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• MAJOR CONTRIBUTION

## **Racism, Mental Health, and Mental Health Practice**

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*In this article, the authors present an interdisciplinary discussion of the multiple dimensions of racism and formulate conceptions of its impact on the formation of healthy personalities. They describe how racism has both ideological and structural components and perpetuates itself recursively at the macro- (e.g., group, institution) and microlevels (e.g., interpersonal). As one consequence of its embedded, cyclical nature, efforts to treat client problems that involve issues of race and racism will necessarily entail piercing distortions in reality, encouraging self-moral development, and eliciting risk-taking behaviors. To take part in transforming current structures of racism, counseling psychologists are urged to extend these strategies beyond the therapeutic milieu. Implications for practice, training, and research are presented.*

Although many significant advances have been made since the civil rights and Black power movements—considered by most scholars to be the pivotal movements in American race relations—racism continues to plague U.S. society (e.g., Dovidio, 1997; Jones, 1997; Takaki, 1994). Contemporary narrative accounts reveal the array of injustices that people of various races experience on the basis of race (e.g., Cose, 1993; Dees, 1991; McCall, 1994). Empirical data support the persistence of racism in terms of public opinion, incidents of racially motivated violence, and structural discrimination. For example, a recent national survey found that the majority of Whites believed that Blacks were violent and preferred welfare (National Opinion Research Center, 1990). Meyers (1995) found that racial discriminatory practices accounted for approximately 70% of the racial gap in loan rejections. And in an extensive review of empirical research on racism, after controlling for the effects of class and other relevant variables, Smith (1995) concluded,

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In education, in the sale and rental of housing, in access to mortgage loans, in employment, in access to health care (including certain surgical procedures), in the purchase of an automobile or in the punishment of the use of illegal drugs, American institutions continue to operate so as to produce racially disparate outcomes. (p. 141)

The establishment of President Clinton's 1997 Race Initiative signifies the need to understand the persistence of societal racism and develop collaborative efforts to combat it. Similarly, counseling psychology has established a tradition of striving to address societal concerns as articulated at the Greyston Conference over three decades ago. Consistent with this tradition, counseling psychologists have begun increasingly to address the topic of racism and counseling practice in books (e.g., Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Ridley, 1995) and in theoretical and empirical works (e.g., Skillings & Dobbins, 1991; Thompson & Jenal, 1994; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996). These writings complement the goals of the Race Initiative by helping to delineate the methods in which counselors specifically can challenge their racial beliefs and prejudices to deliver more effective services. Because of the nature of psychology, counseling psychologists primarily have targeted challenging the ideological, as opposed to structural, components of racism.

These works have contributed to our growing understanding of the role of race and racism in training students and working with clients; yet, there exists few writings in the counseling literature that focus directly on the relationship of racism, mental health, and mental health practice. Specifically, what appears to be missing is a conceptual discussion of the multiple dimensions of racism—ideological and institutional—and how it relates to the mental health of Whites and people of color (i.e., African, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino, and Native Americans). Past writings have concentrated largely on the mental health costs of racism to people of color, primarily Blacks (e.g., Chunn, Dunston, & Ross-Sheriff, 1983; Ramseur, 1991), and have rarely engaged in discussions of its costs to Whites or to American racial groups collectively. The purpose of this article is to address this gap in the counseling literature by synthesizing interdisciplinary writings on racism and formulating conceptions that extend this knowledge to psychological functioning and counseling and clinical practice. Below, we maintain that people in American society are socialized in ways that oppose some rather fundamental ideas of mental health. This socialization imposes strained relationships between and among racial groups, breeds conflict in how people perceive themselves racially, and contributes to sustaining racism at the institutional level. We also assert that this socialization influences what transpires in the process of therapy and in therapist training. We not only propose ways in which mental health practice can include a focus on usurping ideological

racism but also recommend innovative strategies that counseling psychologists can use to transform current structures of racism.

There are several assumptions about racism and mental health practice undergirding our analysis. First, we assume that racism in the United States differentially affects Whites and people of color. Second, we view societal racism as a highly complex phenomenon that has shifted in character over time as a result of multiple social and economic forces yet that has endured generations as a malignancy that dehumanizes people and obstructs meaningful relationships. Third, we believe that people socialized within an unfair system of racial stratification tend to internalize strategies to uphold the racial status quo. Conversely, a climate of racism generally facilitates and legitimizes these strategies. Within this system, many White Americans tend to maintain racism by employing strategies that mask its existence (e.g., Bowser & Hunt, 1996; Morrison, 1992; Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Douglas, 1998; Takaki, 1990; Wells-Barnett, 1892/1993; Woodson, 1977). Many people of color internalize racist beliefs and practices that serve to work against referent-group empowerment and to prevent them from challenging the system (Bulhan, 1985; Jost & Banaji, 1994). Fourth, we contend that therapists can and do engage in the above strategies and, thus, also help to preserve the racist status quo.

Importantly, we also assume that an examination of macro- and micro-level racism is integral to an understanding of the preservation and perpetuation of racism. We draw on a systems orientation to elucidate this recursive relationship and to frame racism as a phenomenon that influences and is influenced by the ways people conduct themselves interpersonally and experience themselves racially. Recent writings by adherents of contextualist, interactionist, discursive, chaos, constructivist, constructionist, and general systems theories and paradigms proclaim that persons and environments influence each other dialectically, and thereby cocreate realities (Cushman, 1991; Gergen, 1985; Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986). These perspectives question the idea of an individual personality as distinct from a historical and sociological context (Chrzanowski, 1982). We describe how history and context help craft the phenomenon of racism as both a societal and interpersonal pathology that, in turn, leads to dissociations of the self.

A systems orientation is also valuable as a framework for explaining the potential usefulness of counseling and psychotherapy in facilitating changes in clients whose problems stem from or relate to racism. Constructivists Lyddon (1990) and Mahoney and Patterson (1992) assert that when the goals of psychotherapy are aimed at achieving balance or provoking a return to a previous state of being, they erroneously convey notions of linearity and simplicity rather than the notion of the interdependence between people and

external systems and the complexity of psychological phenomena. Notably, certain systems-oriented writers assert that for deep, structural change to occur, there will necessarily be disequilibrium, including strong affect and the reorganizing of the self. Any attempt to significantly alter clients' expressions of racism, racial prejudice, or internalized racism will also necessitate their experiencing disequilibrium and disorder. Because of the parallel need for change within people as well as within the systems in which they interact, efforts to address racism in therapy without due consideration of the context can be easily frustrated.

Consistent with a system-related approach to framing racism, we fully respect the myriad factors that affect individual, group, and societal functioning. However, we conduct our examination of racism by attempting to extract it from the host of interlocking variables that also influence these levels of functioning. Therefore, racism is subjected to magnification and scrutiny in this treatise. It is not suggested that racism be construed as an aspect of case conceptualization or treatment that can be examined in isolation of other relevant biological, psychological, and social factors, but rather as a component to be enfolded into the larger whole. In addition, we conclude the article by spurring readers to begin or continue a process of critically evaluating the role of racism and other forms of injustice and dehumanization in mental health conceptualization and treatment. These forms of injustice include but are not limited to sexism, homophobia and heterosexism, class exploitation, xenophobia, and their combinative effects.

The article is divided into seven sections. Section 1 serves as the foundation for later developments and includes definitions of the terms *race*, *racism*, and *mental health*. In Section 2, we review the recent reemergence of systems-related philosophies and paradigms in the counseling and general psychology literature and the relevance of this trend to achieving an understanding of racism as a complex, evolving phenomenon. In Section 3, we describe macro- and microlevel contexts of racism. Specifically, we discuss how racial oppression is rationalized and disseminated through the basic institutional framework of society, especially in the media and mainstream-influenced educational systems. We also describe manifestations of microlevel racism, vis-à-vis defense mechanisms used to lessen the pain and discomfort in knowing about and exacting individual acts of racism. This section also includes an examination of how racism influences interpersonal interactions. We conclude Section 3 with a discussion about how the interplay of macro- and microlevel racism creates pathological effects in the development of dysfunctional identities. We also propose how these pathologies manifest themselves differently in Whites and in people of color. In Section 4, we return to and build on our earlier discussion on mental health to reflect these developments on racism and identity impairment. In Section 5,

we discuss the implications of our developments to psychotherapy practice as well as provide an outline of intervention methods that counseling psychologists can employ to change the structures of racism. In this section, we draw on the latest developments in racial identity theory and also the principles of radical psychiatry and critical educational theory. In Section 6, we recommend future lines of research that can help build on our knowledge of how best to work with clients with problems related to racism and how to enact structural change. Finally, Section 7 presents a conclusion of this article.

In this article, we frequently use broad-stroke characterizations of people based on their racial group designations (i.e. White or people of color). Our intent in generalizing qualities onto entire groups of people based on race is to describe normative attitudes and behaviors rather than to convey stereotypes. We also acknowledge that racism experiences differ among different minority racial groups according to history and context (e.g., see Takaki, 1990) but rely on more generalized descriptions because of space limitations. Fine-grained descriptions of the systemic nature of racism and its effects on different racial groups would be a large undertaking, and we encourage readers to pursue further learning in this area by perusing among historical and anthropological writings for more nuanced and contextualized renderings of how the drama of racism influences and is influenced by specific communities of people. Finally, we acknowledge that there exists ample evidence of the concerted efforts of individuals and groups to dismantle racism in a variety of contexts. However, we center our attention on the hegemony of racism and its influence on institutional practices and individual attitudes and behaviors.

## DEFINITIONS

Clear descriptions and working definitions of race, racism, and mental health are essential to identifying and supporting assumptions that influence our later analysis. We begin each subsection with contextualizing the construct and its development in the United States, prior to providing a working definition.

### Race

To understand racism in the United States, it is important to first define what is meant by race. Race has been one of the most elusive concepts in the social science literature as well as in society in general. Biologists, anthropologists, sociologists, and historians alike have created many theories to describe race, most of which generally can be placed within two camps:

natural race and social race. Until the latter half of this century, race was typically viewed as a biological construct or as a natural occurrence, that is, a product of one's phenotype and/or genotype as expressed by one's physical characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Zuckerman (1990) summarizes this perspective well by characterizing *natural race* as "an inbreeding, geographically isolated population that differs in distinguishable physical traits from other members of the species" (p. 1297). According to this perspective, there are distinctive racial groups as illustrated by the physiognomic marks of various subspecies of humans; one cannot deny the variations of physical characteristics of people around the world.

However, the notion of natural races has several fatal limitations that even natural scientists have begun to acknowledge. One problem weakening the argument of natural race is *hypodescent* or how intermixing is incorporated into the racial classification system (Smedley, 1993). The children of mixed parentage illustrate this dilemma. Such children may have one classification in one context and a different classification in another context. For example, a person of mixed Black-White parentage most likely would be classified as Black in the United States; the same child could be classified as colored in South Africa (a distinct racial group from White and Black), or potentially as White in the Caribbean.

In the past three decades, social scientists including psychologists have moved away from defining race in biological terms and toward defining race as a social construct. According to this perspective, racial categories are not natural categories but, instead, "racial categories and the meaning of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded" (Omi & Winant, 1986). To highlight the social component of race, Helms (1996) suggests the term *sociorace* to connote that racial groups have "different political and economic histories" (p. 200). These histories are reflected in one group's relative power in the United States. That is, Whites as a racial group have historically benefited from racial domination, and people of color have been subjected to racial oppression (Helms, 1996).

The acknowledgment of racial groups as not truly distinct but rather a social particularity serves to advance our understanding of race and its impact on human lives. However, in trying to address the question of how social distinctions have arisen to begin with. Concluding that slavery was seminal to creating and developing the idea of race in North American colonies, Smedley (1993) stated that the colonists, individually and collectively "fabricated and imposed their ancient image of savagery over an easily distinguishable, and powerless, category of people, making it possible to view them as subhuman" (p. 145).



In this article, we adopt a perspective rooted in a social construction standpoint, but we also acknowledge that racial classifications are partly determined by the physical characteristics of specific groups. We believe that Cox's (1970) early groundbreaking work on race and race relations still holds true, and thus, we have adopted his definition of race.

Race may be thought of as simply any group of people that is generally believed to be, and generally accepted as, a race in any given area of ethnic competition. . . . [Furthermore, race] may be thought of as any people who are distinguished, or considered themselves distinguished, in social relations with other peoples, by their physical characteristics. (pp. 319, 402)

Using this definition of race, five major racial groups have been constructed in the United States: American Indian/Aleutian/Eskimo, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Black, Latino, and White. As with the general construct of race, these socially defined groups are not pure and there is "illogical" overlap. For example, some have further divided Latinos into five subgroups: Black, White, Asian, non-Black, or non-White. It is also important to note that within each of these socially defined racial classifications, there are various ethnic groups such as Filipino American, Sioux, Jamaican, Chicano, and Jewish. In this sense, some racial categories such as Asian can also be viewed as pan-ethnic groups with similarity of experiences and treatment in the United States (Espiritu, 1996). For example, Asian American consists of many ethnic groups; however, regardless of ethnicity, most Asian Americans have endured similar racial stereotypes and have had a history with exclusionary laws (Espiritu, 1996). In this article, we mainly refer to racism as it applies to the socially defined racial or pan-ethnic groups in the United States and not necessarily to specific ethnic groups.

The notion of hypodescent or mixed race raises concern about how to racially categorize biracial individuals, that is, those persons whose parents are primarily identified (or who identify themselves) as having descended from different racial ancestries. According to F. J. Davis (1991), the practice of monoracial assignment of biracial people in the U.S. census is rooted in a long history of oppression against African-descended people, which has produced the "one drop rule," inferring that one drop of African blood was akin to contamination and, therefore, assignment to the lower status racial group. In light of changes in race relations over history, including but not limited to consensuality in sexual practices (contrasting master-slave sexual practices), the dismantling of miscegenation laws, and a changing demography, one might expect also to see changes in how racial groups are designated. However, in the United States, there currently exists no formal classification system to delineate the various possible combinations of mixed race children (e.g., Latino and Asian American, White and Black, Native American and



Black). This seems to arise principally from the fact that there has not been a shared history or political economic treatment of biracial individuals as in other countries, such as South Africa or Brazil.

An individual's experiences as a racial being in society would appear to be largely dependent on his or her phenotype; consequently, people who have at least one racial minority parent are often identified by society as a racial minority, for example, golfer Tiger Woods and actress Halle Berry. We are aware that some biracial people, as individuals, have assimilated into White society, such as actor Keanu Reeves; however, all Asian-White or other biracial groups have not been identified as White in the United States. For the purposes of this article, people of color include those persons with at least one parent who has been classified as racial minority (i.e., Asian, Black, Latino, or Native American).

### **Racism**

Racial oppression was an intensely debated public topic in the United States at the turn of the century, a period termed the Nadir, or abyss, by historian Raeford Logan because of prevailing acts of racial violence at the time (Takaki, 1994). However, debates about racism and race relations did not emerge in the social science literature until the 1940s (e.g., Cox, 1948; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Du Bois, 1940; Myrdal, 1944), also a volatile time in the United States. This was a time when the first generation since the great migration North had matured and the United States was being criticized for hypocrisy, that is, advocating for democracy and opposing fascism abroad while enforcing Jim Crow laws at home. However, racism as a contemporary social concept did not become part of the fabric of American discourse until the publication of the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* in 1968. Over the past three decades, conceptual frameworks to describe and understand racism in the United States have abounded (e.g., Bullard, 1993; Feagin & Vera, 1995; Perlo, 1996; Winant, 1994). Considering that entire books have been devoted to the subject of racism, it is impossible to provide a "quick and dirty" definition; racism is a complex construct involving nuanced consideration of theories of race and social relations.

Chesler (1976) has identified seven categories of theories of racism that range in degree of victim-system control (i.e., the extent to which racial injustices are considered rooted in the control of victims of racism or in the social structure) and embeddedness (i.e., the extent to which racial injustices are considered marginal or essential to the fabric of life). Most of the counseling and applied literature have used definitions of racism that are high on the system control and on the essential embeddedness continua (e.g., Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Ridley, 1995). Consistent with this trend, we provide a broad

definition of racism drawn heavily from sociological and historical theories that underscore the structural nature of racism that has permeated daily life in the United States.

