

Modern Racism Behaviors

The following list of behaviors or manifestations of modern racism for the dominant or non-target groups are offered from my colleagues and my experiences to help explain this struggle. The accompanying examples come from our work in educational settings.

1. *Dysfunctional rescuing*: This form of modern racism is characterized by helping people of color based on an assumption that they cannot help themselves; setting them up to fail; being patronizing or condescending; helping people of color in such a way that it limits their ability to help themselves. This “help that does not help” is often motivated out of guilt or shame. It may be conscious or unconscious and is often embedded in the “culture of niceness or politeness” thus making its limiting aspects hard to discern. “Tokenism” is another name for this process of “doing what’s right” without preparing the existing organization for this change.

Examples of dysfunctional rescuing are:

A white teacher “gives” a black student who is making a “B+” an “A” instead of challenging her. The student is active in the black student association and is obviously quite bright. The teacher feels vaguely guilty about societal injustices and worries that the student might see him as racist. The teacher is not active in campus efforts to change institutional racism and believes that if he just “does right by blacks,” everything will be okay. A white department head brings a 30-year-old black female into a previously all white male biology department. He feels good about insisting that she be chosen and denies the importance of the reluctance of his colleagues. All of these faculty have been at the institution for at least 10 years and have failed to support the hiring of any target group members. The department chair fails to recognize the potential set up for failure involved in bringing target groups into a hostile environment without a plan for impacting the culture. “Tokenism” is another name for this process of “doing what’s right” without preparing the existing organization for this change.

2. *Blaming the victim*: In this form, racism is expressed by attributing the results of systemic oppression to the target group; ignoring the real impact of racism on the lives of blacks or other people of color; blaming people of color for their current economic situation; or setting target group members up to fail and then blaming them.

Examples of blaming the victim include:

A black student is labeled as having misplaced priorities because of her work on black issues on her campus; she is considered bright but too busy being angry to study. She was not accepted into a student leaders campus honorary society because her concerns were viewed as “too narrow.” A latina female becomes depressed and exhibits paranoid symptoms in a faculty meeting after being the lone latina and female faculty person for a year in a previously all white male department where she is largely avoided or patronized. The chair recommends she get psychiatric treatment.

3. *Avoidance of contact*: Modern racism may also be manifested by not having social or professional contact with people of color; making no effort to learn about life in communities of color; living in all white communities; or exercising the choice that whites most often have of not being involved in the lives of people of color.

Examples of the avoidance of contact are:

A white university administrator who lives in an all white neighborhood says, “I just don’t have the opportunity to meet black people.” A white supervisor is a very pleasant person but does not confront a situation when two black male employees engage in conflict. The supervisor, however, would confront the situation if the employees were white.

4. *Denial of cultural differences*: In this expression, modern racism means minimizing obvious physical or behavioral differences between people as well as differences in preferences that may be rooted in culture; discounting the influence of African culture and of the African-American or Asian-American experience; or being color-blind in a way that masks discomfort with differences. “What does race have to do with it? Aren’t people just people? Skin color doesn’t matter, we are all just people.” --color-blindness—“I don’t see color, I see people”

Examples of the denial of cultural differences include:

A white faculty member describing the only black faculty member he works with, and trying hard to avoid saying that the faculty member is black. A white administrator says with much exasperation, when being given information about racial differences in retention of blacks in his university, “What does race have to do with it? Aren’t people just people? Skin color doesn’t matter, we are all just people.”

5. *Denial of the political significance of differences*: Finally, modern racism may be manifested by not understanding or denying the differential impacts of social, political, economic, historical, and psychological realities on the lives of people of color and whites, minimizing the influence of such variables on all our lives and institutions. This modern racism may be accompanied by an attitude that cultural differences are just interesting or fun. Such a stance results in an unwillingness to acknowledge the multiplicity of ways in which the impacts of the myth of white superiority continue. The stance also minimizes white privilege as well as the insidious nature of the prevalence of the mentality and practice of “West is Best” by those in positions of power and control in key aspects of life in the United States and most of the world as the beginning of the 21st century. This type of modern racism is firmly entrenched and is perhaps the most binding. Unraveling the hold of a dominant Western perspective will take a massive rethinking of many of our ways of being and doing in the United States.

