acknowledging the collusion of white people in a societal structure of privilege and advantage). Other students, however, experience a kind of cognitive dissonance when presented with the $R = P + P$ formulation and decry what they feel is an abandonment of logic and a tendentious reengineering of a perfectly good term to isolate white people as evildoers and let black people off the hook even when they commit similar offenses. This schism that emerges in the classroom reflects what exists in the professional discourse on the definition of racism. (Pinderhughes [1989] and Tatum [1997] illustrated this dissonance in their classroom discussions of the definition of racism.) The remainder of this article traces the history of the term “racism” and the dispute over its proper meaning and concludes with a means of resolving the dispute.

RACISM AND SCHISMS

The discourse on the meaning of racism begins, of course, with the coinage of the term and its original usage. From there, as is natural with etymology, the term has evolved, adapting to the needs of those who use it in various sociohistorical, sociopolitical, and psychosocial environments. Contextual alteration in the meaning of terms is normal. The use of a term is not made difficult because it can mean somewhat different things in different contexts. Usage and utility become problematic when a term’s variable meanings are not just relative to the context in which they are used, but when there is conflict and competition over the *one right way* to use the term at issue, no matter the context. The term “racism” has come to this point of conflict and contestation. For students endeavoring to develop and refine their understanding of social identity, social justice, and

diversity, the result can be and often is a cognitive dissonance that renders the term a signal for conflict rather than a useful descriptor of a crucial social phenomenon.

The frustration and exasperation with conflicted meanings of the term has led some to want to abandon it altogether. Historian George M. Fredrickson (2002) admitted that in writing a book on white supremacy in the United States and South Africa, “I concluded that racism is too ambiguous and loaded a term to describe my subject effectively” (p. 152). In the same volume, Fredrickson quoted the sociologist Loic Wacquant as advocating “forsaking once and for all the inflammatory and exceedingly ductile category of ‘racism’ save as a descriptive term referring to the empirically analyzable doctrines and beliefs about race” (pp. 152–153).

Despite justifiable frustration and even discouragement over the term, it is unlikely that it will be expunged from popular or professional discourses. We are obliged to make efforts to resolve the conflicts that have grown into the understanding and usage of the term “racism.”

Original Intent

Terms are created to capture phenomena for which we need a frame, a handle by which to grasp and share understanding of the phenomenon under consideration. Racism is a term originally crafted to frame a phenomenon that, by the early part of the 20th century (having emerged in the 19th century enterprise of classifying peoples according to a racial hierarchy) was powerful, distinct, and in need of nomenclature.

As noted by Fredrickson (2002), “[racism] came into common usage in the 1930s when a new word was required to describe the theories on which the Nazis based their persecution of the Jews” (p. 5). The atrocities of the Nazis were based in the fallacious theory that people can be methodically and reliably sorted into biologically distinct subspecies of which some are superior and some inferior to others, and that regardless of what might be contained in the character of any given individual (beliefs, talents, and so forth), her or his physical being, as categorized in racial terms, is the necessary and sufficient basis on which to accept or reject her or his value and worthiness of social consideration—from recognition as an equal human being to the very right to

live. The horrible crimes committed by the Nazis could have been conducted under a different aegis—territorial conquest, manifest destiny, a struggle to secure resource, sheer madness—and they were possible because the Nazis acquired the power necessary to commit the crimes. What made the Holocaust a *racist* tragedy was not the genocide itself, but that it was based in a belief in the superiority/inferiority of races. As noted by Fredrickson (2002), “the logical outcome of the blood-based folk nationalism increasingly embraced by the Germans was the total exclusion and elimination of the Jews” (p. 94).

Grafting Power into the Definition of Racism

As noted earlier, there is nothing particularly unusual or problematic about contextual adaptation of a term or the evolution of meaning of a term. What has led to the problem with the use of *racism* is that there are some who insist that it has a particular, strict, and exclusive meaning all bound up with a notion of *power*, such that for one to qualify as a racist one must be in a position of power. On the other side of this retooling of the term are those who appeal to the original doctrinal basis of the term and, while including race-based abuses of power as forms of racism, recognize the possibility of passive racism (the simple awful belief that races exist and that people can be sorted into races and valued according to the race to which they belong).