Cox's (1948, 1959) groundbreaking work on racism remains one of the most cited references from this perspective. According to Cox (1959), racism is "a social attitude propagated among the public by an exploiting class for the purpose of stigmatizing some group as inferior so that the exploitation of either the group itself or its resources or both may be justified" (p. 393). In his writings, Cox underscores that racism is a relationship of domination in a system consisting of a privileged race (Whites, especially the White elite) and oppressed races (people of color, such as Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans). Although Cox's conceptualization of racism radically have transformed how scholars conceive the topic, there are several limitations to his analysis. Foremost, Cox has been criticized for relying too heavily on class (economic) dimensions of racism, at the expense of the role of racial attitudes and belief systems.

To address Cox's limitations, other scholars (e.g., Baron, 1985; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Chesler, 1976; Szymanski, 1985) have extended his theory to account for both institutional (which includes class exploitation) and attitudinal or belief dimensions of racism. Specifically, these scholars have argued that racism consists of two interlocking dimensions: (a) an institutional mechanism of domination and (b) a corresponding ideological belief that justifies the oppression of people whose physical features and cultural patterns differ from those of the politically and socially dominant racial group—Whites (Cha-Jua, 1996). This latter component is particularly important to counseling psychologists because it concerns itself with individual and collective attitudes that potentially can be targeted in therapy contexts. Sociologist Chesler (1976) succinctly incorporates both institutions and ideology in his conceptualization of racism, arguing that racism is

whatever acts or institutional procedures that help create or perpetuate sets of privileges for Whites and exclusions or deprivations for [racial] minority groups. This usually requires an ideology of explicit or implicit superiority or advantage of one racial group over another, plus the institutional power to implement that ideology in social operations. (p. 22)

Chesler (1976) and other proponents of this approach emphasize that racism is a systemic problem that has real consequences for the life experiences of Whites and racial minorities. Our conception of racism builds on the work of the aforementioned scholars and consists of the following three assumptions:

- Racism consists of structural and ideological components.
- Racism consists of four main forms: individual (including everyday), institutional, cultural, and environmental.
- Racism has evolved over generations and across geographical regions.

#### STRUCTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL COMPONENTS OF RACISM

We assert that racism consists of both structural and ideological components. Below, we will briefly describe these components to provide a foundation to which later discussions are grounded. By structural, we mean the systems in which society is organized, including political, economic, and social institutions (e.g., education, law enforcement, military) as well as the built environment (i.e., the structure and development of social space, including reservations, ghettos, barrios, and the process of suburbanizations). Racism has a structural component in that it consists of interlocking systems designed to “(1) keep Blacks [and other racial minorities] in an inferior status and (2) prevent feelings of solidarity emerging between Blacks [and other racial minorities] and Whites” (Bramel & Friend, 1982, p. 180). According to Bramel & Friend (1982), the latter system is necessary to prevent an interracial alliance of the working class to challenge class exploitation. Consistent with this view, Smith (1995) described the necessary conditions for racism to exist in the following manner.

One racial group must have the relative power—the capacity to impose its will in terms of policies. . . . Without this relative power relationship, racism is a mere sentiment because although group A may wish to subordinate group B, it lacks the effective power to do so [therefore] it remains just that, a wish. (p. 143)

In essence, the structural component of racism in the United States relates to the way society is organized, which maintains and perpetuates the political and economic domination of Whites, especially the White elite, and conversely, discriminates against racial and ethnic minorities in institutional participation. For example, racial minority men and women are underrepresented in politics; the intellectual and cultural contributions of racial minorities are often distorted, minimized, or omitted in primary, secondary, and higher education; Whites own a disproportionate amount of wealth; and racial minorities (especially Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans) are overrepresented among the poor and prison populations (Leiman, 1993).

It is important to note that White individuals can experience the negative effects of structural oppression, particularly in the forms of gender oppression and class exploitation. However, consistent with many scholars (e.g., Szymanski, 1983), we assert that White individuals do not experience the

negative, demoralizing impact of structural racism because people of color do not control the social institutions, nor are they significantly represented in positions of power, in which they have opportunities to set policies that will systematically discriminate against Whites. Naturally, people of color can discriminate against Whites as individuals, but these individual forms of discrimination do not translate to institutional practices. Jones (1997) captures this point by characterizing “racism [as] feelings of racial superiority reinforced by the power to determine the outcomes for other racial groups that are consistent with one’s own group’s best interests” (p. 15).

*Ideology* can be defined as “a system (with its own logic and rigour) [sic] of representations (images, myths, ideas, or concepts . . . ) endowed with a historical existence and a role within a given society” (Althusser, 1969, p. 231). Some common assumptions about ideology include “(1) a system of beliefs characteristic of a particular class or group; [and] (2) a system of illusory beliefs—false ideas . . . which can be contrasted with true or scientific knowledge” (Williams, 1977, p. 55). Building on the work of scholars who have examined class ideology (e.g., Szymanski, 1983; Williams, 1977), we propose that racism has an ideological component, in that ideas about race and race relations serve to protect the status quo, that is, the current system of racial domination in which racial minorities experience institutional discrimination. Racist ideologies are manifested and perpetuated by false representations of racial minorities as culturally, intellectually, and/or morally inferior and the simultaneous representations of Whites, as a whole, as superior and the norm by which other groups should be evaluated (Jones, 1997). These false representations are characterized in media images and educational practices.

Racist ideologies also reflect the culture of a particular historical moment, and thus, its form and function change over time. For example, during the turn of the century,

It is not surprising that as long as Black physical labor was necessary in a period of rapid accumulation and a low level of technology, theories of biological inferiority (from cranial size to I.Q.) were propagated arguing that Blacks were incapable of intellectual work. (Bramel & Friend, 1982, p. 181).

Contemporary racist ideology against Blacks in the current economic structure is different; deindustrialization and new technological innovations have largely excluded Blacks in the transition to a more technological era (Wilhelm, 1987), and thus, ideas of Blacks as “being parasitic on society (e.g., those on welfare, or the unemployed)” (Bramel & Friend, 1982, pp. 181-182) have emerged to rationalize the current form of racial domination.

In contemporary society, to be labeled a racist is to provoke intense, negative emotions. As Smedley (1993) noted, even members of the Ku Klux Klan, who have long been viewed by society as confessed racists, have distanced themselves from the term *racist*, preferring instead to rebuff with elaborate rationales for their belief in the superiority of White people and the inferiority of arbitrarily defined non-White people (see Takaki, 1993). We acknowledge that the association between racism and Whiteness is likely to stir some readers, both White and non-White, precisely because of the role of institutional racism in which there is a tendency to deflate this component and, therefore, cast Whites and non-Whites in equal partnership in its wake. But as Tatum (1992) noted,

In the context of U.S. society, [racism as a] system of advantage clearly operates to benefit Whites as a group. However, it is assumed that racism, like other forms of oppression, hurts members of the privileged group as well as those targeted by racism. While the impact of racism on Whites is clearly different from its impact on people of color, racism has negative ramifications for everyone. (p. 3)

Displays of racism exist in extreme forms; consequently, people will probably always feel compelled to label White people who don white hoods and robes and/or who blatantly boast about their views of White supremacy as racist. However, racism is transmitted and internalized so pervasively that it would be instructive to examine it less as a classificatory description of Whites and more as an ideology that shapes the socialization of all people. Because White people are the beneficiaries of structural racism, however, this socialization has a different impact for Whites. Indeed, one impact of racism on people of color is the desire to be like (but not necessarily become) White people.

#### FOUR FORMS OF RACISM

Jones (1981) has identified three forms of racism that are commonly referred to in the literature: individual, institutional, and cultural. Environmental racism has recently emerged as a fourth form of racism. These forms help to articulate the interlocking and multilayered manifestations of racial oppression and help to highlight the structural nature of racism.

*Individual racism* refers to personal situations in which the distribution of goods and/or services are restricted to or biased against someone based on his or her perceived racial minority status. Individual racism also refers to personal acts designed to humiliate or degrade an individual(s) based on his or her racial group membership, such as name-calling or physical abuse. The brutal attack of Abner Louima, a Black Haitian father, by at least two White

New York police officers exemplify an extreme form of individual racism. Believing that such extreme forms of individual racism are the only ways racism is experienced, some Blacks, for example, may report that they have never experienced racism. Moreover, some Whites may proclaim that they see racism as aberrational because the information they receive, especially if it is primarily from mainstream media, reveal only a few and typically extreme and horrific cases of individual racism.

Corollary to individual racism is *everyday racism*, which has received increased attention in the research literature (Essed, 1991). Everyday racism transcends individual and institutional levels of racism; it is the ordinary or habitual occurrences that people of color encounter in their day-to-day lives, such as name-calling; being followed in department stores; and mistreatment by strangers, vendors, or gatekeepers of certain services. These repetitive acts are heterogeneous in that the types or expressions of racism one encounters are influenced by one's class, racial classification, and gender. For example, the everyday racism experienced by middle-class Asian American women is different from that experienced by working-class Latino males. Exceptional cases of racism that lay outside the bounds of normal daily activity should not be confused with everyday racism, such as being a victim of a racially motivated attack or murder.

What empowers the police officers in the Louima case to exert their extreme acts are the other forms of racism. Allegedly, these police officers explained that their use of brutality was justified as a method to teach Louima and other Blacks to respect police authority. *Institutional racism* generally refers to the policies, practices, and norms that incidentally, but inevitably, perpetuate inequality (i.e., restrict life opportunities of people of color). Institutional racism has one of the more damaging effects on people, resulting in significant economic, legal, political, and social restrictions. One powerful way in which institutional racism is conveyed is through the media. We noted earlier that the mainstream media occasionally reveals acts of extreme racism. On occasion, these mainstream outlets focus on racist practices in the job market and some other institutional arena, or on the racism experiences of some people of color. But important, these media convey events from the perspectives of the powerful and elite (van Dijk, 1987). The suppression or amplification of knowledge, as well as the practice of reporting acts of discrimination as incidents rather than as experiences of widespread racism, represent just two strategies that help enliven racism.

Cultural racism is the practice based on the conscious or unconscious belief that White cultural values embraced in the United States are the norm and are superior to the cultural practices and values of racial minorities. This form of racism often results in limiting, pathologizing, exoticizing, or entirely omitting the cultural practices or values and contributions of racial

minorities. A simple example of cultural racism is when educational institutions refer to classical European music and literature as “high culture” and either omit or diminish the musical and intellectual contributions of other groups. Cultural racism also enables White individuals to deny or distort the influence of other cultural practices on their values and customs (Takaki, 1993).

With the success of the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit held in Washington, D.C. in 1991, *environmental racism* has emerged as a notable fourth form of racism. Essentially, environmental racism is “racial discrimination in environmental policy-making . . . in the enforcement of regulations and laws . . . and in the official sanctioning of the life threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color” (Chavis, 1993, p. 3). Environmental racism differentially affects the health risks for Whites and racial minorities in their communities and work environments. The Kennedy Heights case illustrates recent attention given to environmental racism. Residents in this predominantly Black working class Houston neighborhood filed a suit against a major oil company for intentionally allowing a housing development (targeted to low-income Blacks) to be built in an area that had been contaminated by the company in the late 1920s. Residents argue that poisoning from this contamination is responsible for the high cancer and lupus rates of residents in the neighborhood.

#### **RACISM HAS EVOLVED OVER HISTORY AND ACROSS REGIONS OF THE UNITED STATES**

Racism has evolved over time as a changing yet enduring outgrowth of American social, political, and economic life. Therefore, it is inaccurate to conclude that racism was essentially nonexistent during certain historical periods (e.g., following the civil rights movement) and prevalent during other periods (e.g., slavery, the segregated U.S. south). Instead, its character has taken shape in several different ways, depending on the various themes of the historical period (Helms, 1995) and, importantly, on the extent to which there was a threat to the notion of White superiority or privilege (e.g., Dees, 1991; Frederickson, 1988). It is also notable that the four forms of racism outlined earlier have been observed throughout the history of America. For example, evidence of individual racism were in the brutal killings of Native Americans during America’s formative years and the fire bombing of Black churches in the 1950s. In contemporary society, institutional forms of racism is reflected in the alleged practice of restricting the admission of Asian and Asian American college applicants to prestigious U.S. institutions, and in the ongoing exploitation of Mexican and Central American farm workers on Californian grape farms. Examples of the evidences of environmental racism include the taking over of the land of indigenous Americans by European settlers, and the



building of freeways through and dumping of toxic waste in low-income, non-White racial communities during the 1960s to the present.

Racism not only differs over time but also across different regions of the country. Multiple factors contribute to how regional identities are shaped and, recursively, to how people's identities are influenced by the racial climates of these regions. Consequently, the racial dynamics of one community or region may sharply differ from another, yet the racism still maintains. For example, in a historical account of the Mississippi Delta, historian Cobb (1992) reveals that by the 19th century, the Delta had already assumed an enduring identity as a region "where the wealthy, status-conscious White elite exploited the labor of a large and thoroughly subjugated Black majority" (p. 28). Hence, although the Delta has long been perceived as a region in which "time stood still" in regards to racial stratification, Cobb establishes that the continued stratification of Blacks and Whites across social, political, and economic lines was and continues to be willfully constructed. Similar to Cobb's account of how the legacy of oppression is reconstructed in the Delta, M. Davis (1992) describes how Los Angeles, too, remains racially divided, despite the growing numbers of people of color in the city and the prevailing perception that the city's social, political, and economic arenas reflect racial diversity. M. Davis documents how such occurrences as "extreme gerrymandering," the creation of homeowners' associations, the advocations of conservationists and environmentalists, and the cropping and implementation of anticrime programs have helped to create a city that is highly stratified along racial and class boundaries. In effect, M. Davis argues, much of what has helped to shape the identity of Los Angeles as a major urban center has concentrated also on sustaining the privileges of White elites relative to the growing numbers of racial/ethnic minorities.

Yet another persistent quality of racism that has endured the generations is the manner in which people deal with it. For example, selective attention and denial represent a sample of the ways in which racism is perpetuated across historical periods. For example, at the turn of the century, antilynching activist Ida B. Wells-Barnett spoke boldly of how White lynch mobs justified their acts in the face of knowing the innocence of their victims. A major point of Wells-Barnett's advocations was that these lynchings were brutal, terroristic acts that were used to exert dominance and power over Blacks and not, as Wells's detractors asserted, quixotic acts by White men to defend the virtues of (presumably White) womanhood. The justifications of these lynch mobs were based largely on denial, selective attention on the "facts" of each case, and more fundamentally, the unswerving belief that Blacks were inferior and deserved to be treated savagely by their more civilized racial counterparts. Another example of reality-distorting strategies used mostly by Whites to deny a non-White racial group's humanity is the use of physical violence or

restrictive codes to disadvantage people of color without acknowledging the actions that contribute to the disadvantage. Enslaved Africans who were found reading or learning to read were subjected to punishment by Whites. In juxtaposition with this law was the pervasive assumption that the enslaved Africans were uneducable and unintelligent.

The practice of exerting dominance and oppression, while simultaneously denying the existence of these measures in explaining certain phenomena, continues today, but largely in evolved or "sophisticated" forms. For example, in investigations of why White parents objected to the increased racial integration of their children's schools, Fine (1990) found the liberal use of words and phrases by these parents that simultaneously allowed them to deflect the existence of structural inequality and inflate themselves as moral and just in their decisions. Fine stated that the use of such words as *meritocracy* and *parental choice* serve to help accord these parents the privilege to believe that they are justified in their actions. Under the assumption of a color-blind society, this language invokes a reality of fairness and democracy.

