

# COMBATING RACISM

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Racism will not be cured by Radical Psychiatry. Its roots lie in the structure of our society. Its face is reflected in a thousand ways in the course of daily life in America.

Radical Psychiatry can, however, make a contribution to the efforts of people of conscience to recognize our own racism and to do something about it. The ideas and methods we propose here are tools for working together to overcome the attitudes and habits which divide, and thereby weaken, us.

## **RACISM AS PIG**

Racism is a structure of inequality which acts to deny certain groups of people their rights and access to opportunity. As a political institution, racism relies on the internalization of certain attitudes. In other words, people must believe that the members of the group which is discriminated against share certain characteristics, simply by virtue of their identity in that group. Black people are lazy, women are weak, Asians work unthinkingly and obediently, Latinos are shiftless, Jews are greedy: all are generalizations, or stereotypes, based on little or no data. As a result of these stereotypes, individual members of the group become invisible; on first meeting, they are viewed through the prism of these internalized generalizations, rather than on their own merits.

Racist attitudes, then, are Pig (see Chapter 5), according to Radical Psychiatry's definition (Pig = Internalized Oppression). Let me quickly make the distinction between racist *attitudes* and racial *oppression*. The latter is a set of actions taken on the basis of racist attitudes to deny power to the discriminated-against group. Such actions often occur, despite the good, non-racist intentions of the person taking them.

Bob Blauner,<sup>1</sup> for example, has detailed the ways in which people of color are disadvantaged at the University, despite the expressed (and sincere) intention of progressive faculty members to challenge racism. The underlying assumptions of the University (that scholarly work is constituted in a particular way, that academic standards must be maintained, that those standards rest on a particular culturally-determined set of beliefs, etc.) work against the success of people who hold different cultural values, and who have been traditionally excluded from the institutions which promote those of the University. This form of institutional racism (that which operates independently of the attitudes of the perpetrators, and so would have a strong tendency to continue even if prejudice were to disappear) is common among progressive groups.

In another example, a progressive theater company may wish to include more actors of color, but cannot find good scripts with parts for them and cannot bring themselves to consider radically unconventional casting (women in men's roles, people of color in roles which are clearly intended for white people, and so on.)

In Radical Psychiatry, we have long grappled with the contradictions of our position, because it tends to exclude many people with whom we would wish to be allied. For instance, we have resisted becoming credentialed, for theoretical and political reasons (credentialing standards select for a kind of therapy to which we are explicitly opposed). Yet to be uncredentialed means that we cannot work in agencies which pay (relatively) decent salaries. We are therefore dependent on private practices, and must charge fees. We try to keep those fees low and flexible, but nonetheless they exclude many people — many people of color, for example — who cannot afford them. Moreover, potential Radical Psychiatrists must be willing to take a very large risk, to work extra hard against substantial odds to support themselves

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (Harper & Row, New York, 1971).

during the slow years of building a practice. The success of that endeavor is even more problematic when practitioners seek to work with communities (such as working class people and people of color) who do not tend to seek out private therapy. Over the years, more and more Radical Psychiatrists have opted to get degrees and licenses, and to work inside mainstream institutions, bringing with them their radical predispositions. The effect has been productive, but has raised new problems. There are no perfect solutions to these contradictions. But if we decide that we are truly intent on working together in interracial groups, we must be willing to make institutional changes that may challenge us deeply.

We are still, however, left with the problem of our internalized oppression. Once we think of racist attitudes as the Pig, we can begin to say some things about how it works, and how to fight it. First of all, racist attitudes are always wrong. It may be true that the Pig attaches to some grain of truth. It may, for instance, be true that a given black teenager is less motivated to work for good grades in school than is his white, affluent classmate. The black youth may have figured out that his chances of getting a job are so small, even if he excels in school, that they are not worth taking. He may be resentful and rebellious as a result. None of this behavior, however, proves the racist Pig about him, that he is lazy and shiftless. That is a generalization. It stands outside of time and place (When and where is he lazy? Is he lazy when repairing his motorcycle? Is he shiftless when writing and performing popular music?)

The second characteristic of the Pig which is useful in the fight against racist attitudes is that the Pig can be changed. The Pig is an idea which has been learned. Consequently, it can be unlearned and replaced with ideas that are more accurate and truthful. Some ways of changing Pig ideas in a problem-solving setting are outlined in Chapter 5. I suggest below some strategies specific to a discussion of racism in other contexts.

Finally, to say that racist attitudes are Pig is to say that they come from a social milieu by which we all are influenced. Racist notions surround us: We see mostly white actors on television, unless we are watching a "Black piece." White is "normal," Black is "exceptional." Asian women models are very often dressed in lacy underwear or girlish dresses. Many citizens of big American cities never see a person of Chinese origins outside a laundry or a restaurant.

To recognize our own racist Pig, then, is not to confess original sin. It is very important to be able to be self-critical without self-blame. The majority of people in our society are immune neither from being stereotyped, nor from stereotyping others. I am a middle-aged woman. Sometimes, when I meet a person for the first time, I can read in his eyes his preconceptions about me: square, comfortable but not sexy, sweet but not interesting. On the other hand, I was recently part of a group that was challenged by a Japanese-American woman: Did we not assume she was shy and withdrawn? I found, to my consternation, that I did indeed. It was an assumption that proved entirely wrong, and that I have not since repeated.

Guilt and shame about racist ideas are not helpful. They lead to silence, and from there to an impregnable stronghold of secrecy. When unheard and unchallenged, the Pig festers. Only when it is out in the open can it be examined and undone.