In terms of lexicography, what has occurred is that a *precising* definition has been asserted as superior to the *stipulative* definition that gave rise to the term racism. As described earlier, the coining of the term racism was catalyzed by a need to name an important phenomenon that, if not unique, was significantly distinct to warrant a label of its own. This initial action of language creation is referred to as *stipulative defining*. Originally the term racism was meant to stipulate a belief in essential biological and associated (social, intellectual, and so forth) differences between subgroups of human being that rendered some subgroups superior or inferior to others. Since the stipulative definition of racism, some have advocated forcefully that the original definition should be made more narrow, precise, and limited in its use (a *precising* definition). This has led to lexical definitional confusion and conflict.

Voices in the Dispute

The original stipulative definition of racism is akin to and as clear as the definition of any ism. A review of definitions of isms makes clear that the distinguishing essence of an ism is that it is a doctrine, theory, belief system, or attitude. In other words, it is a cognitive phenomenon first and foremost. All sorts of actions based on a particular ism are possible, but action is not what tends to define an ism. Those who advocate a precisising definition of racism argue that racism should not be considered a merely psychological or cognitive phenomenon, but that, instead, it should be conceived as an action committed against its victims, and that to commit the action of racism, one must have access to the power required to inflict racist harm of the sort that promotes and preserves the status and privileges of the dominant social group and the subordination of the nondominant social group.

Racism = Prejudice + Power?

An author whose precisising formulation is often cited by those in the R = P + P camp is the sociologist David Wellman. In his *Portraits of White Racism*, Wellman (1993) asserted that the sociology of racism has become more sophisticated in that it has shifted away from interpersonal race-based prejudice and toward analyses of institutional, historical, and structural dynamics that result in the perpetuation of social advantages of the dominant social identity group, that is, white people in America. Stating that racism “used to be a rather hard-edged, specific concept” (p. 2) that “referred to a set of practices that assumed the inherent, and biological inferiority of non-northern Europeans and people of color” (p. 2), Wellman declared that shifts in the dynamics of race (for example, shifts toward new economic and political realities such as more blacks achieving middle class, and racial controversies involving busing, affirmative action, and disputes about diversity and multiculturalism and away from strictly interpersonal instances of race-based cruelty or violence) rendered the racism-as-race-based-prejudice formulation less relevant and no longer useful. Wellman (1993) proposed a revision of the definition that would allow it to remain “useful and analytically powerful”).

That is, when racism is analyzed as culturally acceptable beliefs that defend social advantages that are based on race. Racism is not simply bigotry or prejudice, and it should not be confused with ethnic hostilities. Although specific expressions of racism clearly change ... sociologically speaking the analytic features of the concept stay the same. Regardless of its historically specific manifestations, racism today remains essentially what it has always been: a defense of racial privilege. (p. 4)

It is important to note what appears to be a tendentious interpretation by Wellman (1993) when he described racism as having always been a “defense of racial privilege.” This, of course, as we have seen in the review of the origination of the term, is not at all what racism was coined to represent. It is most certainly the case that white privilege, white supremacy, and too many atrocities stem from the doctrine of racial difference, which was the essence of racism at its inception, but it is a serious and misleading revision of the history of the term to portray racism as having always been about the defense of racial privilege.

Despite his misconstruing the original essence of racism, Wellman’s precisising definition of racism resonated strongly with many authors and educators.