### **Mental Health: A Working Definition**

One of the earliest efforts to define mental health was by Marie Jahoda (1958), a social psychologist who conducted studies that distinguished prejudiced from unprejudiced Whites relative to mental health qualities. Jahoda helped to broaden the perspective that mental health was not merely the absence of mental illness, but rather a phenomenon that referred to an individual's ability to realistically and productively engage in his or her environment. Jahoda's (1958) definition of positive mental health includes the following criteria:

(1) being self-aware, self-accepting, and enjoying a stable identity, (2) individual development and actualization of his or her potential; (3) an individual's integration of psychic functions, (4) an individual's autonomy, relative independence from social pressures, and ability to act independently under internal controls, (5) the adequacy of an individual's perception of reality, and (6) the ability to master one's environment at a reasonable level of competency. (As cited in Pettigrew, 1980, pp. 12-58)

Jahoda's (1958) application of multiple criteria to define mental health has greatly influenced current conceptualizations. A brochure distributed to the public by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) proposes a definition of mental health similar to that of Jahoda's definition. This brochure, written for lay audiences, is the only source in which the term *mental health* is defined within the NIMH documents. Similarly, in an extensive review, Lazarus (1975) identified several themes in defining mental health that are

consistent with Jahoda's criteria. For example, the ability to accurately perceive reality appears in many conceptualizations on mental health, as well as issues of adaptation and coping, the development of intimacy, and an ability to participate constructively or competently in one's environment.

From a lay standpoint, these criteria appear to have face validity, especially in explaining adult mental health. Also, multiple criteria definitions illustrate the complexity of mental health, as opposed to delimiting the concept to one phenomena such as freedom from illness. However, authors who have reviewed definitions of mental health (e.g., George & Brooker, 1984; Lazarus, 1975; Ramseur, 1991) have concluded that Jahoda's (1958) definition and other multiple criteria definitions of mental health lack a conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon and, therefore, leave uncertain the relationship of certain criteria to others. Furthermore, multiple criteria definitions of mental health reveal little about how inchoate qualities of mental health, if they exist, reveal themselves at various life stages.

Other limitations of multiple criteria and related definitions of mental health are the assumption of universality and the omission of cultural values. In defining mental health, it is important to identify the context in which the term will be applied. In doing so, understanding the cultural values of theorists and society is critical to evaluating the appropriateness of the definition. Different theorists have and will continue to conceptualize mental health according to what they themselves value or consider to be important in their culture. Indeed, the issue of values as guiding mental health conceptualizations is one that some critics have raised in their reviews. Lazarus (1975) raised this issue as a caution to his readers at the outset of his review, stating that what is considered "healthy" is no different from what is regarded as "virtuous" by society, "in spite of our tendency to run for cover under pseudo-scientific and medical terms" (p. 7). Still, it is telling that in reviewing the different conceptualizations, several common themes emerge.

In considering the values tied to theorists' conceptualizations of mental health, it would also seem to be a useful exercise to examine the influences that have helped to inform the theory of the theorist. In several ways, this examination is done frequently in biographies of highly influential theorists to Western society (e.g., Monte, 1977). These life stories help us to gain an understanding of the forces that have helped shape the theorist and his or her efforts to create a framework of mental health. For instance, in a biographical account of Frantz Fanon (1968) and his works, Bulhan (1985) describes the various theorists who influenced the Martiniquean psychiatrist and the ways in which (and why) Fanon departed from these influential thinkers in his efforts to create a psychology of oppression and liberation.

Fanon (1968) was interested in developing a theory to explain psychological functioning, adaptation, and mental health treatment that included a

reality of societal oppression. What Fanon discovered in learning the theories of European psychiatrists and psychologists was a virtual absence of any discourse on colonization and its relevance to mental health. For example, although Fanon admired certain aspects of the works of Carl Jung, he was also quick to acknowledge limitations to Jungian theory.

I believe it is necessary to become a child again in order to grasp certain psychic realities. This is where Jung was an innovator. He wanted to go back to the childhood of the world, but he made a remarkable mistake: He went back only to the childhood of Europe. (Fanon, 1968, p. 190)

In describing Fanon's (1968) European influences, Bulhan (1985) elaborated on the manner in which Fanon reconciled what he believed to be useful aspects of these personality theories and what he deemed to be aspects that deemphasized the role of colonialism to mental health conceptualizations. Speaking of Europe's "convenient amnesia," Bulhan explains how European-influenced theories served not only the racist status quo of the theorist's era but also helped to perpetuate future racism and colonization.

There is a culture of silence on Europe's violence and a convenient amnesia among established psychologists. Writers in the history of psychology too remain fettered by the same tradition of selective inattention. Europe's violent assaults within and without its borders are sloughed off as if they never existed or mattered. Conveniently omitted also are the bigotry and complicity of major pioneers who defined the priorities, content, and methods of establishment psychology. History and ideas are thereby "sanitized." Psychological theories shorn of their relative oppression are catalogued; technical innovation for the economics of inequity and politics of domination are brandished. In the end, amnesia of the expert fosters more amnesia in the neophyte. (pp. 58-59)

These theories, if presumed by practitioners to be universal in application, can relegate people of color to positions of deviancy, especially when they are seen creating environments that Europeans and Whites choose not to perceive fully (see also Gould, 1981; Kovel, 1970/1984; Sue & Sue, 1990; Thomas & Sillen, 1972; J. White, 1991). Taken a step further, it is not difficult to conceive how strategies for treating racism in therapy remains illusory when these theories are split off from a socioracial context.

Ramseur (1991) addressed the question of whether mainstream models of mental health (which Lazarus only reviewed) apply universally to all people in American society. He reviewed conceptualizations of psychological health from two perspectives: models that describe presumably universalistic conceptions of healthy adults and models that propose conceptions of psychologically healthy Black adults. Ramseur concurs with the conclusion that

conceptualizations of mental health are tied intimately to the values of the theorist. Importantly, Ramseur noted that of the so-called universal models of psychological health, there are perspectives and ideas that indeed seem to touch on universally applied notions of psychological health. However, these models do not lend themselves to explanations of how members of one oppressed group (in Ramseur's case, Blacks) become and remain healthy in lieu of a racially oppressive environment. Although many of the so-called universal models attend to the influences of the environment in shaping individual personality, there is little inclusion of the extent of pathology in the environment owed to racism. On the other side of the ledger are those models of health that focus on Black personality and identity. Ramseur asserts that these models have generally assumed pathological reactions to the environment with little diversity in explaining how Blacks respond to racism in their environment.

Jones (1991) agrees with and extends Ramseur's conclusion. Jones points out that Black personality theories tend to focus not only on the negative consequences of racism as informing Black personality but also on the contention that for Blacks to overcome racial self-hatred, they need to jettison an internalized White ideal, develop an active engagement with the collective Black group identity, and accept the existence of and value African cultural origins. Although he sees merit in several models of Black personality, Jones believes that they overlook the notion that positive mental health for Blacks may not entail political engagement, White rejection, or the adoption of African cultural values. He also makes yet another important notation: These models tend to provide a linear and overly simplistic view of Black personality and, therefore, "fall short of providing a comprehensive account of the variable contexts of Black personality" (p. 312). A similar critique can be said of other conceptualizations of people of color.

And what of the role of the healthy White personality in conceptions of mental health? Although one might assume that the so-called universal models of mental health were targeted for explaining the mental health of Whites, it can be argued that they have failed to examine the mental health effects of societal racism on White people. The existing theories that direct attention to the influence of racism on people of color coupled with the relative lack of attention devoted to racism's impact on Whites suggests that there exists no interdependency between people in a given society. Scholars have theorized and have begun to empirically investigate the consequences of racism on people of color (e.g., Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). However, with notable exception (e.g., Frankenberg, 1993), few scholars have delved into conceptions of how racism affects its beneficiaries. But, and as Bowser and Hunt (1981) write,

An essential reality of North American race relations is that its practitioners are White. Studying the victims of racism is obviously important, but limiting inquiry only to victims invariably leads only to proposing palliatives to soften abuses and comfort the oppressed. Such measures do little to alter permanently the determining circumstances of victimization. (p. 246)

In a rare effort, Myers (1988) conceptualized mental health by directly addressing the pathologies inherent in several oppressive forces, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation, and their effects on the psychological functioning of all people. Myers proposed that people behave optimally when they come to realize the connection between spirit and matter and, by implication, the inseparableness between the spiritual self (as manifestations of God or Goddess) and the material self. When people rid themselves of their spiritual selves, Myers asserts, they define their realities according to what they perceive through their five senses and, therefore, are bound to a material reality. Accordingly, and because of the basic human need to feel worthy and accepted, people rely on external indicators of self-worth.

According to Myers (1988), people behave suboptimally by basing their judgments of their worth and the worth of others on tangible indicators, such as how much a person owns, how well a person dresses, or how attractive (or White, or gay, or feminine) a person appears. A system that relegates certain people as better or worse or as superior or inferior to others without regard for our common humanity fragments humankind. In a parallel fashion, to operate suboptimally is to experience a fragmenting of the self because the individual is preoccupied with fitting himself or herself into desirable categories to achieve a sense of belonging and to offset a sense of worthlessness and alienation. This preoccupation sets up a dilemma: There will always be someone with greater wealth, better looks, or more popularity, and therefore, the person is never earnestly successful in achieving this false sense of acceptance. Myers proposes that when people experience this dilemma and the concomitant feelings associated with felt isolation and meaninglessness, they can begin the process of optimalization. This process entails a gradual recognition and acceptance of both a material and nonmaterial (spiritual) reality and, hence, an ability to perceive reality accurately, including the ability to achieve an understanding of the basic humanity of all people.

We applaud Myers's (1988) conceptual achievements in explicating how mental health is frustrated when societal oppression is taken into account and how changes should theoretically arise in overcoming the effects of these oppressions on individuals. With further developments, we believe this theory is informative in conceptualizing client distress, assisting in the training of practitioners, and deliberating treatment. We do not attempt to provide such a comprehensive theory here but, instead, offer a working multiple

criteria definition of mental health that incorporates components of Myers's and Fanon's (1968) thinking.

We concur that conceptualizations of mental health are value and culturally based (e.g., Sue & Sue, 1990). Therefore, we state overtly some of our biases in arriving at our definition of mental health. We concur with Bulhan (1985) and Myers (1988) that aspects of several widely accepted theories are useful, but we reject the practice of denying an environment that propagates the maltreatment and exploitation of people. Our definition attempts to take into account the impact of oppression on psychological functioning of all people in a given context and, therefore, has moral overtones. We also base our definition on a communal (versus individualistic) orientation.

It is important to note that on some points, we two authors do not agree. A major difference between our world views relates to our beliefs in a higher being. One of us believes in the notion of a spiritual reality; the other does not. But in crafting a definition of mental health, we share the following values: (a) being inclusive and, therefore, attempting to draw on the life experiences of marginalized as well as entitled groups of people; (b) stressing oft-stated criteria of mental health that appear to have some resonance for several theorists (e.g., Fanon, 1968; Myers, 1988), such as accuracy in perceiving reality, healthy coping and adaptation, and the capacity to experience a full range of emotions and behave competently; and (c) viewing individual mental health as inseparable from the environment. Given these assumptions and perspectives, our working definition mental health is as follows:

To be mentally healthy is to be aware of self and others, and accepting of self and others, and to enjoy a stable identity. Mentally healthy people are capable of perceiving reality accurately and are able to cope with and influence their environments based on their levels of cognitive, affective, and moral development. Mentally healthy adults understand that they are inseparable from the environments in which they live and influence. Mentally healthy adults take responsibility for themselves and ensure responsibility for present and future society (hence their families, communities, and institutions). Mentally healthy adults recognize that people are human, no lesser or greater than the next. Raising mentally healthy children involves conveying these ways of being through parenting, formal education, and other socializing practices.

### **Summary of Definitions**

In this section, we have attempted to provide working definitions of the terms race, racism, and mental health as the bases for further developments. In summary, race refers to a categorization in which people are distinguished in social relations with other people in part by their physical characteristics. This categorizing can occur by others or by themselves; consequently, individuals may consider themselves to be of one racial group (e.g., Native



American), even though they may not appear so phenotypically. However, people who have a biological parent who is Native American, were raised with other Native Americans, and are referred to by others within their community as Native American will likely identify themselves as Native Americans. The permeability of racial self- and/or societal identification reflects, to a great extent, the "impurity" of race and the absurdity surrounding race's conventional and strict association with biogenetics. Indeed, from a definitional perspective, race can be seen as a human invention; this is supported by investigations of its origins and construction over generations (e.g., see Smedley, 1993).

When racism is defined narrowly as individual or group attitudes and actions, it overlooks the history and context of racial oppression and, therefore, minimizes the complexity of the construct. In our definition, we have tried to account for the existence of stereotyping and mistreatment by one or more racial group to others, but we distinguish these behaviors and attitudes as evidence of racial prejudice rather than racism. The key is that racism is more than ideology; it involves a system of structural relations and thus can be manifested in multiple forms, including institutional, cultural, and environmental.

Mental health is an important yet nebulous abstraction. We briefly outlined a cross-section of reviews on mental health or "healthy personality" definitions to identify common elements and significant omissions. Our working definition of mental health incorporated our values in desiring an end to racism and other oppressive forces that fractionalize the notion of a common humanity. Retaining elements that appear common to other definitions of mental health, such as adaptation and coping, and accuracy in perceiving reality, we incorporated aspects in our definition that seem imperative to the development of morality, such as the ability to perceive self as influencing and being influenced by one's environment and viewing others as equals.

### **SYSTEMS THEORY INFLUENCES IN PSYCHOLOGY**

Theory has traditionally guided the research and clinical work of counseling psychologists. Systems-oriented theories have been extremely helpful in assisting applied psychologists to conceptualize the role of the environment on individual and group behavior. We assert that systems-oriented theories also have implications for understanding the influences of the structures of racism, not only on individual and group behavior but also on treatment and intervention practices.

Recent years have shown a proliferation of writings that reflect a systems orientation to psychological theory, research, and practice. Although differences exist between these paradigms and perspectives (see Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986), a common thread in these writings is the recognition that people and environments are in constant interaction, dialectically influencing and shaping the other in an open system (Katz & Kahn, 1978). We believe that the recent advent of these philosophies and paradigms reflect some growth in the profession. To be sure, there is resistance to this growing force (e.g., see Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996), as well as evidence of its cyclical nature over the course of history and across several professions. However, the tenets of these philosophies and paradigms are compelling to the profession's oft-stated desire to best capture the complexity and Gestalt of psychological phenomena and to bridge science and practice (Hoshmand & Polkinghorne, 1992). We also believe that an examination of systems-related perspectives in psychology is important to achieving an understanding and appreciation of historical and contextual influences to psychological functioning. In this section, we present a brief overview of four systems-related theories and their collective influence in explaining the phenomenon of racism.

#### **Four System-Oriented Theories**

Systems-oriented theories are similar in that they acknowledge that the interaction between humans and their environment is dynamic and that each influences the other. However, there are important differences between these perspectives. One main difference is the degree to which the environment is viewed as relatively objective or as being constructed by the individual, that is, relative. Constructivism is one of the theories on the subjective construction end of the continuum. Mahoney and Patterson (1992), who label the changes within the psychology profession as signs of a "cognitive revolution," asserted that recent thinkers in constructivism argue that environments are proactively constructed by the individual and that the relationship between an organism and its world entails a complex and dynamic reciprocity of influence. This development contrasts earlier, behavior formulations that placed behaviors as a function of environments ( $B = f[E]$ ). A central principle of the constructivist perspective thus is that "humans actively construct the realities to which they respond" (p. 671). Mahoney and Gabriel (1987) state that reality is not viewed as external and stable but as a coconstruction and that "human thought is not meaningfully separable from human feeling and action" (p. 46). Motor metatheories (contrasted with sensory models of cognitive and perceptual processes), evolutionary epistemology (the study of knowing systems and their development), and autopoiesis (self-organizing

processes in complex, open systems) are complementary developments of constructivism (see Mahoney & Patterson, 1992).

