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Addressing White Racism as Part of the Psychotherapy Process

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David Drustrup



David Drustrup is a Ph.D. candidate in Counseling Psychology at the University of Iowa. His master's degree was in Counseling at The Family Institute at Northwestern University. His clinical practice primarily utilizes psychodynamic approaches with feminist and liberation psychology foci. His research is in racism and whiteness, with a forthcoming study on white people's expectation of the white racial equilibrium and the way these seemingly innocuous white responses construct and protect white supremacist systems and epistemologies.

Disclosures/Conflicts of Interest

- None

References/Citations

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Learning Objectives

1. Identify direct and subtle racism in our own self, as well as our white clients' comments and behaviors.
2. Utilize three ways of framing the problem of racism as important to the health and livelihood of the white client.
3. Demonstrate various responses to a white client's racist comments to open a curious discussion and avoid a rupture.

The Clinical Dilemma

- To comment or not?
- Silence is a clinical action
- Managing the therapeutic relationship
- The client's work, or ours?
- APA Standard 2.01 Boundaries of Competence

The Ethical Challenge

- Client autonomy & self-determination
 - Principle E
 - Therapeutic alliance & goal-setting
- Responsibility to client & community
 - Principle B, Principal C, & Principal E
 - A relevant clinical concern?

The Psychotherapeutic Challenge

- Maintain the relationship
 - Risk a rupture
 - Less effective therapy
 - Dropout potential
- APA Standard 3.04 Avoiding Harm
 - Client context

Does Race Matter in Therapy?

- Is it necessary?
 - For white people?
 - white race v. BIPOC races?
- White race and mental health
- Janaya Khan
- Toni Morrison

Terms Defined Today (different from the 1960s protests and other times)

- Racism
 - Defined by power
- whiteness
- white racial equilibrium
- white privilege, white fragility, diversity, cultural competence, etc.
 - Power evasion

What is whiteness?

- The expectation of racial comfort
- Assumption of innocence
 - Historical and systemic blindness
- Individualism
- Conscious and unconscious belief in white superiority

Psychosocial Costs of Racism to whites

- Moral, spiritual, psychological, social, and material
- Distorted sense of reality, identity (Utsey et al., 2005)
- Psychological split, leading to moral ambivalence
- Concerns at cognitive, affective, and behavioral levels
 - Cognitive: Distorted racial beliefs, reliance on stereotypes
 - Affective: guilt over unearned privilege, fear and mistrust of minoritized populations (“white fear”), sadness/anger over existence of racism (“white empathy”)
 - Behavioral: limited association with minoritized populations, self-censoring in interracial context, inauthenticity in behavior and speech

Patterns of Psychosocial Costs of Racism to whites (Spanierman, et.al, 2006)

Combination of Empathy, Guilt, & Fear – five patterns emerge in data

- *(C) Informed Empathy & Guilt* (High E, high G, low F) – More likely to be Democrat, female, diverse friends, highest support of AA, smallest group (n=32)
- *(B) Empathic but Unaccountable* (high E, low G, low F) – Diverse friends, largest group (n=61), low guilt, low awareness of racial privilege
- *(D) Fearful Guilt* (moderate E, high G, high F) – More likely to be female, few interracial friendships. Similar guilt to Group C, but low awareness of multicultural issues
- *(A) Unempathic & Unaware* (low E, low G, medium F) – Low multicultural education
- *(E) Insensitive & Afraid* (low E, low G, high F) – Most likely to be Republican, low multicultural education, smallest exposure to other races, lowest support of AA, highest score on institutional racism & blatant racial issues

Are Racist Beliefs and Behavior Different from other Issues Addressed in Therapy?

- If client has aggressive and violent beliefs and behaviors, do we address them in therapy?
- If client is highly critical and criticizing of others, do we view that as problematic and address it in therapy?
- If client steals things from others, do we view this as problematic behavior and address it in therapy?
- If client takes advantage of others by tricking them in some way that gives client greater wealth, do we address it in therapy?
- If client has racist beliefs and engages in discriminatory behavior and makes prejudicial comments, do we address it in therapy?

Three-tiered approach to addressing racist beliefs in therapy

- Empathize with the feeling/affect of the client, but lightly note/label the racial aspects of the situation/problem. If resistance is shown, express more empathic understanding.
- Pose a curious question as a means of exploring the client's racial consciousness as a topic area.
- Connect the relevance of race with the issues/topics that client feels is important in their life.

Therapeutic Openings

1. “Ugh, this week was awful. I was late to work 3 days in a row because the rioters were out blocking the road. I get it that it’s important for Blacks to be equal, but can’t they do it peacefully?”
2. “We were having dinner together and my friend told us that his daughter is dating a Mexican now, which is great, but I don’t know if I’d want my daughter to marry a minority. I believe they should be equal to us, but I just worry about their kids and the difficulties they would face.”
3. “My wife seemed upset with me, but I get really uncomfortable every time I see that Native American homeless man outside of work. He seems drunk, so I don’t give him any money because he’ll probably spend it on booze.”
4. “Why do they get so mad at police? Who do they think is going to protect them the next time someone breaks into their house?”