In their textbook, *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook*, Adams, Bell, and Griffin (1997) defined racism as

The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the United States (Blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asians), by the members of the agent racial group who have relatively more social power (Whites). This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and the institutional structures and practices in society. (pp. 88–89)

In her essay, *Defining Racism: “Can We Talk?”* in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria*, Tatum (1997) embraced and promoted Wellman’s revision of racism as a “system of advantage based on race,” stating,

[Wellman's] definition of racism is useful because it allows us to see that *racism, like other forms of oppression*, is not only a personal ideology based on racial prejudice, but a *system* involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. Another related definition of racism, commonly used by antiracist educators and consultants, is "prejudice plus power." Racial prejudice when combined with social power—access to social, cultural, and economic resources and decision-making—leads to the institutionalization of racist policies and practices. While I think this definition also captures the idea that racism is more than individual beliefs and attitudes, I prefer Wellman's definition because the idea of systematic advantage and disadvantages is critical to an understanding of how racism operates in American society. [italics added] (p. 103)

In their textbook, *Diversity Education for Social Justice*, Van Soest and Garcia (2003) said, "We view racism above all as a sociopolitical phenomenon that is characterized by social power" (p. 32). And later, echoing the $R = P + P$ formulation, "When discrimination is buttressed by social power it represents *racism and oppression*. When not backed by social power, biased behaviors represent individual discriminatory actions" [italics added] (p. 33).

Beyond their strong agreement with the Wellman revision, what is worthy of note in the constructions of these authors is the conflation of racism with oppression. Later I will make the case that properly understanding and effectively utilizing the term oppression is a key to resolving the dispute over the definition of racism.

In *Understanding Race, Ethnicity, & Power*, Pinderhughes (1989) stated,

the distinction between prejudice and racism is an important one. Racism raises to the level of social structure the tendency to use superiority as a solution to discomfort about difference. Belief in superiority of Whites and the

inferiority of people-of-color based on racial differences is legitimized by societal arrangements that exclude the latter from resources and power and then blame them for their failures, which are due to lack of access. Although these arrangements may exclude some persons who are White, people-of-color are affected in far greater proportions. A single policy or institution cannot be identified as the cause. It is rather the ways in which the total social system in which policies and institutions interlock and reinforce one another in their capacity to deprive and cripple many people-of-color while offering preparation, support, and opportunity to Whites. . . . Thus, while both Whites and people-of-color may harbor prejudice or bias, the bias of people-of-color can usually not be used to reinforce advantage since they usually lack such power. (p. 89)

Pinderhughes (1989) and Tatum (1997) acknowledged that this construction of racism reliably leads to confusion, consternation, and objection in students who observed that the $R = P + P$ formulation exempts blacks (minorities, people of color, nonwhite people) from the charge of racism even if they evidence attitudes and behaviors that would qualify as racism if presented by a white person.

Acceptance of this fact can constitute a peculiarly painful moment in the struggle to understand. A psychiatric resident protested, "If that's true then there is real inequality in this group. You (people of color) can point a finger and say "racist" and we can't, and that's not fair.

The sense of injury that Whites feel stems [in part] from recognition of themselves as trapped in the systemic process of racism, which benefits them and exploits people-of-color. (Pinderhughes, 1989, p. 90)

In addition to the emotional difficulty the $R = P + P$ formulation incites, it simply defies logic and, ironically, privileges the historically

disadvantaged social identity group by exempting it from accountability.

Although Pinderhughes (1989) was somewhat sympathetic to the discord triggered by the R = P + P formulation, Tatum (1997) was unapologetic and strident about it. Because Tatum (1997) rendered a very explicit argument for the R = P + P construction, I quote her at some length:

The discomfort generated when a systemic definition of racism is introduced is usually quite visible in the workshops I lead. Someone in the group is usually quick to point out that this is not the definition you will find in most dictionaries. I reply, "Who wrote the dictionary?" I am not being facetious with this response. Whose interests are served by a "prejudice only" definition of racism? It is important to understand that the system of advantage is perpetuated when we do not acknowledge its existence. (p. 9)

When I am asked, "Can people of color be racist?" I reply, "The answer depends on your definition of racism." If one defines racism as racial prejudice, the answer is yes. People of color can and do have racial prejudices. However, if one defines racism as a system of advantage based on race, the answer is no. People of color are not racist because they do not systemically benefit from racism. And equally important, there is no systematic cultural and institutional support or sanction for the racial bigotry of people of color. In my view, reserving the term racist for only the behaviors committed by Whites in the context of a White-dominated society is a way of acknowledging the ever present power differential afforded Whites by the culture and institutions that make up the system of advantage and continue to reinforce notions of White superiority.