Contextualism is another construct that attempts to explain the complexity of human behavior in place of previous, more simplistic explanations. However, contextualism acknowledges the objective social conditions in which humans function. According to Rosnow and Georgoudi (1986), contextualism

underscores the idea that human activity does not develop in a social vacuum, but rather it is rigorously situated within a sociohistorical and cultural context of meanings and relationships. Like a message that makes sense only in terms of the total context in which it occurs, human actions are embedded in a context of time, space, culture, and the local tacit rules of conduct. (p. 4)

These authors also explain that macrolevel contexts enter and become incorporated into the microlevel contexts of everyday life. Conversely, everyday practices intentionally or unintentionally instigate change in the wider context within which they occur and consequently, "people construct contexts in discourse, exchange, and communications" (p. 8). Similarly, interactionism assumes that individual functioning is not determined by person factors or situation factors in isolation but by inseparable person and situation interactions (Magnusson & Allen, 1983). From a developmental point of view, the person-environment interaction is regarded as a continuously emerging and ever-changing process over time—"as symbolized not by a circle but by a helix or spiral" (Magnusson & Allen, 1983, p. 7). Focusing on popular psychological models of human development, Steenbarger (1991) maintained that the combined forces of constructivism and interactional counseling help serve contextualist notions of counseling. Steenbarger stated that these combined forces add complexity and depth to models of psychological development by taking into account significant situational events that influence the developmental process.

Closer to the objective social conditions end of the spectrum, theorists of social constructionism and hermeneutics (e.g., Cushman, 1991; Gergen, 1985) emphasized the issues of power and privilege in the interplay between macro- and microlevel contexts. They contend that people and environments do not influence the other equally: This dialectical influence is embedded in a sociopolitical context. According to Cushman (1991), exclusion of political structures as factors that inform and shape behaviors and psyches has yielded incomplete theories of psychology. Cushman also asserted that by not observing the sociopolitical matrix in seeking explanations of human behavior and, thereby, decontextualizing psychological science, psychologists have "put forth an agenda that is relative and political without appearing to do so" (p. 206).

Ecological or contextual models represent a widely acknowledged perspective in the field of community psychology. Ecological approaches differ somewhat from the theories described earlier in that they account for human development throughout the life span with implications for interventions, including social programs and policy. Simply put, ecological models are nested-systems models in which individuals are characterized as developing and being influenced by their interactions within and between immediate systems (e.g., school and church) and social structures (e.g., political and economic systems). Bronfenbrenner (1977) further defines the ecological approach as follows:

The ecology of human development is the scientific study of the progressive, individual accommodation, throughout the lifespan, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (p. 514)

Psychologists adopting an ecological perspective are concerned with observing environments and systems in addition to individuals, and thus, they acknowledge objective social conditions, such as poverty and racism. One goal of this approach is to explore the fit between individuals and the environments in which they operate. Exploration of this fit has direct implications for intervention approaches such that the

ecological paradigm . . . can be applied as a means to adjust persons to environments or environments to people, but also allows for the possibility that neither solution is adequate and that entirely new environments, created by and in the control of, people who are different from the mainstream, are desirable. (Rapaport, 1977, p. 23)

### **A Systems Application to Racism**

We believe the focus of systems-oriented theories, particularly the theories upholding a belief in an objective environment (i.e., one that is not subjective or relative), provide a useful tool in describing the perpetuating and evolving nature of racism and, likewise, the impact of racism on interpersonal interactions and individual functioning. Indeed, several scholars have long criticized the psychology profession for failing to take into account the history and context of personality development, in particular, the reality of exploitation, violence, and dehumanization on human behavior and functioning. For example, although the roots of this systems approach have been attributed to a variety of philosophical sources, including Buddhism and Confucianism (Bhola, personal communication, March 1998), similar ideas

have been expressed by Fanon (1968), Akbar (1985), Kovel, (1970/1984), and J. White (1991) in their attempts to explain the perpetuation of violence and colonization as an outgrowth of history and evolved practices of racism. Stated another way, these authors have contended that expressions of racism emerge out of a history of racial oppression and from the construction of racist ideology. These authors also asserted that any attempts to discern and, likewise, confront racism likely will entail an understanding of the context that nurtures it.

From a systems perspective, American racism began and continues to evolve as a means to subjugate its targets for the purpose of gratifying the economical, social, and psychological needs of mainly wealthy Whites. Racism accomplishes its objective of domination by relying on efforts to erase or deemphasize the malevolence of the perpetrator; consequently, many Whites in early America had to craft people of color as less human than themselves or merely as deserving of mistreatment. Thus, for White American settlers to secure land in the New World from Native Americans, profit fiscally from the labor of enslaved Africans, and protect their prosperity from Asians and Mexicans, a host of measures were employed to sanction these actions. For example, stereotypical images of the savage Native American, the docile and childlike African, the dirty Mexican, and the conspiring or heathen Asian helped to portray the subjugated as inferior and, by implication, deserving of domination and exploitation. Depending on the level of threat to White entitlement, these images could rise in fervor or even change from one stereotype to another, such as the pious versus the gun-toting and hostile Mexican American. The psychology profession was no stranger to this construction, especially in "proving" inferiority in non-White people (e.g., see Gould, 1981; Guthrie, 1976, 1998; Thomas & Sillen, 1972).

These earlier manifestations of racism influenced the establishment of law and in the institution of policies to segregate housing, in limiting educational and occupational access and ascendancy, and in prohibiting people of color from having access to establishments or facilities reserved for Whites, such as restaurants, schools, amusement parks, movie houses, and recreational arenas. Without serious regard for how the likelihood of discriminatory actions and racist attitudes can reverberate into rage, poor education, and a generational cycle of helplessness and poverty, many Whites were eager to advocate for, or merely agree to, laws and policies that would establish further limits to the civil rights of people of color (e.g., Massey & Denton, 1993; Ryan, 1976; Takaki, 1991). Roediger (1991, 1994) and Morrison (1992) proposed that the "racialization" of American society stemmed from the desire of early European emigrés to rid themselves of their former, regional heritages and forge new, romanticized identities as Americans. They argued further that the presence of subjugated non-Whites was in fact necessary in

helping Whites construct this idealized self. It would be important to acknowledge that although American racism possesses unique qualities that can be attributed to a system of influences that occurred on American soil, it was also influenced by centuries of global domination of Europeans over non-European (as well as other European countries).

Although legalized racism is largely abolished, signs of the evolving helix of racism are evidenced in all sectors of American life. An examination of discourse, exchange, and communications reveals ways in which macro- and microlevel racism continually interact to give way to a constant, evolving racism. More pointedly, a study of the subtleties of language and of meta-communication points discernibly to how racism can thrive in a climate that also condemns it.

Discourse theory specifically “maintains that talk and language do not serve simply nor primarily as expressive functions. . . . Both language and communication are cultural practices within which the various realities of one’s encounters are constituted” (Sampson, 1993, p. 1221). Sampson (1993) employs discourse theory in his work on demonstrating how societal oppression is sustained. For example, in observing claims by several identity groups (e.g., gay men and lesbians, racial/ethnic minorities, and women of all races) that they are denied voice in establishing the conditions of their lives and in determining their own identity and subjectivity, Sampson presents examples of how people use language to accommodate missing voices. As one example, discourse analyses reveal that marginalized others are often treated as though their purpose is to serve the needs of the dominant group, and therefore, to assume the role of the “serviceable other.” Sampson maintains that these approaches merely accommodate marginalized groups and, thereby, frustrate the goal of transforming the profession to be genuinely inclusive. Concentrated attention on discourse and communication is important to analyzing how racism is cocreated, sometimes quite subtly, in the racial socialization of all Americans and especially in the psychotherapy context.

### SYSTEMS OF RACISM: MACRO- AND MICROLEVELS

Scholars that adhere to a systems or ecological perspective suggest that human development and functioning is best understood when we examine the complex interaction between individuals and the various environments in which they interact. The two systems levels of focus include macro- and microlevels (Essed, 1991). *Macrolevel* refers to the cultural values, ideology, and practices of a given society. *Microlevel* refers to the beliefs and practices of an individual unit (e.g., human, family, etc.). In this section, we review

dimensions of macrolevel racism, which are further elaborations of the institutional forms of racism described earlier. We also discuss microlevel racism by describing specific defense mechanisms used by Whites and people of color to preserve racism and legitimize the status quo.

We repeat and emphasize here that to attribute monolithic qualities onto Whites and people of color is to oversimplify reality. People are complex. They are capable of engaging in behaviors that help to chip away at societal racism, and simultaneously, perpetuate it. Contextual and historical factors, such as social movements, have inspired the deregulation of racism and a rise in the consciousness of people regarding matters of race. People of color are socialized by their families and communities to resist racism; their endurance and survival are proof of the effectiveness of this legacy. These efforts are not to be minimized because without them, positive changes in the environment would never have occurred and the inherent complexity of humans would be unfairly compromised. But these efforts are limited in dismantling racism. People and environments engage pathologically to spur a cycle of dehumanization, and any chance for a cessation of the cycle will depend on efforts to stop the pathology at both the macro- and microlevels. Whites are the benefactors of racism and have a major stake in its cessation. Consequently, Whites must play a principal role in the struggle. People of color also have a major stake in ending racism. The recognition by all people in American society to the plaguing of racism is a necessary precondition for its ultimate eradication.

### **Macrolevel Racism**

As noted in Section 2, there is a dialectical interaction between environments and individuals that produces an environment in which racism is perpetuated. This construction must occur by means of squaring the discomfort inherent in condoning injustice on the basis of skin color. Within the macrolevel context of racism, the construction occurs by sanctioning language and practices that serve to (a) deny or selectively attend to the relevance of race to certain people and to race-related phenomena; (b) render irrelevant or marginal the contributions or perspectives of people of color and, likewise, "standardize" the perspectives of Whites; and (3) promote a climate of dysconsciousness (i.e., a *Zeitgeist* in which disparities in reality are tolerated rather than investigated critically). Below, we examine these three components more closely.

Included among the traditions that both reflect and influence society's cultural values are the media, scholarship, and educational practices. Media play a large role in influencing the racial climate. Americans rely heavily on the mass media for information about the society in which they live, and the



media shape Americans' social perceptions and political attitudes in important ways (Gilens, 1996; Giroux, 1997; Wildman, 1996). Racial stereotypes continue to appear in commercial, mainstream films, and the preponderance of Whites in heroic roles and people of color in secondary roles prevails (e.g., Bogle, 1989; Wildman, 1996; Wong, 1998). News productions, an important source of knowledge for adult citizens, convey what is newsworthy and what is not. And although there would appear to be some range of perspectives expressed in the media, ideological diversity is in reality quite narrow (Campbell, 1995; Essed, 1991; van Dijk, 1991). Despite the increases in the past three decades in the number of people of color who report or write the news, there is virtually no representation within mainstream circles in making decisions about what is printed or broadcast.

Terms such as *reverse discrimination*, *preferential treatment*, and *political correctness*, are conveyed as acceptable nomenclature, although they reflect and serve to legitimize ideas of White entitlement. Recent language to propagate support for California state Propositions 187 and 209—"Save Our State" and "Save Our Children," respectively—help to ensure the perspectives of influential supporters on the basis of seemingly universal values.

Media distort images of racial groups by ignoring the historical and contextual factors that influence various events and phenomena. Hence, in efforts to control immigration of Mexican Americans in California, little attention is paid in explaining the role these immigrants have played in the past and contemporary state economy. The media also distort truth. For example, Gilens (1996) examined weekly newsmagazines and television news stories and found distortions in portrayals of the poor in general, and of poor African Americans in particular. Gilens found that the media coverage of poverty reflect a negative race bias, wherein portrayals of poor Blacks predominate over images of poor Whites. He suggested that public perceptions—and misperceptions—and media portrayals influence each other wherein media reproduce biases in their portrayals of the human condition.

Furthermore, when people of color in history are portrayed by Whites as mysteriously subjugated or as invisible in terms of their contribution to the American landscape, then efforts to reinsert these missing data can be a source of dis-ease and anger. In these cases, people of color can be perceived by Whites as nuisances—annoying reminders of what many Whites would prefer to forget or minimize. In a helical fashion, the identities of people of color are pushed further into the periphery, and the standardization and near-invisibility of Whites as a racial group helps to deflect the experiences of people of color as being attributable to racism. Similarly, such terms as *economically disadvantaged* and *culturally deprived* place responsibility on those who fit these categories and silently affirms the rightful or deserved place of those who do not fit into the categories. Burgest (as cited in Moore, 1988)

suggested that the term *culturally deprived* be replaced with *culturally dispossessed* and the term *economically disadvantaged* be replaced by *economically exploited* to provide an entirely different frame of reference to the reality that non-Whites or poor people experience in U.S. society.

Blatant disregard for the perspectives of people of color helps to reinforce the denial, such as the recent advocacy to raise the confederate flag at a state-sponsored gala in Virginia and the arguments by some legislatures that reflected a dismissal of the flag's meaning to African Americans. In another recent example, White Louisiana fishermen who believed that their rights were being infringed on by Vietnamese immigrants whom they saw as competitors persuaded the governor to impose restrictions on these newly arrived citizens (Dees, 1991). Similar to the above example, the decision was made with little or no regard for the perspectives and, indeed, the humanity of people of color, in this case, the Vietnamese Americans who were eventually ambushed by members of the Ku Klux Klan. Instead, the perspectives and opinions of the Whites who believed they were entitled to certain rights were given more weight than the Vietnamese citizens.

We contend that a climate of dysconsciousness also contributes to macro-level racism. This lack of critical consciousness condones an acquiescence to racism in the face of discrepancies that question or compromise the values of justice and racial equality. King (1991) described this phenomenon as a manifestation of Whites' awareness of racism but failing to question its existence critically, preferring instead to rely on the distortions that maintain or reinforce their entitlement in society. She also refers to this as *dysconscious racism*, which refers to her belief that racism is perpetuated not merely by the absence of consciousness but by an impaired consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race. We emphasize that this dysconsciousness appears to relate not only to an unwillingness to square differences in reality but also to reckoning differences in how people express their moral views (e.g., "everyone possesses worth") with how they conduct their lives (i.e., discriminating against or condoning the discrimination of members of a particular racial group).

### **Microlevel Racism**

Microlevel racism refers to how individual units, namely humans, deal with racial stimuli. Racial stimuli can include people of different racial groups, as well as information concerning racial groups. Individual strategies to address with racism can range from healthy acknowledgment and confrontation to unhealthy distortions and denial. We focus the first part of this section on three main components of microlevel racism: (a) the use of defense mechanisms to maintain and/or perpetuate racism, (b) the effects of racism

on inter- and intraracial interpersonal relationships, and (c) specific strategies used to distort the self as a racial being.

#### INDIVIDUAL STRATEGIES: DEFENSE MECHANISMS

Conceived originally by Freud (1938), a defense mechanism is defined as “an unconscious distortion of reality that reduces painful affect and conflict through automatic and habitual responses” (Clark, 1991, p. 231). We modify this definition by stating that individuals distort a reality of racism dysconsciously, rather than unconsciously, because people generally have access to knowledge that refutes the denial of racism. These distortions generally aid in an individual’s attempt to protect himself or herself from a threat and by mitigating the individual’s anxiety, guilt, shame, grief, humiliations, remorse, embarrassment, or other painful feelings. Everyone uses defense mechanisms to negotiate life challenges. However, defenses become abnormal when a person rigidly adheres to the response style rather than using flexible cognitive and behavioral response styles to meet challenges (Clark, 1991; Delaney, 1991). The following descriptions of racism-related defenses are not mutually exclusive, and it is our contention that people often use a combination of these mechanisms to protect against the threat and consequences of acknowledging racism.

Our examples relate to defense mechanisms employed by Whites in preserving racism; however, we note here that similar strategies are employed by people of color in colluding in an ideology of White supremacy. We propose that differences exist in why Whites and people of color employ these strategies. The strategies used by people of color and the differences in their usage based on racial status will be examined more closely in the next subsection, which focuses on the interpersonal manifestations of racism.