Examples of the denial of the political significance of differences are:

A white middle level manager came to a workshop very upset about the affirmative action plan his company has implemented. He was convinced that affirmative action was reverse

discrimination and said, “We don’t need affirmative action here. We hire blacks.” Blacks comprised 10% of the management positions (up 8% in two years because of the plan) and 90% of the custodial positions. Reverse Racism – Isn’t talking about racism actually racism? – when you bring up race, you’re just trying to be divisive

Internalized Oppression

As discussed in the definition of institutional racism above, African-Americans and other targets of racism are in a reactive posture. This is not to minimize in any way the personal, economic, and political power that target group members have available to them. It is intended to challenge targets and non-targets to think seriously about the extremely detrimental impact of maintaining a society where institutional power is distributed predominantly to one group.

It is difficult for those who suffer at the hands of oppression not to buy into, at some level, the misinformation that society has perpetuated about victim status. Internalized oppression is the incorporation of negative or limiting messages regarding our way of being and responding in the world by targets of systemic oppression. We define our uniqueness as inferior or different in an unhealthy or un-useful manner. As the character of racism changes, so does the reaction of people of color to it. Most forms of internalized oppression had their origins in situations when their manifestation was necessary for physical or psychological survival. Such behaviors are most likely to occur initially as survival responses in institutions or in situations where the target person perceives a threat.

Five expressions of internalized oppression have been identified.

1. *System beating*: This expression of internalized oppression involves attempting to get over on, or around the system; manipulating others or the system through guilt, psychological games, or illicit activities; acting out anger; or playing dumb, clowning, being invisible. The strategy involves an awareness that one is an outsider; on the belief that the target group member cannot succeed by being direct and/or by being herself or himself. The target group person feels a need to “take care” of whites feelings or to hide parts of oneself for fear of being misunderstood or viewed unfavorably because of his or her “difference.” It may also take the form of using anger or hostility to manipulate whites.

Examples of system beating are:

A black student manages to go through four years of college with a reading deficit. He is a star basketball player and learns through the grapevine how to take courses where he can “get over” and receive a passing grade. A latino teacher in an “upscale” independent school does not speak out, for fear of being disliked, when faculty and staff condemn latino yard workers for speaking Spanish and using English poorly. A black hospital employee intimidates all of her white superiors such that she just comes and goes to work as she pleases, and

does as little work as possible. Any negative feedback is defined by this employee as racism on the part of her bosses.

2. *Blaming the system:* This manifestation is characterized by deflecting responsibility for one's actions; putting all the blame on the other or the system for one's problems; or refusing to learn about and acknowledge mental, emotional, and stress related issues as real. This expression results in an externalizing and blaming of others that in effect gives away the target group members' ability to effect change. It sometimes masks a sense of hopelessness in the target group's ability to visualize and/or implement a more desirable system.

Examples of blaming the system include:

A black student, who is not studying, blames his teacher and the "system" for his bad grades. He is unwilling to accept what role his lack of preparation may have in his failure to succeed. A latina employee applies for a job for which she is not qualified, and says it is the system's fault when she does not get hired. She is unwilling to take advantage of opportunities to get the appropriate training and "blames" it on the fact that her English is too poor.

3. *Anti-white avoidance of contact:* This form of internalized oppression includes avoiding contact with whites; distrusting all whites (obsessive concern and suspicion); being overly sensitive to rejection; rejecting people of color who are perceived as "not black enough" or "not Chinese enough," etc.; escaping (through fantasy, dreams, drugs, alcohol, sex, food, withdrawal). Such a stance is fueled by a rage that can be self-destructive to the person who carries it. The utility of anger is to stop injustice and to insist on and create equity; when it becomes internalized it can hamper the autonomy of the target group person.

Examples of anti-white avoidance of contact are:

A Chinese employee who refuses to talk to a white supervisor about a job related problem because he says the supervisor will not understand. He does not admit that he is really uncomfortable talking to whites. He therefore limits his own chances for a positive change in his situation. A black who calls another black an "Uncle Tom" because the latter is working hard to get a promotion and because he is light-skinned. This perpetuation of "colorism" and of a denial of the impressive "profound work ethic" among black people is self-limiting.