Despite my best efforts to explain my thinking on this point, there are some who will be troubled, perhaps even incensed, by my response. To call the racially motivated acts of a person of color acts of racial bigotry and to describe similar acts committed by Whites as racist will make no sense to some people, including some people of color. To

those, I will respectfully say, "We can agree to disagree." (pp. 10–11)

The voices of those who resist the retooling of the definition of racism are clear about their disagreement with the R = P + P formulation.

In "*I'm Not a Racist, But . . .*" *The Moral Quandary of Race*, Blum (2002) presented a thorough and cogent counterpoint to the R = P + P revision of racism. In a chapter titled "Can Blacks Be Racist?" Blum, like Tatum, directly addressed the question of concern catalyzed by the R = P + P formulation. Blum (2002), however, arrived at a diametrically opposed conclusion.

People of color are . . . capable of developing belief systems based on racial superiority, in which some groups of color are superior and whites or other groups of color are inferior. In my view, these attitudes and beliefs are racist, and current usage generally so refers to them. (p. 33)

Here Blum affirmed the original stipulative definition of racism and its lexical definition (commonly accepted use) since its inception. Unlike Tatum, who was explicitly willing to settle for disagreement on the matter, Blum sought

an account that will facilitate communication between groups about the character, forms, and extent of racism (and other race-related ills). For that we need some agreement on what racism is, and from there we can attempt to settle differences about its extent. But if the meanings of "racism" differ between groups, and if each is interested only in its meaning, empirical inquiries about the extent of racism would produce little illumination. (p. 35)

On the issue of power as the factor that distinguishes between white racism and black prejudice, Blum (2002) said,

In the United States blacks or other people of color hold power over other ethnoracial groups in some municipalities and in institutions such as schools and hospitals. They can therefore exclude other racial groups on the basis of race. Thus if racism is prejudice plus

power, people of color in power can be racist against those not in power. (p. 37)

To the predictable rejoinder that the power at issue is “institutional/systemic power,” not individual or small-scale power, Blum (2002) had a response.

Although whites are the dominant racial group in U.S. society as a whole, the key point on which the “racism = prejudice + power” view draws, restricting the operation of power pertinent to a definition of racism to the overall structure of society seems arbitrary. If power to put one’s prejudices into action is the key factor in racism, what is the basis for ruling out any context in which people of color hold power over other racial groups, including whites? (p. 38)

In other words, although none would argue that one of the most harmful forms of racism is structural, institutional racism, what good reason is there to restrict the definition of racism to just *that* manifestation? As Blum (2002) recognized, “The power to harm others through action motivated by racial prejudice goes far beyond institutional forms of harm” (p. 38).

Following his refutation of the argument that black people do not have requisite power, therefore they cannot be racist, Blum (2002) made it clear that positing power as a delimiting factor in the definition of racism is a needless and harmful constriction of the term.

Definitions that build power into “racism” cannot also claim that blacks and other people of color cannot be racist. In my view, a lonely and isolated bigot, with no influence on anyone, is still a racist in a meaningful sense, and certainly possesses racist attitudes. *It is the content of attitudes and beliefs that makes them racist, not whether their possessors have the power to put them into practice.* [italics added] (p. 39)

Sharpening this point, Sowell (1994) took the $R = P + P$ argument to its logical extreme by observing that “if this kind of reasoning were followed consistently, then Hitler could not have been considered a racist when he was an isolated

street corner rabble-rouser, but only after he became chancellor of Germany” (p. 154).