Guilt and shame, however, are closely associated with pain and dismay about the racist state of our world. To combat the former is a step toward healing the latter. It is in the interest of all of us to do this work, for we all are affected in some way by a divided society, riven by racial (as well as other) injustices.

## **FIGHTING RACIST ATTITUDES**

The fight against racist Pig can most sincerely be undertaken in the context of racially mixed groups. That does not mean that we cannot (or should not) work on our racism, or other -isms, at other times and places. But nothing motivates like necessity, and it becomes essential to fight stereotypes when working cooperatively with people affected by them.

People who have been oppressed by stereotypes, however, are frequently unwilling to struggle very hard with those who hold them. People of color, women, older people, gays, lesbians, and disabled people are often weary of warding off others' prejudices. Too often, particularly in groups of progressive people, criticism about racism is met with well-meaning discounts: "No, no, I didn't mean that; some of my best friends..." Or criticism is seen as accusation: "How can you think that about *me*? Others, maybe, but not me!" Not surprisingly, people who have been wounded by discount may eventually resort to attack. Criticism may turn ugly, for on its back are riding huge monsters of resentment and frustration.

Here, then, are four suggestions of ways to fight racist notions:

### **1. Listen very carefully to criticism from a discriminated-against person.**

Even if it is badly delivered, it always contains some grain of truth. It may be mistaken in detail or in its speculation about intent, but the complaint is at its core useful and correct.

Think of criticism of this nature as paranoia, in the Radical Psychiatry sense (see Chapter 8). Like paranoia, such criticism always has a kernel of truth. Be sure you have understood that kernel before you act on any impulse to excuse or defend yourself. It will be much easier to take this unguarded posture in the face of criticisms if you remember that you are not a bad person for holding some mistaken belief. Such attitudes are inevitable, given the racism in our culture, and you are to be commended for working hard to discover them and to change.

### **2. The person giving criticism also shares some responsibility.**

People who have suffered racism, sexism, or any other -ism, are not under any theoretical obligation to struggle with such attitudes when confronted by them. However, when people have come together in a cooperative group for some shared purpose, the affected person stands to gain direct and personal advantages by giving criticism. It may be wise for her to do a minimum of work. If others in the group are not willing to work hard, harder than she does, to challenge stereotypes, then she should complain only about that. Criticism is gold, and the giver should be sure she is getting back equal coin.

But given a decision that the people on the receiving end are well-intentioned, open to dialogue and willing to work hard, the affected person will get better results if she gives her criticism skillfully. For example, to say that someone is racist (sexist, homophobic, etc.) is to invite discount. Generalizations are not sufficiently helpful, and they invite guilt and defensiveness. Look instead for the concrete: what did the person say or do that made you think she was racist? It is very different to say, "I became worried about racism when you kept interrupting to provide me with the next word while I was speaking just now. My paranoia is that you think I am not sufficiently articulate to say what I mean because I am Black."

In most settings where people share a progressive social agenda, racism may take forms that are subtle and hard to identify, making the task of both the giver and receiver of criticism hard. People will already have worked to overcome more overt forms, because they sincerely desire to be non-racist. But racism can be involved in more complex transactions. Rescue, for instance, can be a carrier of unhelpful attitudes (see Chapter 7), as the example above suggests. We once realized after the fact that we had urged a lesbian trainee to start leading groups too quickly, and too alone, making an exception to our usual practice in an effort to promote her career. It was a Rescue, and she suffered for it, because she was left out on a limb with insufficient back-up.

**3. Once the issue of racism has arisen in a group, it is a very useful technique for those of the dominant group to meet without the affected person(s) present to work on the Ptg.**

In our Collective, for instance, a long-time colleague who was a gay man insisted we meet without him to fight our homophobia. We protested that, after so many years of working together and sharing frank dialogue, we didn't need to. We knew from old experience, however, that our colleague deserved to be taken seriously, and that in fact we were very likely to benefit from doing so. We met, and for some time made little progress. Then someone asked how we would feel if our sons were gay. The question would probably not have been raised if our gay colleague had been present; it certainly would not have been answered so fully and, as it turned out, usefully. Here was a place we did indeed need to confront our homophobia, and did through heartfelt and honest discussion.

**4. When conflicts arise, any person in a minority should have sufficient support.**

In the ideal, nobody would ever be a minority of one, or even a minority at all, in a group. But it does commonly happen that people of color, or gay people, or disabled people, or so on, find themselves in the position of being outnumbered by people from a category who are dominant in the culture. Conflicts are bound to arise, just as they might for any other member of the group. When they do, the minority person should have easy access to an advocate: someone to stand by her side, help to support and communicate her position to the group at large, give her encouragement and backing when she feels outnumbered, and so on. Sometimes, an ongoing member of the group can be asked to take the advocacy role by the person affected. He can rise out of his position as a "player" and look at the situation from the point of view of his comrade. Sometimes, however, there is nobody in the group sufficiently trusted by the person in a minority. In that case, she should be encouraged to bring an advocate from outside, a person she trusts and who, at the same time, will be careful to avoid further polarizing the conflict.

To have a method for working on racism can be an enormous relief. None of us wants to be thinking unfair and prejudicial thoughts about our comrades, nor to be acting unwittingly in ways which are oppressive. Most of us do not wish to benefit from racism, and we feel deep pain about the ways in which most of us do. That contradiction, that we do in fact gain from the deprivation of others, whether we be white, male, straight, upper class or able-bodied, while at the same time we deplore these inequalities, is one we must confront whenever possible. We cannot singlehandedly eliminate -isms, but we can expose and correct stereotypic attitudes wherever we find them among ourselves. And in the process we can treat each other with the respect and kindness that is deserved when people of good conscience undertake hard and pioneering work, both in the world and on our attitudes, together.