Therapeutic Responses

1. “Gosh, that is frustrating to be late to work because of something you can’t control. I know you value being punctual, and your work performance has been important to you lately.”

- I. “What’s your understanding of the reasons that Black people are protesting and blocking the roads?”
 - i. “Once you mentioned that your boss is a Black woman who seems to take pride in her racial identity. How do you imagine your relationship with her would change if you had a discussion with her about the Movement for Black Lives?”

Therapeutic Responses

2. “You’re worried about the future that your daughter and future grandchildren might have. You want to have a good life. You want to protect them from hassles and harm.”

II. “What are some of the things that you think happen to children of interracial couples? What disadvantages might they face?”

ii. “What do you think your daughter would say or feel if she heard what you just said to me? How might she feel towards you if she found herself attracted to a boy who was Black or Brown? Are there other ways you could show your support and care for her life and the life of her future family?”

Therapeutic Responses

3. “It’s distressing to have your wife upset with you over your reaction to the man in the street. It’s hard to feel charitable towards someone who might simply use the money for more alcohol.”

- III. “Maybe you and I can brainstorm some reasons together of why people like that end up without a home and begging for money?”
- iii. “How might your relationship with your wife change if you listened to her reasons for why she wants to help people like that homeless man?”

Therapeutic Responses

4. “I hear that you’re frustrated with people for not appreciating the protection and safety you feel here. It seems so clear and obvious to you. We live comfortable and safely around here. It’s upsetting to think that unknown change might be coming.

IV. “Have you ever had a had hurtful interaction with police? Has anyone you know had one? Has a Person of Color at work ever told you about their interactions with the police?”

iv. “Can we wonder for a moment about how your growing up in a mostly white neighborhood has shaped your understanding of typical police behavior? How might your experiences with the police have been different if you grew up in a mostly Black neighborhood?”

Defensive Responses

1. “I guess it kinda feels like you’re trying to make this about race. I was just trying to tell you what’s been happening at work this week and now all of a sudden we’re way off on a tangent.”
2. “I’m not sure what she’d say...but I don’t really think my relationship concerns with my daughter have to do with race. I don’t really think race affects my life that much.”
3. “I guess she would be happy about that. But that doesn’t change the fact that I don’t like giving money to people if they’re probably going to use it to buy alcohol. I feel like you’re focusing on the fact that he was Native American and now you’re trying to tell me I’m racist. I’m not racist, and it hurts very badly to know my therapist thinks of me that way.”
4. “The fact that I only had white friends growing up doesn’t mean I have some warped view of society.”

Empathize with Defensiveness

1. “Yes, talking about race is a very personal topic and the way I brought it up felt off-track from the concerns you brought in today. I bring up this question because I wonder if there is some important meaning in your life that we can work towards finding. Since your boss seems to believe race is important, and you’ve wanted to find ways to connect with her, humor me for a moment and entertain this question: What would a conversation with her about race feel like? What if all you did was ask questions and listened to her answers?”
2. “Race is not something that enters your mind all that often, so maybe this question feels a bit off-base. Given some of your stories, we both might agree that race is somewhat important for your daughter, however. And since one of your goals is to improve your relationship with her, how do you think she would respond if she noticed that her father was interested in her opinions on a personal and sensitive subject like race?”

Empathize with Defensiveness

3. “I’m hearing you say that the way I responded to you felt accusatory and felt overly-focused on race. I apologize for saying that in an accusatory way and I’m grateful that you were so honest about how I made you feel. I wonder if you can trust me with this conversation and stay here for a moment. Just like with any topic, when there are strong emotions in the room, I try to get us to explore those together. Can you stay with your emotions right now and tell me more about what it’s like to feel accused of racism right now?”
4. “Yes, you’re right, I don’t believe that you have a distorted view of your world and I apologize that my words implied that. One thing we believe as psychologists is that we are shaped by our upbringings—maybe you remember some of our past work related to your childhood relationship with your mother and how that shaped your first marriage? Can you think of some things in your life that have shaped how you think about race or policing?”

Common white Resistances

- Race isn't important to me. Race does not affect my life.
- I was not privileged. I worked for everything I got. I did not get any special breaks. I struggled just like them, except with poverty/sexuality/gender/etc.
- I have Black friends at work, Black friend at church. Get along well with them. No problems. I am not racist.
- Why are you bringing up race so much? I feel that it's racist to divide people by race. This blaming one race for the problems of another race is racist. I won't have any of it. We are all just people.
- I don't really care what color she is. She yelled, so I yelled back. I treat all people equally. I treat others as they treat me.
- I'm not responsible for racism. I do not discriminate against anyone. I do not stop anyone from achieving their best. I have no power to help or hinder anyone. I wish them well, and I encourage them to work hard.

Challenges – seeing racism in our own beliefs and behaviors

- We believe ourselves to be good
- We are helpers
- Color-evasion
- Power-evasion
- Constant self-reflection and non-defensiveness necessary
- Do we have any of the common white resistances? What emotional reactions do we have when someone mentions “white privilege”? Do we unconsciously move to avoid Person of Color as we walk through the mall?

Q&A



- Dr. Sammons will read select questions that were submitted via the Q&A feature throughout the presentation.
- Due to time constraints, we will not be able to address every question asked.