Sociologist Donal Muir (1993) adhered strictly to the logic of the concept of racism by including not only those who believe in the superiority or inferiority of races as racists, but anyone who subscribes to the notion of race at all:

Almost all of the inhabitants of the United States and many other nations ... believe that humans can be sorted physiologically into racial categories. Given that the essence of racism is to interact with others on the basis of racial assignments, these societies are far more racist than their members suppose. (p. 340)

According to logic, as Muir saw it, either one does not “perceive themselves or others in racial terms ... and so is legitimately a ‘non-racist,’ or one is a virulent racist, actively seeking to harm and oppress members of target races (Muir called such people ‘mean racists’) or one is a ‘kind racist,’ believing in racial differences but also in tolerance of differences stemming from race.”

Once it is understood that race is a specious social construct, subscription to it, from Muir’s perspective, makes no sense and only makes possible racist beliefs and actions. “Racism,” stated Muir (1993), “resembles a gun. While mean racists use it to coerce or kill, kind racists help keep it loaded by supporting the underlying racial concepts” (p. 347).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PEDAGOGY

As is evidenced by my initial accounts of students experiencing dismay and disagreement, as well as those of some of the authors I have quoted, the precisifying revision of the original stipulative definition of racism promoted by those on the $R = P + P$ school of thought is by no means an easy formulation to accept. As the counterpoints of Blum, Sowell, and Muir (not to mention others who agree with them) demonstrated, there is deep and thorough disagreement about this matter in academia. As a phenomenon of the highest importance to education, practice, and policy, in social work and social justice, how, if at all, can we provide a pedagogical approach to racism that overcomes the fractiousness that is endemic to the current discourse?

It should be acknowledged that arriving at unanimity or even consensus on all matters involving theory and the conceptualization and definition of concepts is not always possible. In many matters of great importance in many arenas (academia, politics, religion, law), conflicting and competing schools of thought abound, and the best that can be done pedagogically is to present all perspectives, after which students must determine which point of view resonates most with them. It is possible, as Tatum (1997) concluded, that in this matter of the most appropriate definition of racism, there must be agreement that disagreement is inevitable.

If that is so, then our pedagogy must accurately reflect the competing worldviews on the matter, not promote one over the other as if there is an inherent superiority in one that, for whatever reason, the advocates of the other fail to appreciate. Education should not be indoctrination into a particular school of thought. As Freire has expressed so eloquently (Freire, 1970), we must not consider our students to be empty receptacles into which we can deposit our presumed superior knowledge lest we become purveyors of dogma. Where controversy exists in the topics under study, we are, I believe, obliged to present the theses and antitheses involved. If we, as instructors, have a leaning, a bias in the matter, then we honor our students' autonomy of thought by presenting that, too, but *as our bias, not as the "truth" of the matter*. And, ultimately, we must encourage and direct our students to perform their own metabolism of the material and arrive thoughtfully and deliberately at a synthesis that makes sense to them.

Is This Racism? Resolving an Overly Fraught Dialectic

In their practice of social work, students, whether they settle primarily in the realm of policy, social welfare, research, teaching, or clinical practice, are likely to confront the question "Is this racism?" Whether the question applies to what a client seems to have experienced, an uneven distribution of goods and resources, a double standard in rules and regulations, or their own attitude or behavior, a clear and settled understanding of this crucial term is necessary to answering the question. We cannot effectively support or challenge our clients, advocate for social justice, or refine our use of self

vis-à-vis racism if we cannot be sure what we are talking about when we use the term. Agreeing to disagree is not a satisfactory solution, nor is it a necessary one. Racism requires a clear, precise, and reliable definition. Luckily, it is quite possible to provide one.

"Oppression" to the Rescue

Advocates of the R = P + P revision are right to cast a bright light on the enormously harmful effects of race-based bias enacted by those who have access to the sort of power that can afflict masses of people who do not have equivalent power or means of defense. They are wrong, however, to limit the definition of racism to only that particular form of race-based bias. Doing so is logically problematic (as has been argued herein) and practically unnecessary. It is unnecessary because there exists a term that perfectly captures the heinous form of social bias the revisionists wish to highlight.