*Denial or selective attention.* Probably the two most pervasive and primitive mechanisms used by individuals to avoid the distress caused by the presence of racial discrimination and racist beliefs are denial and selective attention. Denial refers to the erasure of painful aspects from consciousness, whereas selective attention refers to the erasure of certain aspects of a reality while attending to other aspects to settle discrepancies in one’s perspectives or beliefs on race stratification. For Whites, we propose that these strategies assist in evading responsibility for the perpetuation of racist practices. By denying the existence of racism, especially in its structural, pervasive form, one cannot challenge it. Furthermore, one’s complicity maintains the status quo of White supremacy (hooks, 1993). Another benefit of the denial mechanism is to disregard the deleterious effects of racism. Thus, racism is not viewed as venomous as people assume because it either does not exist, is

wholly exaggerated, or has inconsequential effects on its targets. By denying racism and its effects, Whites can continue to hold negative faculty assumptions and beliefs and/or engage in practices that unfairly discriminate against people of color.

As noted in an earlier section, the notion of race carries with it assumptions about a person's status within the stratification based on race. Consequently, denying that a person has a race, or maintaining a color-blind posture, can translate into one's desire to deny the existence of racism. Color blindness is a means of denial that serves the function of maintaining racism instead of resolving it (Helms, 1992). Thus, color blindness infers that "if one can ignore race, then everyone will have access to the level of economic and political power in society that they deserve" (Helms, 1992, p. 2).

A White person who claims to have a color-blind stance is attempting to convey that he or she is not affected by the way a person appears or how he or she identifies him. This idea of color blindness is admittedly a noble one, and the person who adopts it may earnestly have an interest in stripping the stereotypes that are invoked when meeting and relating to someone. However, we believe that color blindness is an ideal that is probably successfully accomplished by very few people. It is a perspective that is most likely achieved when people are able to first undergo a struggle of piercing the distortions inherent in a racist environment. But normatively, the "habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal gesture" (Morrison, 1992, p. 9) that conveys people's discomfort with race and racism. The limitations of color blindness as a means to deal with racism have been addressed in a variety of fields, including law (e.g., Gotunda, 1991; Guinier, 1994), journalism and literature (e.g., Cose, 1997; Morrison, 1992), social science broadly (Carr, 1997), and psychology (American Psychological Association, 1997).

*Rationalization or transference of blame.* Formulating a "reasonable" justification to explain racial inequalities and discrimination and placing blame solely on the shoulders of the oppressed group are other common defenses. By using these defenses, we propose that rationalization and transference of blame help Whites evade responsibility for racism. This mechanism moves beyond ignoring social reality to actively placing blame on people of color for their predicament. By evading responsibility and blaming victims, Whites are not required to change; instead, the onus of responsibility rests solely on the shoulders of people of color. For example, people who link disproportionately high rates of unemployment and poverty among people of color to laziness or broken-home environments also rationalize that all people have an opportunity to achieve material wealth. Consequently, rather than think critically about the nexus of factors that contribute to racial disparities

in employment, income levels, educational attainment, and occupational ascendancy, people who operate with this defense mechanism associate mostly group-specific factors to these outcomes. In this manner, some Whites especially may express annoyance at what they see as the benevolence of other Whites to people of color, only to witness little advancement of people of color (e.g., D'Souza, 1995).

*Intellectualization.* Intellectualization involves acknowledging the existence of White racism or unacceptable practices but removing the emotional aspects of the matter. Using highly technical or precise language enables individuals to distance themselves from the harmful human consequences of racism. Several members of the Simi Valley jury hearing the Rodney King beating case used intellectualization to inform their evaluation of the evidence. This highly publicized case involved the beating of a seemingly defenseless Black man, Rodney King, by Los Angeles Police Department officers. The beating was videotaped by an onlooker and televised across the United States. One juror was reported to comment, "We all agreed that it was a bad beating. But we had to kind of leave the emotional impact of the evidence behind and just weigh things on the physical evidence" (Feagin & Vera, 1995, p. 96). A second juror was reported to further support this assertion, "Maybe that's the reason why we got the [acquittal] verdicts we did. I wasn't into it emotionally" (Feagin & Vera, 1995, p. 96). One might surmise that the jurors reached these verdicts because the presence of racism was too emotional for them. By extracting the emotional element out of the case, these jurors were able to objectify the King incident by denying that the violence exacted on the victim was not gratuitous and racially motivated.

*Identification or introjection.* Identifying oneself as possessing an admixture of "racial blood" or adopting the attitudes, practices, or appearance of an envied, feared, or despised population of color are defenses used by some Whites to lessen the pain or discomfort associated with racism. One way some Whites attempt to identify or "become" a person of color is by altering their physical appearance but mostly denying this intent. For example, certain White people may engage in several practices to appear more ethnic or exotic, including tanning themselves to become darker, wearing garments to enhance their hips, chemically treating their hair to add body or curls, or injecting collagen to increase the fullness of their lips.

Identification or introjection also manifests itself in the adoption and, in some cases, the appropriation of cultural practices and symbols. For example, the burgeoning mythopoetic men's groups use Native American symbols and cultural practices to ritualize their quest for emotional healing (see Messner, 1997). Numerous collegiate and professional sport teams don the names

of Native American nations (e.g., Indians, Chiefs, Seminoles) and also appropriate Native American symbols and practices (e.g., headdress, tomahawks, chanting). Yet, another example of identification or introjection is witnessed in White youth who listen primarily to rap music and dress in clothing that reflect Black hip-hop culture. Although identification and introjection might appear to reflect ways of acknowledging aspects of non-White culture as American culture, these strategies surface more as means for serving White interests.

*Projection.* When people or institutions “relocate” unacceptable personal-collective attributes onto others, they are using the defense of projection. According to Delaney (1991), projection is a “commonly employed device used by individuals to avoid dealing with deep-seated conflicts” (p. 604). This defense allows an individual to attribute onto others characteristics about himself or herself that the person knows or fears is unacceptable to others. We propose that projection prevents many Whites from acknowledging their own negative traits or flaws by relocating them onto people of color. This relocation enables Whites to further justify unequal treatment and maintain a view of White supremacy.

Throughout history, Native Americans, Blacks, and Asians have been portrayed as savages or less than human. This portrayal has helped Whites not only to justify their brutal or exploiting treatment of these groups but also to project their own violent proclivities onto people of color. In support of this assertion, Feagin and Vera (1995) have similarly contended that White men projected their socially censured lust for Black women onto Black women. Combined synergistically with sexism and class exploitation, this defense against a reality of racism manifested itself in the stereotype of Black women as “loose,” making their rape by White slave owners more acceptable and the slave owners blameless for their acts.

The focus of this section was to outline specific defense mechanisms that many Whites may use in racial contexts to avoid dissonance and maintain the current racial stratification. It is important to note that all behavior by Whites in such interactions are defensive; use of defense strategies are minimized when individuals and systems acknowledge the ideological and structural components of racism and have an understanding of the influence of racism on social relationships. However, achieving this understanding is a formidable task that involves striving to comprehend disparate racial realities. As will be evident in the following section, racism can produce different ways of viewing the world. Consequently, misunderstandings and, indeed, deep-seated divisions can occur between people with more informed perspectives of these realities and those with less informed perspectives.

**INTERRACIAL AND INTRARACIAL INTERPERSONAL EFFECTS OF RACISM**

For both Whites and people of color, engaging in discussions related to race and racism can evoke strong, unpleasant emotions. Yet, when people are confronted with efforts to pierce the defense mechanisms that help deflect racism's existence and assuage the painful emotions, an interpersonal environment of growth and learning can occur. Indeed, these uncomfortable interactions are likely very essential to helping people work through racism.

However, people of all racial groups may avoid these problems altogether or strive for immediate, short-term harmony rather than long-term growth. Whites may avoid the painful and sometimes confusing emotions or dissonance by fraternizing among those whose opinions on race-related topics are similar to their own, White or non-White (Helms, 1995). They can also seek solace with further, selective evidence of their beliefs that can be accessed rather easily, especially in insulated communities. People of color may use similar strategies in making sense of pervasive racism. Because power has always resided in the hands of Whites relative to people of color, the dynamics inherent in interpersonal interactions differs according to the racial composition of the dyad.

The dynamics of racism and an individual's responses to racism, thus, can have deleterious effects on racially similar or dissimilar interpersonal relations. People across all racial groups can find that their encounters can result in a multitude of fissures that divide Whites and Blacks (and people of color in general) not only from each other, but also among themselves (e.g., Shipler, 1997). We argue that distortions and denial of racial reality wedges a gap between people's ability to honestly and fully interact. We further contend that this interpersonal distance is sustained via a host of emotional and behavioral responses to racial stimuli. For Whites, these responses can range from guilt, shame, fear, and anger; for people of color, the emotional responses often center on anger and rage. We are not suggesting that people of color and Whites cannot have meaningful relations; instead, we are suggesting that racism and its corollaries present obstacles that potentially can interfere in the establishment of whole relationships.

To illustrate the discomfort and rage that people of different racial groups experience when confronted with racial stimuli, we return to the example of how history textbook writers and instructors report acts of past oppression. (We base this illustration on a compilation of countless narratives over the generations, both journalistic and autobiographical, which seem to capitulate the drama of race in people's lives.) When one revises the language to address the role of racism in history, one can begin to imagine how comfort levels can become compromised. For instance, if a history teacher talked about Christopher Columbus's pillaging the New World and stealing the land from Native Americans, students of any given race would likely experience feelings of



dismay. The idealization would be tarnished. White students may feel guilt and shame, whereas Native American students would experience anger or rage. Certain feelings would already be present, to be sure, but the naming of Whites pierces an aspect of reality that can lead to considerable discomfort. Whites would be reminded of their race and of the negative ramifications associated with identifying themselves as White people. People of color will likely experience anger and rage—a reaction many White people fear (e.g., Stalvey, 1989). Some may also experience guilt and embarrassment for Whites, and still others will experience racial pride, which in turn, can create further turmoil in some Whites.

Similarly, if a film depicts an account of the so-called relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II, with Japanese American actors and actresses cast as central characters rather than Whites, then the producers would garner little interest from moviegoers, especially Whites, and patrons of all races may even display in a variety of ways their dismissal of the film's portrayals. Both of these examples reflect historical accounts and, consequently, can create an optimal distance for some to intellectualize these stimuli and to not perceive them as especially threatening to their current lives. To make this experience more relevant to the lives of any group—for example, California students about to graduate from high school—instructors may attempt to present a critical analysis of a current topic that has an immediate effect on the group. These topics could include busing, Proposition 209 (mandating that teachers and health care personnel report the citizen status of students and patrons), or dismantling of affirmative action by the University of California system.

Our perception is that when Whites openly discriminate against people of color or condone a status quo of White supremacy by erasing history and context, people of color raise objections, express anger, and even retaliate. Subsequently, the people of color then are accused of being too emotional, and therefore, are perceived as having heightened subjectivity and little objectivity. Conversely, Whites who have attempted to erase their associations with racism see themselves as objective and rational. They may dismiss protests by people of color on matters concerning race because of this heightened emotionality. These interactions spiral further into efforts to dehumanize and marginalize these groups not only by Whites.

We propose that this denial fuels greater distance between racial groups, both physically and psychologically. Distancing fuels further misunderstandings among racial groups, and people may find themselves relying on stereotypes, even without intending to do so. Within this tense, distant climate, Whites who are intrigued by the notion of people of color may occasionally ask questions of them that are annoying and offensive because they reflect stereotypes and a general ignorance of the person's racial heritage. In

retort, people of color who express their anger and annoyance are accused by Whites of being too touchy or overly paranoid (and by default, these reactions certainly can occur), and the distance between racial groups grows. Whites avoid future interactions with members of the particular racial group to avoid embarrassment, anger, or guilt, and people of color are suspicious and distrustful of Whites' intentions and motives. People of color avoid associations with Whites because they feel dehumanized around them. They may also idealize their own ethnic culture as a way to seek solace, or respond rigidly to all Whites and, therefore, make generalized assumptions that reduce the person's individualism. Whites may come to use coded words and phrases to convey to other Whites that certain people of color are like them or, rather, unlike others in their racial group. They may describe racial "others" as very friendly, articulate, fluent in English, or level-headed. To fellow Whites who express racially enlightened ideas that cause them to feel uncomfortable, some Whites may apply labeling to question or slander their character, using such words as hysterical, Nigger-lover, or liberal.

Racial stereotyping can also lead to disingenuous and/or condescending interactions. For example, Whites may act on stereotypes and on their devaluation of people of color by judging them unfairly. They may also attempt to avoid stereotyping and unfair evaluating, as in the study that showed that Whites tend to evaluate the academic work of Black students less critically than similar work done by White students (Harber, 1998). Harber (1998) analyzed the written comments and grade-like ratings by nearly 200 White undergraduates on similar essays written by their White and Black peers. White students provided more praise and less criticism on papers they said were written by a Black person. Although these acts can be seen as a means to compensate for one's feelings of racism, they also spawn further dehumanization: The Black students may have been unfairly evaluated because the White students believed that they were not capable of doing better. In addition, these students probably did not want to be called racist.

We propose that there are several mechanisms that also can create distance among people of color, including internalized racism and perceived restriction of culturally appropriate responses. People of color can succumb to the culture of unfairness largely by internalizing racism and, in ways different from Whites, by justifying a system of disadvantage. This internalization is likely to create confusion and conflict when people of color relate to one another. Like Whites, people of color who internalize racism perceive the structure of rewards that affirms the status quo as valuable. These rewards are material and, in turn, can afford many Whites and some people of color certain levels of prestige. Internalized racism occurs when these people of color concede to overlooking history and context in achieving an understanding of the status quo. Like Whites, they too are influenced by a climate

of dysconsciousness, marginalization of people of color (often by dissociating themselves from other people of color), and a denial of racism. Because of the standardization and invisibility often accorded Whites, people of color internalize an ideology of White racism without necessarily intending to do so and without perceiving critically the expense of their internalization on the welfare of themselves and of other people of color. Internalization of racism can then create conflict in intragroup interactions; individuals operating from this perspective can elicit anger from racially similar people for acting against the interest of "the people." Thus, the person may feel defensive in his or her interactions with racially similar people and, consequently, may try to avoid such contact or restrict his or her contact to only likeminded people.

We suggest that another rift that can be traced to racism is that a person of color can often feel restricted in offering a viewpoint because he or she may be accused of selling out. A. White (1994) described how some African American women were accused of being unsympathetic in the rape case of former heavyweight champion Mike Tyson, when they expressed concern that some of Tyson's African American supporters believed that his accuser invited the rape. These women found themselves in a bind when many attempted to point out how rape myths can inspire misunderstandings about the case. Perhaps more important, regardless of whether Tyson was guilty or not guilty, there appeared to be some indications that because of a system of injustice based on race, Tyson should be acquitted. This sentiment is not so farfetched to many who see no possible end to a justice system that favors Whites and disadvantages people of color (see Wright, 1987). These divisions are heightened in the climate of dysconsciousness, in which people are generally insensitive to and tolerant of an environment that attempts to deflect the role of race and racism in the distribution of justice. In the case of Mike Tyson, the defendant was served a sentence more stringent than any convicted rapist in the state of Indiana. In short, within a system of racism, people of color are often caught in a bind.

#### EVIDENCE OF CONFLICTS OR DISTORTIONS OF THE SELF

This section focuses on the damaging effects of racism on people's lives by concentrating on its intrapersonal manifestations. We separate our discussions according to racial status to outline the ways in which racism can promote self-distortions differentially for Whites and people of color.

*Conflicts or distortions of self among people of color.* We propose that racism not only has untoward effects on interpersonal relationships but it can also inspire distortions of the self for people of color. Specifically, these distortions are manifested in via multiple processes, including erasure of race,

autocolonization, false consciousness, and rage. For example, rather than being singled out as the racial "other," some people of color may strive to make themselves less racially visible. To be "less of a nuisance" to Whites, they may freely yield to stereotypes, indulge in the exoticism sometimes bestowed on them, reject their associations with other people of color, or liberally adopt accepted ways of communicating that deflect a reality of racism. If physically possible, they may pass for White. People of color may also cope with racism by helping to maintain the fiction of White superiority and the inferiority of people of color, and consequently, justify a system of racial stratification. They are rewarded for these efforts by being more acceptable to Whites, the benefactors of material power in society. To be sure, these rewards are not without costs. One such consequence is that the erasure of race is never complete (with the possible exception of those who can successfully pass for White), and they must somehow learn to cope with the conflict of never being able to achieve a level of acceptance in White society.