4. *Denial of cultural heritage:* In this expression, internalized oppression means distrusting one's own group, accepting that one's group is inferior, giving deference to whites, rejecting or devaluing one's cultural heritage, valuing and over-emphasizing white standards of beauty, valuing and accepting whites as the highest authority and white standards as superior. Such a stance colludes with the myths of "white superiority and inferiority of people of color."

Examples of denial of cultural heritage include:

A latino patient who does not want a latino nurse or doctor because the patient thinks they are not as well qualified as a white nurse or doctor. A black employee who does not associate

much with blacks, who is uncomfortable considering her African heritage, and who, when with whites, aggressively expresses negative opinions of blacks as a group.

5. *Lack of understanding or minimization of the political significance of racial oppression*: Internalized oppression can also be manifested by being passive and unassertive; feeling powerless (learned helplessness), misdirecting anger to persons with less power, having difficulty expressing anger, avoiding conflicts at all costs, turning anger inward resulting in high blood pressure, strokes, ulcers; buying copiously (symbolic status striving; conspicuous consumption of goods,- clothes, cars, etc.); in-group fighting, displaying sexist or other “ism” behaviors, e.g. heterosexism, classism, etc., taking advantage of the lack of information or feelings of powerlessness of other people of color. This stance involves failure to examine the pervasive nature of racism and the multiplicity of ways in which target group members are set up to collude with its perpetuation. It can also result in an unwillingness to accept that the historical legacy of racial oppression has not been corrected systematically and its effects continue to impact most aspects of life.

Examples of a lack of understanding or minimization of the political significance of racial oppression are:

A black first level manager is unwilling to apply for a promotion because he does not think he will get it. He is sure that the organization will not promote a person of color simply because there are none presently. He has the necessary skills but does not believe he can be successful. He does not understand how to seek out and organize support to promote systemic change. An Asian supervisor always does what the white manager wants and is harder on the employees of color whom he supervises. He believes that the white supervisor cannot and should not be successfully confronted but feels powerful as he “pushes” his supervisees of color.

One can see that the five modern racisms have their corollary, or parallel in the five internalized oppressions. Figure 3 below shows their relationship to each other:

FIGURE 3

Behavioral Manifestations of Modern Racism and Internalized Oppression

Modern Racism

1. Dysfunctional rescuing
2. Blaming the victim
3. Avoidance of contact
4. Denial of differences
5. Denial of the political significance of differences

Internalized Oppression

1. System beating
2. Blaming the system
3. Anti-white avoidance of contact
4. Denial of cultural heritage
5. Lack of understanding of the political significance of differences

How Modern Racism and Internalized Oppression Interact

Challenging modern racism and internalized oppression begins as individuals give up the need to deny that “isms” still exist. Rather, they start to look for manifestations of oppression in the personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural contexts. Modern racism and internalized oppression are often played out in a complementary fashion.

Given a white who practices dysfunctional rescuing, for example, many people of color will resort to system beating rather than confront the behavior, if they perceive it to be the safest choice, or if they have no permission to be assertive with whites. Such actions reinforce the dysfunctional behavior on both parts and keep the system intact.

People of color, who for a variety of reasons have adopted a “Don’t trust whites” stance, will often be misunderstood by whites who practice avoidance of contact. The white person will take the person of color’s avoidance of contact stance personally, and will often use it as justification of further avoidance. Such whites discount the realities of racism for blacks or other people of color and do not seek information about their experiences. They are also likely to perceive blacks or latinos, for instance, who are in a pro-black or pro-latino posture as anti-white when the individuals are not.

Using the system when there are no other feasible options is “survival behavior” and not reactive internalized oppression. Indeed, a critical question to be asked as individuals are teasing out “the dance” between modern racism and internalized oppression is: when is a given target group members’ “difficult behavior” reflective of a survival strategy? In the face of overt or covert racism, internalized oppression behaviors can be the key to psychological or physical survival. It is very important that such behaviors which are reactive to racism not be used to blame people of color or other target group members for their adaptations to oppression.

Valerie Batts – Modern Racism: Is Reconciliation Possible?

<http://visions-inc.org/article/is-reconciliation-possible-lessons-from-combating-modern-racism/>