If we avail ourselves of a clear understanding of "oppression," and integrate it into our thinking about and constructions of racism, then the disagreement over the proper definition of racism can be resolved. Based on the definitions of the terms prejudice, racism, power, and oppression provided at the outset, the following concepts are provided to resolve the unnecessary conflict between the competing definitions of racism. Utilization of these concepts makes possible the maintenance of racism as a stipulative term that connotes prejudice based on race, while also accounting for the real and pernicious phenomenon of institutional/systemic/macro-level behaviors that function to preserve and perpetuate unearned privileges of the dominant social group.

Race-based Oppression—the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner against people on the basis of a supposed membership in a particular race or races—which can manifest at an individual (micro) level if it is perpetrated by a person who, motivated by racist beliefs, uses superior power and force over another person, or at the institutional (macro) level, when policies or resources are shaped and channeled to advantage or disadvantage racialized groups. (Sexism as a doctrine, then, would have an action corollary of sex-based oppression; ageism would translate from belief to action as age-based oppression, and so on.)

Institutional Race-based Oppression—the network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages and benefits for the dominant social identity group, and discrimination, oppression, and disadvantages for people from the nondominant social identity groups. This is akin to what some authors (for example, Adams, Bell, and Griffin [1997]) referred to as “institutional racism.” The key difference being that the concept of institutional race-based oppression avoids the difficulty of the impossibility of knowing the beliefs of those at the levers of institutional power. As long as the oppression is conducted systemically and differentially affects social identity groups, it qualifies.

To be *prejudiced*, one need only harbor preconceived opinions (positive or negative) not based on reason. To be a *racist*, one need only believe in race and in the inferiority or superiority of races. To *oppress*, one must have power over the target of one’s oppression. If one behaves oppressively on an interpersonal level based on the belief that races exist and that members of different races are superior or inferior to one another, then one commits race-based oppression. To commit *institutional race-based oppression*, one must have racist beliefs and the power to act on them at an institutional level.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Holding irrational unjust beliefs and acting on them is an equal-opportunity peril. We do our students (white and not white) a disservice by indoctrinating them into a belief system that charges white people with being de facto racists (by virtue of being the beneficiaries of historic and present institutional race-based oppression) while providing an exemption to black people from being held accountable for racist beliefs (racism) or practices (race-based oppression). One of our basic charges as social workers is to affirm that discrimination and oppression based on the accident of one’s condition (whether the condition is one’s appearance (lookism), physical ability (ableism), sex (sexism), sexual orientation (heterosexism), place of origin (xenophobia/ethnocentrism), or socioeconomic status (classism) are patently and intolerably unjust. In defining and describing the types of social bias and injustice we confront and

aim to dispel, we are obliged to observe nuance when it is relevant to a thorough understanding of a phenomenon under consideration. The minute that one human being is treated unequally by another, without legitimate basis for the unequal treatment, there is injustice, but until the motivation for that unjust treatment is determined to be a belief in the superiority or inferiority of races, the mistreatment cannot reasonably be labeled as racist. There are, unfortunately, many factors that can derail reason and lead to irrational unjust behavior (personal enmity, fear of the unfamiliar, the perception of threat, social conditioning, any of the isms listed earlier). When the flaw is a belief in race as a legitimate reason to discriminate, it is racism. When racism is enacted to subjugate or disenfranchise others, it is oppression; when the source of the power is systemic, structural, or institutional, it is race-based institutional oppression.

When I was a (black) teenager in the grips of false beliefs about the inferiority of white people (due in great part to the conviction that their presumed racist attitudes rendered them brutish, stupid, and dangerous), my belief constituted racism. And when I translated those beliefs into malicious actions (taunting, excluding, fighting), it was behavioral expression of racism. And when I was in a group of like-minded young racists, and we chose to take over the back of a public transportation bus and become openly hostile and threatening toward white riders—often to the point that they felt so unsafe that they disembarked before their desired destination had been reached, it was an exercise of power that adds up to race-based oppression.