We suggest that the intrapersonal costs of racism can emerge as a source of conflict and distress in identifying oneself racially. Gaines and Reed (1995) asserted that there is a division or duality in the personality of groups that have been oppressed or exploited. Citing the works of W.E.B. Du Bois (1940), who proposed that "becoming an African American involves a process of divided loyalties" (as cited in Gaines & Reed, 1995, p. 97), the authors state that this dualistic personality formation contrasts with the formulations of mainstream social psychologists. This duality in personality arises from the experience of being treated unfairly and/or feeling unwanted and despised by White society while simultaneously being socialized with a mainstream identity in which one shares many of the same goals as Whites. Writings on racial identity theory address this role of a dual or split personality among people of color (see the next section). Sue and Sue (1990) talk about what would appear to be a similar phenomenon experienced by members of various racial/ethnic minority groups using the term *marginality*. This term, a variant of biculturalism, also suggests a duality of experience among other, non-Black racial/ethnic minority people (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993; Sue & Sue, 1990).

Autocolonization pertains to the internalization of inferiority beliefs that has not only existed for generations but also influences the socialization of children. Some Latino parents urge their children to marry Anglo people or Latino people with White features (e.g., see Grace, 1997), certain Black parents instruct their children to equate "good hair" with beauty, and children of various non-White racial groups of color are often implicitly conveyed that "good" schools or neighborhoods consist of those in which White people are represented in ample numbers, even though they may not feel welcomed in these environments.

The process of autocolonization helps to confuse people of color, placing them in a quandary of who they are and their relative value in the racial-social order. It is not surprising, then, that some children of color contend with racism by splitting off their racial selves. In a study of Black high school students at a predominantly Black school, Fordham (1996) found that a group of high-achieving Black students distinguished themselves from their Black (and lower achieving) peers by stating that they preferred to refer to themselves as "simply American" and not Black. These students also expressed their preferences for aspects of White culture (art, music) over Black culture. Fordham theorized that these students had experienced a process of deracination, which involved dissociating themselves of their Blackness. Although the children in the study dissociated by rejecting their racial selves, others may do so by believing that they are better than other members of their racial group on other dimensions. Light skin color, ethnicity, elevated class status, high educational achievement levels, or prestige in occupation all may be factors associated with a desire to elevate oneself above racially similar others.

Not all people of color recognize this lack of consciousness and firmly hold onto racist ideology in face of evidence that could spur critical exploration and self-reflection. One example of this can be seen in a recent account by Richburg (1997), a Black journalist who traveled extensively throughout Africa and who seemed eager to affirm his romantic notions about the continent. Instead of finding a reality that matched his images, he found war and a lack of unity among African-descended people in the countries he visited. Based on his travels, he concluded that Africa did not come near the image he had hoped. But rather than engaging critically in why his images did not match his earlier romanticizations, Richburg reached the conclusion that he was heartened that his African ancestors were enslaved and brought to America! This polarization between, at one extreme, romanticizing the lives and the history of people of color, and at the other extreme, demonizing Africa and criticizing other Blacks for holding similarly romantic notions of Africa is a manifestation of Richburg's world view, informed by societal dysconsciousness, dehumanization, and denial of reality.

Drawing on the Marxist intellectual tradition, psychologists Jost and Banaji (1994) defined the term *false consciousness* to refer to "the holding of beliefs that are contrary to one's personal or group interest and which thereby contribute to the maintenance of the disadvantaged position of the self or the group" (p. 3). Those described as having false consciousness justify the system and, thereby, provide legitimacy and support for existing social arrangements even at the expense of personal and group interest. The authors argue that this system of justification may operate implicitly; therefore, the unconscious nature of system justification allows existing ideologies to be exercised without the awareness of its targets. In regards to a societal racism,

possessing false consciousness appears to occur most readily when people of color justify the system without attributing Whites as the targets. We suggest that their quest for acceptance, therefore, is not seen necessarily as a means to justify a system of White supremacy but rather to uplift their racial group or to echo normative sentiments that people of color tend to exaggerate, overidealize, or generally distort reality for the purpose of exploiting the system.

What often can go unnoticed in their efforts is that although there is a lack of awareness of the targets (Whites), there is typically a constant awareness of the problem (people of color). They may even endow people of color with a degree of power in usurping a system of fairness and in being unreasonable in their protests. Hence, they make use of selective attention and distortions to portray people of color in a negative light and reifying the system. Televised or transcribed debates among people of color on such topics as affirmative action, transracial adoptions (involving White people wishing to adopt children of color), and the rendering of justice in court cases (see Carter & Gesmer, 1997) illustrate some of these themes.

We suggest that the eventual realization that one has acquiesced to a climate of racism can lead to rage. In an intriguing analysis of the interviews of highly successful Black people, Cose (1993) found that a group of relatively wealthy and prestigious interviewees expressed feeling betrayed when they were faced with evidence that their material success did not absolve them from racism. In incident after incident, these interviewees revealed how they experienced repeated racism. They also described how they had witnessed, on numerous occasions, White people with similar or fewer credentials, years of experience, or competencies surpassing them in promotional opportunities and salary. Some of Cose's interviewees also disclosed how they had led their lives and reared their children as if racism were no longer an issue. This book suggests that for many of the interviewees, the experience of rage related to their realization that they had conceded in the perpetuation of dysconscious racism.

*Distortions of the self for Whites.* Society not only promulgates an ideology of White supremacy but insidiously conveys the message that racism is wrong and that those who blatantly discriminate possess undesirable qualities (e.g., Morrison, 1992). To square these contradictions, we suggest that society provides Whites with opportunities to dissociate themselves from labeling their attitudes and actions as racist. Whites can distort and deflect their role in preserving racism by also erasing their Whiteness. Also to deal with the dissonance created by adopting a belief in "equality for all" and in the existence of racism, Whites may create romanticized notions of what it means to be White or develop a split in their consciousness.

Several authors have noted that Whites generally take their race for granted or as an unstated attribute that does not contribute to who they are holistically. For example, McIntosh (1988) stated that Whites are taught to think of their lives as “morally neutral, normative, and average” (p. 210). But this suppression of identity does not rid Whites of the experience of feeling entitled as White people. In fact, “White privilege is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” (p. 210). McIntosh generated a long list of the ways Whites are privileged in American society. This list includes the following:

- (1) I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time;
- (2) I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race;
- (3) If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones;
- (4) I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my racial group;
- and (5) I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the place I have chosen. (pp. 210-212)

Because of efforts to suppress Whiteness to avoid its association with racism, the White self can emerge in masked ways. By analyzing the treatment of Black images in the work of certain well-known writers, Nobel Prize Laureate Toni Morrison (1992) found that she was able to learn a great deal about the authors. In the works of White authors, she found that images of Black people served to define the author and, often, to project elsewhere the author’s images of undesired or taboo aspects of the self. The “Africanist presence” in these works, Morrison argued, is an extension of the writer; consequently, an enfoldment of these images can contribute to more a complete understanding of the person.

Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence—one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness. And it shows. (p. 6)

We suggest that White identity is associated, in part, with the notion of White superiority and non-White inferiority. Piercing the cycle of racism will likely entail Whites having to acknowledge that they are socialized to believe that they are endowed with racial privilege and entitlement and the



willingness to relent the advantages or privileges gained from racial oppression. This effort, although simply stated, is probably one of the most formidable barriers to the demise of racism because Whites' socialization is deeply embedded within the American ethos. Regardless of race, to be American is to negotiate and, too often, absorb an ethos of White supremacy. Skillings and Dobbins (1991) wrote how this ethos provides the backdrop for raising White (or Mainstream, according to these authors) children. Using the Piagetian constructs of accommodation and assimilation to describe the socialization process of White children in developing racism, Skillings and Dobbins contended that the process of recognizing Whites as superior and non-Whites as inferior and effectively unimportant occurs primarily through discourse. Furthermore,

We hypothesize the Mainstream children form a rule by which to organize data about target populations and place that data in a schema that allows them to accurately predict their environment and the responses of people around them with minimal mental effort. This rule is that data from and about members of target populations, when they conflict with existing schemata, are irrelevant. Simply irrelevant. There is considerable anecdotal evidence that European Americans learn to overlook the content of data from or about people of color to preserve other cognitive structures that they need to order their world. A glaring example is the odious tradition that Columbus "discovered" America. In truth, Columbus merely led Europe in an invasion of numerous indigenous cultures. Nevertheless, overall Mainstream culture tends to believe that Native American cultures are "irrelevant" and can therefore assert that Columbus discovered this already occupied land. . . . One can imagine the sense of confusion in Anglo children who must balance these realities with a cognitive set that their parents are flawless, and "we" (my family, my neighborhood, my culture, my country) value human equality, which is what makes us the good guys in the world and gives us our right to exert our power and influence in the way that we do. (p. 209)

Some Whites are socialized to develop a positive identity while upholding racial stratification. This process can create a split in consciousness, which appears to be a necessary ingredient to preserving racism while reifying Whiteness. The below passage by Smith (1961; as cited in Dennis, 1980) in a biographical account of her life exemplifies the splitting process.

The mother who taught me what I know of tenderness and love and compassion taught me also the bleak rituals of keeping Negroes in their "place." The father, who in reminding me that "all men are brothers," trained me in the steel-rigid decorums I must demand of every colored male. They who so gravely taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my "soul" taught me also to split my conscience from my acts and Christianity from Southern tradition. (p. 75)

This split in conscience, which begins for many in childhood, suggests that it is entrenched in how people reared in American society form perceptions of their world and relate to others. That this split is nurtured in an environment of denial, marginalization, and dysconsciousness seems to ensure a future of racism. Evidence of the regenerative nature of racism at the macro- and microlevels can surely diminish for many any hope for change. Yet, the transformations that people and institutions have experienced in overcoming racism and internalized racism serve as sources for inspiration.

### **DISTORTED PERCEPTIONS OF THE WORLD, DISTORTIONS OF THE SELF: FROM WHENCE COMES MENTAL HEALTH?**

Earlier in this article, we defined mental health as a composite of attributes that includes the individual's ability to cope, be self-aware, relate to others, and accurately perceive his or her environment. In revisiting this definition, we propose below that mental health is thwarted as long as people and environments are conditioned to behave in unhealthy ways. Stated another way, as long as people maintain a relatively homeostatic environment that allows racism to thrive, the problems that arise from the phenomenon will remain and even take on more evolved, pathological forms, in light of society's need to suppress a reality of racism. In this section, we restate our definition of mental health and attempt to explain the paradox of achieving positive mental health in a racist society.

To be mentally healthy is to be aware of self and others, to be accepting of self and others, and to enjoy a stable identity.

In our view, a sense of stable identity can seem relatively intact, as long as individuals of color suppress or distort an understanding of themselves and their history as a racial people. When the suppression or distortions are confronted, some people of color may experience anguish and rage that may become self-directed, or directed to racially similar others. These misdirected emotions probably occur because of the subtleties of racism and the relative invisibility accorded Whites who benefit materially and socially from societal racism. These emotions also occur because people of color correctly perceive some racially similar others as contributing to racist ideology. These emotions can be heightened when the individual fails to recognize the embeddedness of racism within society. As elaborated earlier, society hegemony encourages a dismissal of the perspectives of people of color accompanied by a triumphant view on the perspectives of Whites, a denial of

contextual and historical factors that bear on varied phenomena and, more generally, a lack of critical consciousness.

People of color may find themselves often at odds with other people of color and, therefore, may experience difficulty in accepting people who are already dehumanized in society. Marginalization and dehumanization have cast racially similar others in a negative light, and some people of color may find themselves identifying with Whites without necessarily recognizing that their identification is racial. Some people of color may believe that their perspectives are merely just and prudent. By implication, the racialized perspectives of others are perceived as imprudent, exaggerated, and generally misinformed. Others will actively seek identification with Whites, even though they will not be fully accepted as White because of their referent-group affiliation. With respect to their acceptance of self, an environment of racism can breed self-hatred, manifested in efforts to dissociate oneself from one's racial group designation. This dissociation would appear to be inconsistent with a holistic notion of the self, whereby people of all races gain an understanding of themselves as people, including racial beings, and the implications this understanding has on their manner of interacting with others and their world views (see Sue & Sue, 1990).

We suggest that for Whites, a sense of self is unstable when it is built on the false perception of an idealized history and the false perception of innate superiority. Whites generally tend to find comfort in knowing that their foreparents helped build the country and that the fruits of what surrounds them is the byproduct of White achievements. But this reality is not entirely true. Whites can indeed take pride in that their ancestors had a major role in constructing U.S. society, and it is essential to White identity formation that such positive attributes are acknowledged. However, a more realistic assessment and appraisal of history will show that non-Whites helped build the American landscape, and that Whites tended to exercise and continue to exercise oppressive practices to accomplish what Americans experience on the political, economic, and social landscapes. Likewise, accurate renderings of contemporary contexts will likely question common public perceptions about race and privilege (e.g., Gilens, 1996; Kozol, 1991).

If Whites are committed to acknowledging a past history of oppression and a desire to eradicate it, a realistic assessment can lend itself to change more readily than an idealistic assessment. Moreover, we propose that with a more realistic assessment of the White self—which is interdependent with an assessment of racial others—comes greater stability. In the event of dissonance of what people perceive in their environment, people experience discomfort and pain. They are momentarily jarred and seek escape through the use of defense mechanisms. It is a sad commentary that some Whites are able

to sequester themselves from these interactions. People of color, who will likely experience more difficulty separating themselves, will also benefit from these interactions but will be affected by their relative lack of power within a racist society.

Mentally healthy people are capable of perceiving reality accurately and are able to cope with and influence their environments based on their levels of cognitive, affective, and moral development. Mentally healthy adults understand that they are inseparable from the environments in which they live and influence. They take responsibility for themselves and ensure responsibility for present and future society (hence their families, communities, and institutions). Mentally healthy adults recognize that people are human, no lesser or greater than the next.

Putting an end to the pathology that surrounds racism entails a struggle. Interpersonally, engaging in this struggle can arouse anxiety, anger, guilt, and even violence between and among people of different racial groups. Intrapersonally, the struggle to overcome racism and autocolonization requires the individual to examine that aspect of identity that relates to one's socialization as a racial being and to daringly confront how one has succumbed to the malignancy of racism. In our view, a common denominator in why Whites and people of color consent willingly or unintentionally to racism is that they see it as beneficial to them.

Whites receive benefit because the preservation of racism allows them entitlement and privilege. Even if this privilege is not immediately realized, as in the experiences of poor and many working class Whites, a careful examination of the life experiences of many Whites will likely show that they have been or can be assured some status within a racialized society (e.g., see Weis, 1990). We also contend that some people of color perceive a benefit when they are treated as exceptions to the group. Therefore, racism allows them a false sense of entitlement, a passageway out of their association with a dehumanized racial group and some felt acceptance within White mainstream society. Why then would anyone want to put an end to racism if they perceive themselves as deriving benefit from it?

What's more, to challenge racism also is to face the risk of ostracism and rejection. Challenging social norms is potentially to break ties with significant people in one's life, and with few tools on how to negotiate an environment that is critical to one's survival and be committed to antiracism efforts, abruptness from meaningful relationships can inhibit any change in racial world views. Challenging racism is also to invest and, more likely, continually reinvest in an aspect of the self that typically generates feelings of shame,

guilt, rage, or anxiety. For both Whites and people of color, peering inward to examine critically one's role within a racist structure can prove tumultuous. So, in addition to the benefits derived from societal racism, why should people strive to end it if the interpersonal and intrapersonal risks are so great?

The motivation to dismantling racism and overcoming the fear of participating in the struggle is decidedly moralistic in nature. Consequently, perceiving people as having similar worth and as being no greater or lesser than the next is an essential part to the quest for meaningful, macro- and micro-level changes within a racist structure. It also entails an understanding that practicing this belief means acknowledging the pathology and taking deliberate and seemingly illogical measures to ensure equality.

For instance, Guinier's (1994) logic appeared misguided when she proposed that legislatures adopt a Madisonian approach to achieving racial/ethnic representation. Because of the longstanding struggle for people of color to gain footing and finding voice in the political arena, she recommended James Madison's approach of turn taking rather than assuming a majority-rule position. Arguing that Madison's approach would open up opportunities for people of color in attaining political representation, Guinier was accused of presenting absurd ideas and was labeled a "quota queen" by her detractors (Guinier, 1994). We suggest that in a pathological environment, it is probably not surprising that efforts to pierce racism will likely appear pathological.

Raising mentally healthy children involves conveying these ways of being through parenting, formal education, and other socializing practices.

Because the formation of identities develops in parallel to the development of children's cognitive abilities, efforts to influence children are important. To indoctrinate children to carry forward racism is to teach them unhealthy ways to perceive and cope in their environment. Derman-Sparks, Gutierrez, and Phillips (1989) offer an excellent brochure sponsored by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) on teaching children to approach fairly and proactively visible differences in race, sex, and ability. Books that focus on inoculating children to the socializing influences of racism are also available (e.g., Logan, 1996; McAdoo, 1997), as well as sources for classroom learning (e.g., Adams, 1992; Beauboeuf-Lafontant & Augustine, 1996; Chavez & O'Donnell, 1998). These works focus on ways that parents, teachers, and other members of a community engage critically in their environments and infuse empowering messages to children about race, racial pride, and tolerance.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING AND PRACTICE: FROM PSYCHOTHERAPY TO SOCIAL INTERVENTIONS**

Understanding the manifestations of racism is critical to designing effective interventions to counter the ill-effects of racial oppression and to change the current system. In this section, we outline training and practice issues related to racism and mental health. We begin with a discussion within the traditional framework of counseling psychology by extending current racial identity theory's application to psychotherapy. This is followed by a brief discussion of appropriate social interventions, strategies that have traditionally been outside the field of counseling psychology.

#### **Psychotherapy**

When White clients express rage, depression, or guilt over job loss, interpersonal conflict, discomfort with their changing neighborhood, or the diminished prestige of their organization or work, all due to the presence of one or more persons of color, therapists may fail to explore fully the racial implications of the events or overlook the distortions that undergird these beliefs. In a similar vein, when clients of color express angst over the hiring of "another Black, Latino, Asian, or Native American" and, therefore, anticipate that they will no longer be the laudable exception in their all-White organization or in their ability to deal with everyday racism, therapists might deflect the role of racial socialization in assessing their clients' needs. We suggest that in these cases, the therapists are dismissing the impact of racism as an aspect of their clients' life and, therefore, are committing a disservice in treating them.

Well-intentioned therapists may recognize readily that the illogical thinking, partially informed conclusions, and otherwise distorted realities that characterize their clients' complaints are factors that frustrate positive mental health. Rather than modeling reality-based approaches to uncovering or fully exploring the problem, they may be concerned that their efforts to address racism might appear self-righteous or politically motivated and, thus, nontherapeutic. Influenced by the superordinate role of the therapist, the client may perceive any avoidance or minimization of race or racism in the therapy context as signs to affirm its irrelevance to his or her self or to his or her mental health. Consequently, both the therapist and the client can be handicapped in addressing manifestations of racism in therapy because of a societal climate that generally suppresses open, meaningful talk about race. By colluding in the deployment of such strategies as encoding, projecting, and problem reframing, both the therapist and client help to construct an environment that mirrors racism's treatment at the macrolevel.

One starting point for therapists who want to integrate an understanding of racism's mental health effects into holistic conceptualizations of psychological functioning is to undergo a process of learning and critical self-examination. Achieving a thorough understanding of racism is to know its impact of one's life and the life of others. This lifelong endeavor consists of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components that are not unlike the components that can be used with clients in therapy (see below). Moreover, a therapist's own resistance to racism has to be addressed continually. In fact, it is likely that therapists need to involve themselves in activities that help them to constantly examine their racism or internalized racism. These activities could include readings, supervision, support groups, lectures and debates, and psychotherapy.

Articulating a personal theory of reality and of therapeutic change in the context of a racist environment is one way to begin the integration of racism knowledge with the practice of psychotherapy. In contrast to a conceptual, intellectual system of reality, Epstein and Erskine (1983) asserted that personal theories are preconscious and experiential and, therefore, tend to be less abstract, more closely associated with affective experience, less contemplative, and more concerned with immediate personal welfare. The authors further state that

A personal theory of reality develops in order to fulfill three basic needs of the individual: to assimilate the data of experience, to maintain a favorable balance of pleasure and pain over the foreseeable future, and to maintain a favorable level of self-esteem. (p. 134)

Hence, the theoretical orientation one adopts, based on the individual's shared assumptions with the theorist, may not be sufficient in identifying one's view on reality. Examining the life of the theorist and, more important, the closeness of one's therapeutic work with that proposed by the theorist can reveal evidence of one's personal theory, as well as examining one's own life and explanations of how one's perspectives on reality, knowing, and change were derived. This knowledge may be implicit, and until dilemmas surface in one's life and in one's work, one's personal theory may go largely unexamined. The entrenchment of racism bears particular consideration for this type of self-examination and introspection.

Earlier, we stated that manifestations of racism do not appear consistently in the environment, nor do most people display racism or internalized racism in all their behaviors. As complex beings, people often engage in both the perpetuation of racism and in its diminishment. Over the past four decades, several scholars have attempted to theorize how individuals come to understand themselves as people rooted in the context of racial oppression and



discrimination. These theorists have attempted to explicate the relationship between race and the self, as well as ways that people transcend from relatively conformist perspectives on race to racially enlightened personal theories.

As early as the 1950s, Fanon (1968) wrote about the impact of colonization on the mental health of African-descended people and, more specifically, on Black racial identity. Today, there are numerous models describing the racial identity of various racial and ethnic groups, including Blacks (Cross, 1970, 1991; Helms, 1990, 1995), Asian American/Pacific Islanders (Sodowsky, Kwan, & Pannu, 1995), Latinos (Bernal & Knight, 1993), and Whites (Hardiman, 1982; Helms, 1994, 1995; Rowe, Bennett, & Atkinson, 1994). Full descriptions of these models are beyond the scope of this article; for a detailed analysis, the reader is referred to noteworthy reviews in the *Handbook of Multicultural Counseling* (Ponterotto, Casas, Suzuki, & Alexander, 1995).

We believe these theories, and particularly Helms's more widely written formulations (e.g., Helms 1990, 1994, 1995) are valuable as tools for addressing issues with race in the therapeutic context. These theories are useful in explaining how people perceive themselves and others racially and how they come to perceive and make sense of their racialized environment. Discerning a client's configured racial identity statuses (e.g., a combination of several statuses rather than one; Helms, 1995) can assist the therapist in determining the nature and extent of barriers that prevent the person for racially self-actualizing. By having a grasp of racial identity assessment, the therapist can hone in on the myriad ways people conceive of their environment and, thereby, extend beyond conventional notions about race and racism.

For example, an adept therapist will know that not all Whites will feel discomfort or distress in living in, say, an all-Latino neighborhood and that racial identity development can become frustrated even when Whites or people of color involve themselves in the promotion of civil rights. These could be cues to many therapists that these clients have overcome their racism or internalized racism. However, an exploration of these issues might reveal an obsession with the racial "other" or manifestations of their remorse over past actions by self or others (e.g., parents, community) without an anticipated awareness of the potential problems that could arise as a result of these actions, such as displays of distrust, suspicion, and anger by people of color.

Racial identity involves a dynamic process in which maturation, experience, and self-reflection converge to move people from a restrictive view of themselves and others to more enlightened, realistic, and moral views of people and humanity (Helms, 1995). For people of color, this development typically begins with the internalization of negative messages to the adoption of a

positive and realistic racial group identity and realistic perception of racial others and society. Helms's (1995) People of Color theory consists of five interactive, permeable ego statuses that range from less mature to more sophisticated interpretations and coping with race-related stimuli. The statuses are composed of race-related attitudes, beliefs, and cognitions that give rise to a range of behaviors or schema that serve to protect the individual psychologically.

It is critical to underscore here that typically, individuals have attitudes and beliefs reflective of more than one status, but customarily, there is a dominant status with which one operates as he or she negotiates racial situations and/or defines self and others (Helms, 1995). Furthermore, accompanying each status are a set of information processing strategies (IPS) that the individual uses to cope with racial stimuli (Helms, 1996; Thompson, 1997). These IPS resemble the defense mechanisms described earlier but include those strategies that reflect healthy acknowledgment and confrontation of racial stimuli based on realistic appraisals of the environment and one's reactions to the environment. The more advanced the development of racial identity, the more complex and flexible the IPS. When the individual is confronted with racial stimuli that challenges the way he or she has dealt with racism dominantly, he or she may return to the familiar strategies or may attempt to develop strategies that would better equip himself or herself to negotiate this reality.

Helms's (1995) theory also lends itself to linking racial identity specifically to mental health. Theoretically, the dominance of higher statuses (i.e., internalization and integrative awareness statuses for people of color and immersion status for Whites) are indicators of positive mental health because they reflect a realistic appraisal of the environment and of the self as a racial being (Helms, 1995). In addition, individuals who demonstrate attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors consistent with the integrative awareness status for people of color and autonomy status for White people indicate increased mental health as they demonstrate connections to other individuals based on commonalities and, moreover, are invested in positively influencing their communities. Schemata influenced by a dominance of the lower statuses are not representative of positive mental health because they reflect the use of strategies that impede realistic assessment of race-related stimuli, including denial, obliviousness, distortion, and minimization (see Helms, 1995).

Knowledge of racial identity theory can also assist therapists in identifying the strengths that people possess in dealing with race and racism in their environment. For example, in addition to being affected negatively by racism, people of color possess an extraordinary resiliency to racism (Jones, 1997; Sue & Sue, 1990). The recognition that many people of color experience pride in themselves because of their culture and because they have

endured racism can go discounted or minimized if therapists are not knowledgeable about racial issues. Yet, we suggest that this factor can be a powerful tool in psychotherapy. In developing a sense of wholeness as a person, people of color may need to be reminded of their heritage or their views of racial pride reinforced when they present with issues of autocolonization and their inability to cope in their environment.

According to Thompson (1997), practitioners can help facilitate racial identity development by reinforcing advanced status IPS and confronting the contradictions inherent in their clients' use of lower status IPS. A first step in promoting this development in the therapy context is setting a climate in which the topics of race and racism can be openly discussed (Thompson, 1997). Therefore, the practitioner is advised to treat race as an integral aspect of professional assessment and, by implication, of a holistic consideration of the client and client problems. Some practitioners feel embarrassed about asking questions such as "What is the racial or ethnic background of your spouse?" or "You stated that you grew up in the Midwest. Tell me more about where you grew up. For example, what was your neighborhood like? What was the racial/ethnic makeup? Were there any notable differences between you and other family members or friends?" Discomfort and embarrassment by the client might occur (see Thompson, 1997), but the therapist's facility and comfort with these questions, or with any reactions by the client of racial content, should help facilitate the process. A second step to promoting racial identity development is to assess the client's racial identity profile. This step requires that the therapist use effective probes to explore the client's attitudes, behaviors, and IPS to ascertain the client's (a) range of racial identity schemata; (b) dominant racial identity status and, inferentially, most relied on IPS; and (c) accessibility to advanced level IPS. This final component can be used as a way of assessing and reinforcing the strengths of the client relative to his or her strategies in coping with racial stimuli.

Thompson (1997) stated that it is essential for therapists working with any client regardless of race to be aware that movement in racial identity requires exposure to racial stimuli. Because avoidance and selective attention are dominant IPS, practitioners will typically need to encourage their clients to obtain information and knowledge that can assist clients in perceiving their environments more realistically. This information may not always be readily available or accessible, and the client can quickly dismiss the information as illegitimate because of its inaccessibility or because the authors or deliverers of the information are not White. Such exposure, appropriately applied and timed, can challenge clients but also arouse discomfort. It is also likely that there will be difficulty in establishing a therapeutic bond if the client believes he or she is being accused of behaving wrongly or if the therapist is perceived as preoccupied with race or as exhibiting a liberal lifestyle that departs from

that of the client. These manifestations of resistance have to be examined not only in the context of interpersonal dynamics (e.g., the client responding to the counselor's race, age, and gender and based on his or her experiences with others with similar attributes) but also in the context of a racist societal structure. A constant evaluation of the client's motivation for learning, reckoning cognitive dissonance using approach behaviors, and striving toward a higher level of mental health and humanism will have to occur to determine the nature and timing of interventions.

To resolve the problems that arise from racial socialization in the United States, scholars have asserted that people need to work through rather than suppress race as an integral aspect of their identities (Helms, 1992; Thompson & Carter, 1997). Likewise, these authors have contended that Americans need to acknowledge the role of racism in the American identity to understand the myriad social problems that plague the nation. According to Kovel (1970/1984), the dismantling of racism will occur only with a careful examination of its purposes in the creation of society. Both with changes to society and to the individual, there will likely be a great measure of instability.

But how does the need for societal change relate to the therapeutic context? We suggest that therapists must repeatedly address aspects of the environment to anticipate and deal with client resistance. The interpersonal divisiveness spawned by racism will likely arouse suspicion among clients of therapists' intent, as well as fervor among the people with whom the clients come into contact outside the therapy relationship. Rational methods to confronting the resistance are limited, just as rationality has limited use in advocating for an end to racism. In our view, the topic of racism, once acknowledged and approached, can produce heightened emotionality in clients. These clients will need to be informed that both affective and cognitive disequilibrium can be expected. As a consequence, therapists need to conceive of their therapies as ensconced in a climate of pathology. In therapies focusing on identity conflict and personality disorganization, the therapist must encourage the client to learn that the drama played out in the therapy context is likely instructive in how the client deals with people of the therapist's race. The therapist must also encourage the client to examine the way other systems, such as family, neighborhood, organization, religious community, and society, convey distorting messages about values of fairness, equality, and integrity.

According to Lyddon (1990), people take part in an open, self-organizing system, whereby disorder and disequilibrium can be seen as natural phenomena that elicit a transformation to more viable, higher order organization. This transformation, therefore, is vital to development. When clients claim to aspire to values of fairness and integrity but seem perplexed when their efforts are not rewarded, then therapists may need to engage these clients by

helping them understand their role in a system that organizes itself by sustaining racism. Furthermore, therapists also need to urge their clients to critically examine their stances in the face of contradictory evidence. We repeat here that this is a profoundly humanistic endeavor. In clients who are not yet ready to face the challenge, therapists have at least planted a seed for the possibility that their client may later pursue this endeavor.

### **Social Interventions**

We have underscored that racism consists of two main components, ideological and structural, and exists on micro- and macrolevels. Traditionally counseling psychologists have focused on changing individuals or groups on the microlevel, that is, to assist the adaptation process of individuals or groups in their environments. However, counseling psychology can serve a more proactive role in changing manifestations of racism, both ideologically and structurally, that is, to change individuals as well as environments. We believe that to eliminate racism in the United States, the basic political economic structure needs to be transformed (cf. Carr, 1997; Leiman, 1993; Perlo, 1996). However, such a discussion is beyond the scope of this article. In this section, we rely on principles of radical psychiatry and on the work of Paulo Freire (1972, 1996) to outline strategies counseling psychologists can adopt to help change racial practices within specific systems, such as schools, colleges, media outlets, and communities.

Proponents of radical psychiatry (e.g., affiliates of Radical Psychiatry Center [RPC]) believe two factors are necessary for liberation from oppression, including racial oppression: (a) awareness of oppression and its structures and (b) contact with like-minded people or the development of coalitions that will eventually challenge oppression. These two factors serve as the impetus for action that leads to liberation (Steiner et al., 1975). Neither awareness nor contact are sufficient in and of themselves to produce action. "Only action by groups or people who have become aware of [oppression] will lead to liberation" (Steiner et al., 1975, p. 15). This approach is consistent with Freire's (1972) notion of *conscientização* or "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19). Freire (1996) perceptively noted that raising of critical consciousness (*conscientizacao*) can help produce material changes. On the basis of the conceptualization of liberation provided by the RPC and Freire's notion of *conscientizacao*, we suggest the following strategies to help eradicate the current system of racial oppression and, thus, increase mental health.