A white person, perhaps one sitting in a master’s level classroom or workshop on racism, who does not believe in the superiority or inferiority of races and does not discriminate on the basis of race is not racist. That this white person, due to the accident of her or his condition, is the beneficiary of unearned privileges provided by unjust social, political, and legal structures, systems, and institutions makes the person *the beneficiary of unearned privileges*, not a racist. Being the recipient of unearned advantages is a status that calls for serious consideration of the responsibilities a justice-seeking person has—to work against systems of unfair privilege and to bring about

parity in all realms of social life. That is a tall order; one that should not be made harder by the serious and false indictment of racism as an ineluctable condition of being white (and an impossibility, if one is black).

The dispute about the proper definition of racism between scholars and others has rendered the term more a lightning rod than a concept that illuminates one of the most important phenomena in the area of social bias and social justice. As demonstrated, a careful and thorough analysis of the dispute leads to a resolution that both restores a clear and useful meaning of racism and provides the means by which to usefully acknowledge the factor of power as it relates to race-based social bias. Teachers of social work theory, policy, and practice are encouraged to avoid a dogmatic insistence on the revisionist definition of racism and, instead, to expose students to the debate that has surrounded the term and the reconciliation offered herein. Students are encouraged to apply critical scrutiny to all topics and teachings they encounter, maintaining a vigilance to discern needless conflation and confusion of terms from useful refinement and clarification. **SW**

REFERENCES

- Adams, M., Bell, L. E., & Griffin, P. (Eds.). (1997). *Teaching for diversity and social justice*. New York: Routledge.
- Blum, L. (2002). "I'm not a racist, but . . ." *The moral quandary of race*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Fredrickson, G. M. (2002). *Racism: A short history*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Muir, D. E. (1993). Race: The mythic root of racism. *Sociological Inquiry*, 63, 339–350.
- Oppression. (2010). In Dictionary.com. Retrieved from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/oppression>
- Pinderhughes, E. (1989). *Understanding race, ethnicity, & power: The key to efficacy in clinical practice*. New York: Free Press.
- Province of Ontario. (1994). *The interim report, "Commission on the systemic racism in the Ontario criminal justice system, racism behind bars: The treatment of black and racial minority prisoners in Ontario."* Ontario, Canada: Queen's Printer.
- Sowell, T. (1994). *Race and culture: A world view*. New York: Basic Books.
- Tatum, B. D. (1997). "Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about race. New York: Basic Books.
- Van Soest, D., & Garcia, B. (2003). *Diversity education for social justice: Mastering teaching skills*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Wellman, D. (1993). *Portraits of white racism* (2nd ed.). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Carlos Hoyt, Jr., MSW, LICSW, is associate dean of students, Phillips Academy Andover, 180 Main Street, Andover, MA 01810; e-mail: choyt@andover.edu.

Original manuscript received August 12, 2010

Final revision received October 25, 2010

Accepted November 22, 2010

NASW PRESS POLICY ON ETHICAL BEHAVIOR

The NASW Press expects authors to adhere to ethical standards for scholarship as articulated in the *NASW Code of Ethics* and *Writing for the NASW Press: Information for Authors*. These standards include actions such as

- taking responsibility and credit only for work they have actually performed
- honestly acknowledging the work of others
- submitting only original work to journals
- fully documenting their own and others' related work.

If possible breaches of ethical standards have been identified at the review or publication process, the NASW Press may notify the author and bring the ethics issue to the attention of the appropriate professional body or other authority. Peer review confidentiality will not apply where there is evidence of plagiarism.

As reviewed and revised by
NASW National Committee on
Inquiry (NCOI), May 30, 1997

Approved by NASW Board of
Directors, September 1997