To increase awareness about the nature of racism, counseling psychologists could individually and/or collectively construct learning experiences to

educate groups of people about the structural and ideological components and ill-effects of racism. These learning experiences could take the form of continued education experiences for professionals, standard undergraduate and graduate courses for students, community forums and study groups, and/or group therapy sessions for students or community residents. The types of information covered in the groups should certainly incorporate specific experiences of individuals and communities; however, it is critical to also include a clear sociohistorical analysis of racism. Excellent books to consider in such teaching endeavors include the following: *Prejudice and Racism* (Jones, 1997), *Dust to Dawn* (Du Bois, 1940), *Race in North America* (Smedley, 1993), *The Wages of Whiteness* (Roediger, 1991), *Racial Formation in the United States* (Omi & Winant, 1986), and *The Political Economy of Racism* (Leiman, 1993). In facilitating these learning experiences, it would be important to include pedagogical techniques underscoring the active role of group members or students in the education process (see Freire, 1972). In this sense, the students or group members would function as both learners and teachers.

As part of these educational experiences or as separate group activities, counseling psychologists could facilitate problem-solving sessions. Activities in these sessions would focus on addressing racial practices within a specific environment such as a college, neighborhood, or community. Collectively, the group would identify overt or covert racist practices in the specified environment (e.g., racial discrimination in housing or hiring practices or in newspaper coverage) and identify a specific plan of action to abolish or transform the practice. Similarly, the group could also develop strategies to make an environment more pluralistic: an environment in which racial/ethnic minorities are represented, share power, and their cultural practices are respected (e.g., offering sufficient multicultural education in primary, secondary, and higher education). This group could struggle with questions such as “What are the most pressing racial concerns in our community (or specified environment)?” “What are the sources of the concerns, and how do they affect our community?” and “What concern should we focus on first? What can we do individually and collectively to eradicate the concern?”

The strategies we are proposing differ from those provided by others grounded in Freire’s work, such as liberation psychotherapy (cf. Ivey, 1995) in that our focus is specifically on racism. Furthermore, and although liberation psychotherapy encompasses issues of racism, its focus is on “helping clients learn to see themselves in relation not only to themselves but also to cultural/contextual influences, with special attention to family” (Ivey, 1995, p. 53). We believe elements of liberation psychotherapy are helpful and can apply to the strategies we have outlined. However, we are suggesting that counseling psychologists proactively create learning experiences on racism

incorporating a problem-solving component designed to abolish or transform racial practices. Thus, our suggestions necessarily move from the individual trying to understand, fit into, or adapt to one's environment, to individuals working together to change one's environment. Also, the suggestions were designed to systematically address both ideological and structural components of racism.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Because so little research has actually been conducted on racism and mental health in the counseling field, implications for research are boundless. We focus our discussion on three microlevel research areas (i.e., coping with racism and race-related stimuli, discourse and metacommunication in therapy, and color-blind racial attitudes) and one systems-level research area (i.e., social action).

#### Race-Related Coping

A key to ensuring effective therapy for clients who present with issues related to racism is research that can inform therapists of how to optimally confront and resolve these problems. Because coping is threaded throughout many definitions and theories of mental health, it would seem crucial to study coping models that would be instrumental in dealing with the stress of racism.

Stress contributes greatly to mental health (Lazarus, 1991). Moreover, stress associated with all forms of social oppression has been linked to physical and psychological distress (e.g., Krieger & Sidney, 1996; Williams et al., 1997). What appears to be missing from the literature is the impact of racism on the physical and psychological functioning of the oppressing group (i.e., Whites). In several ways, this stress may not exhibit itself personally, especially if these individuals are not committed to moral convictions and, therefore, have little or no conscience about the dissonance surrounding them. Another possibility for why stress may not affect the person individually is that the environment he or she surrounds himself or herself with effectively guards against any refutation of fundamental racist beliefs. Hence, stress can be reduced given the optimal person and environment conditions. However, when stress occurs, reducing it requires change.

Effective coping has been theoretically and empirically linked to mental health. Theorists, such as Lazarus (1991), aptly noted that an aspect of mental health is the ability to adapt and competently cope with various environmental stimuli. In addition, there is a considerable amount of empirical data



underscoring the mediating and moderating roles of specific coping mechanisms (cf. Zeidner & Endler, 1996). At this point, however, it is unclear if effective coping is an index of mental health or whether the coping process only helps to mediate and moderate the relationship between stress and psychological health, or both. Regardless of the specific function, coping is multifaceted and serves as a "stabilizing factor that can help individuals maintain psychosocial adaptation during stressful periods" or stressful events or stimuli; it also "encompasses cognitive and behavioral efforts to reduce or eliminate stressful conditions and associated emotional distress" (Holahan, Moos, & Schaefer, 1996, p. 26).

New trends in psychological literature approach coping from a transactional framework that emphasizes the dynamic interplay between disposition (trait-like) and contextual (situational) perspectives. Part of the conceptualizations in this area consider the interaction between the general style in which people respond to stressful life events and the process in which people deal with a situation-specific stimuli such as rape or physical illness. Interestingly, with notable exceptions (e.g., Kuo, 1995; Williams et al., 1997), few researchers have theorized about the coping process as it relates to race-related stimuli. This is somewhat surprising considering that racism and, consequently, strained race relations can be perceived as stressful to people across different racial groups. We believe that the presence of both racism and strained race relations in the United States has created tension, discomfort, anxiety, and/or fear in people, as they contemplate or actually interact in race-related situations such as sustained interracial transactions.

Approach and avoidance coping is one of the prevailing paradigms in which researchers conceptualize the coping process (Heppner, Cook, Wright, & Johnson, 1995). According to this perspective, individuals respond to stressful events by engaging in cognitions and/or behaviors that are designed to either orient themselves toward the threat (approach) or avert their attention from the threat (avoidance). Generally, approach strategies such as seeking new information and problem solving tend to alleviate harmful effects of stress, whereas avoidance strategies such as overt efforts to deny stimuli and actively withdraw tend to intensify the negative relations between stress and mental health indexes (Holahan et al., 1996; Srivastava, 1991; Srivastava & Singh, 1988). However, as with all complex person-environment phenomena, these documented relations are not as straightforward as we would like to believe. Researchers have noted the intricate effects of the coping process and have identified situations in which avoidance strategies can be adaptive, for example, when individuals are faced with an uncontrollable event (Holahan et al., 1996) or a short-term stressor (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996).

Building on Holahan et al.'s (1996) general approach-avoidance coping model, we propose a race sensitive model. By doing so, we extend current

conceptualizations of coping to describe how people attend to race-related stimuli. On the basis of our earlier discussion of racism, we mention that racism and its manifestations, such as strained race relations, is an ongoing stressor that may be differentially perceived as relevant depending on the individual and his or her life circumstances. Consistent with a transactional framework (a systems-oriented approach), we believe the strategies employed by an individual to address diverse race-related stressors may differ depending on the situation; one's appraisal of the situation; his or her preferred coping style; and more likely, the interaction of the three. We agree that it is more adaptive to remain flexible in one's choice of coping strategies depending on the race-related situation than to rigidly adhere to a restricted coping repertoire (Holahan et al., 1996). However, we contend that approach coping strategies may be related generally to positive mental health because it reflects a more direct and honest way of attending to racial stimuli. In turn, this may be related to less distorted notions of race and, consequently, a more realistic assessment of self and environment, identified indices of mental health.

Essentially, we apply the four basic coping categories outlined by Holahan et al. (1996) to race-related stimuli. According to this model, individuals' coping can be classified into four basic coping categories: cognitive approach, behavioral approach, cognitive avoidance, and behavioral avoidance. We suggest that all people, regardless of race, may employ similar general strategies to deal with race-related situations; however, given our person-environment perspective, we acknowledge that the contexts and specific manifestations of the strategies may differ for Whites than for people of color because of the basic racial formation in the United States.

Below, we briefly provide examples of each of the four basic coping categories. The cognitive approach strategy entails thoughts and cognitive processes that encourage critical thinking about race; counselors who identify the negative racial stereotypes they hold and actively challenge these faulty beliefs exemplify this perspective. Conversely, cognitive avoidant strategies enable people to avoid confronting race and, thus, maintain an inaccurate assessment of one's environment. Many of the strategies used in this category are linked to denial such as denying that racism exists or simply avoiding thinking about race altogether because race problems seem intractable.

Behavioral coping responses generally refer to activities designed to reduce the stress by directly confronting the stimuli, and in this case racial stimuli. Cultural immersion exercises that many counseling psychology faculty assign to students are designed to promote behavioral approach strategies. Specifically, by encouraging students to immerse themselves into the culture of another group, instructors can encourage people to increase their varied interethnic (and in many cases interracial) interactions and, moreover,

to obtain more complex social attitudes. On the other hand, behavioral avoidance strategies enable individuals to evade directly dealing with race. For example, we both teach a multicultural issues in counseling course. Inevitably, each semester, several students remark that they refrain from expressing their true attitudes about race for fear of appearing ignorant or insensitive. By not discussing their attitudes, in our view, students do not challenge misperceptions and thus stagnate their development.

Although the approach-avoidance coping paradigm may conceptually apply to dealing with race-related stimuli, more theoretical and empirical research is needed. Specifically, researchers should empirically examine if approach-avoidance coping strategies mediate and/or moderate the relations between racial stimuli or stressors and psychological health for people of color and for Whites. Also, more information is needed about the role race-related coping may play in counseling students' adoption of multicultural counseling competencies and in the therapy.

### **Discourse and Metacommunication in Therapy**

If Sampson's (1993) assertions are correct, then discourse is not merely a representation of reality but rather reality itself. Consequently, a discursive framework helps to uncover the construction of reality and, more pointedly, its relationship to power. In the first author's program of research (Thompson, Berrian, et al., 1998; Thompson & Jenal, 1994; Thompson, Qureshi, Jack, & Laurent, 1998), I have found that the presentation (or lack thereof) of race within a therapeutic or quasitherapeutic context can severely disrupt the relationship and that both client and therapist will rely on an assortment of strategies to defray their anxieties in discussing race. These strategies tend to serve the role of topic avoidance, mostly because therapists are genuinely at a loss over how race should be addressed in the therapy context and, simultaneously, to achieve a level of interpersonal engagement and rapport. The therapist and client seem to realize, covertly, that race can create distance, and in some cases, neither wants to experience the alienation or anxiety this distance can cause. These studies and other investigations that examine the discourse between therapist and client can reveal how race and racism are addressed and constructed in the therapeutic context. We suggest that research on discourse as a means of studying racism can be very fruitful in helping psychotherapists identify how language and metacommunication help to shape healthy therapeutic environments.

The main point here is that there is often a lack of understanding about how therapists can meaningfully address racism and that typical cues that a relationship is being established are not sufficient to examining the levels of strife and discomfort that often occur within these interactions. The therapist

and client often engage in efforts to cocreate an environment in which there is a semblance of synchronicity when, indeed, issues of race as relevant to the therapy or to the therapist-client dynamics are skillfully avoided. Continued research in the process of counseling and psychotherapy, when matters of race and racism are addressed, is needed to examine more closely the mechanisms necessary for integrated therapeutic change. Examining the skills of a master therapist through case-study approaches could prove especially valuable in demystifying the sort of skills that are instrumental to client change.

### **Color-Blind Racial Attitudes**

Another valuable line of research is to study the phenomenon of color blindness and, more important, its role in preventing healthy racial identity development. Color blindness refers to the desire to deny race in order to treat everyone fairly. Although color-blind racial attitudes are complex, most writings to date have focused on cognitive dimensions (see Carr, 1997) or on the assumptions people make regarding the function of race in society. The second author has investigated cognitive components of a color-blind perspective. Specifically, Neville et al. (1998) developed an instrument to measure color-blind attitudes. Results from an exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses suggest a three-factor solution: blindness to (a) racial privilege, (b) institutional discrimination, and (c) general blatant racial issues. Higher levels of color blindness were found to be associated with increased racist beliefs, intolerance toward multiculturalism, and greater endorsement of attitudes suggesting that we live in a fair world in which people receive their just desserts (Neville et al., 1998).

Although more theoretical and conceptual research is needed to further disentangle the complexities of color-blind beliefs, this early work is an important first step. Preliminary results suggest that color-blind beliefs are multifaceted and are related to, but distinct from, other forms of racial attitudes, such as racial prejudice. Additional research is needed to further investigate the role of color-blind attitudes on the psychological functioning and social competence of people of color and Whites, and also the delivery of culturally sensitive services. Also, more conceptual work is needed to link color blindness to general theories such as false consciousness.

### **Social Action Research**

Introduced more than 50 years ago by Lewin (1946), action research is designed to integrate theory and social practice. Specifically, researchers use theory to inform social intervention and dialectically use research findings to further develop and refine theory. According to D'Aunno, Klein, and

Susskind (1985), action research is an iterative process in which researchers work collaboratively with community members (i.e., the client) in completing five main activities: (a) diagnoses or initial information gathering and development of tentative theoretically driven hypotheses or action plan; (b) preintervention data collection or further data gathering to support assumption and assess the appropriateness of the action plan (these data can also serve as the baseline assessment of the behavior); (c) action phase data gathering that is systematically collected to provide preliminary feedback about the effectiveness of the intervention and strategies that may need to be modified; (d) postintervention data collection and evaluation of the analyses of outcome data to (1) determine the extent to which the objectives of the action plan were achieved and if the intervention should continue and (2) provide insight to the use and refinement of the theory used; and (e) continuation of the research cycle if the desired objectives or systematic change were not achieved.

Although the concept of action research has advanced over the years, there has been remarkably few implementations using this methodology. Counseling psychologists could contribute to the literature by using social action research to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions designed to change racist practices in groups, organizations, or communities. For example, counseling psychologists could work with students or community members on a specific structural concern such as enrollment, hiring, and/or housing discrimination practices that limit access to resources of racial/ethnic minorities. Once the concern is identified, questions such as the following should be addressed collaboratively by the researcher and client through various phases of the research process: "What theory helps us best understand and describe the current problem?" "How can we use the theory to develop an action plan?" "What data do we need to support the existence of the problem?" "What measures should be used to assess pre- and postintervention levels of the problem?" "What measures should be included to examine the effectiveness of specific components of the intervention?" "Are we assessing both ideological and structural change?" "Is the intervention working as intended, or do we need to modify the action plan?" "If so, in what ways?" "Are the modifications theoretically consistent?" "And, what have we learned from the intervention process that can help further develop and refine our theory?"

## CONCLUSION

The dismantling of affirmative action and social support systems (e.g., welfare) at broader ecological levels, as well as the prevalence of racist incidents observed in various institutions and settings (e.g., college campuses,

court systems, political arenas, integrated communities), exemplify contemporary concerns with racism. The existence of racism plays an important role in the practice of psychotherapy. Racism, regardless of whether it is acknowledged, affects the psychological development and functioning of all racial groups and, therefore, enters into the practices of psychotherapists.

Racism is but one aspect of reality and of people's subjective experiences. Our goal in directing attention to and scrutiny of this topic was to shed light on a phenomenon that is often masked or misunderstood. The task of understanding racism in all its vicissitudes is only one step toward effective practice. Enfolding this understanding into professional practice and with other relevant variables is a challenge that comes ultimately with deliberate contemplation and practice.

Efforts to address racism as a mental health issue will necessarily involve considerations of how we view mental health and mental health delivery. When psychologists and other mental health professionals begin to realize this fact and begin to go beyond the treatment hour to assist people in improving their mental health, then they may begin to see themselves as being more instrumental in effecting improvements in the mental health of their clients as well as in the health of society on the whole. Like Albee (see Albee & Ryan-Finn, 1993) and Payton (1984), who have devoted their lives to advocating broad-scale action within the psychology discipline, we agree that efforts to destroy the pathology of racism and other structures of disadvantage in society will necessarily involve preventative, structural measures as well as remedial efforts to assist in the healing of individuals, families, and groups.

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