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## Article 28

# **The Meaning of Whiteness: Addressing the Taboo in Counselor Education**

Paper based on a program to be presented at the 2011 American Counseling Association Conference and Exposition, March 23-27, 2011, New Orleans, LA.

Krista M. Malott and Tina R. Paone

Malott, Krista M., is an Associate Professor in the Department of Education and Counseling at Villanova University, Villanova, PA. Dr. Malott is a counselor educator whose interest and expertise is multicultural counseling in relation to racial and ethnic identity development. She has presented on, and published, numerous articles regarding best practices in multicultural counseling instruction and also in ethnic identity development.

Paone, Tina R., is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership, School Counseling, and Special Education at Monmouth University, West Long Branch, NJ. Dr. Paone is a counselor educator with an expertise in use of creativity in group settings. She has presented on, and published, numerous articles regarding the topic and since 2008 has instructed a Whiteness course co-designed with Dr. Malott.

What does it mean to be White? This was a question made famous in counseling and counseling psychology by Drs. Sue and Sue (2008), who took the inquiry to the streets and to the 'average' passerby. Responses indicated that Whites—with often hostile reactions to the question—demonstrated limited cognition or understanding of their Whiteness. Conversely, Persons of Color understood all too well the privileges associated with a more pale skin tone as evidenced in Sue and Sue's findings.

This is a question given to our own counseling students in a *Whiteness* group course that has run each semester since the fall of 2008, with reactions similar to the Sue outcomes. Such reactions can be understood within the context, whereby race dialogue is perceived as taboo and talk of the closely related construct of ethnicity has even been outlawed in certain places (e.g., Arizona). Qualitative interviews with students from our Whiteness group course lend insight into emotional reactions to race and ethnicity discussions, as many White students described feelings of "guilt" when realizing unearned racial privileges, a sense of loss regarding their ethnic heritages, and fears of revealing personal racism during classroom dialogue.

In turn, faculty members cite teaching race-related topics as anxiety provoking largely due to fears of managing students' negative reactions (Sue, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, & Lin, 2009; Young, 2004). Such feelings have even led some educators to avoid

race-related topics all together in the classroom (Watt, 2007). We have found that use of other scholars' and educators' guidelines for addressing racism in teaching has made the practice more feasible, and has inspired us to move from a general multicultural counseling course format to one solely focused on Whiteness. Following is a description of some of the course practices, informed by the literature and adapted over time in response to qualitative assessment of student learning.

Whiteness instruction can be informed by the literature found largely in history, sociology, and teacher education disciplines (e.g., Hitchcock, 2002; Katz, 1999; Kincheloe, 1999; McKinney, 2008; Pennington, 2007; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). A Whiteness course is unique from a multicultural counseling course in its deliberate focus away from traits of *special populations*—a practice that risks creating group stereotypes while maintaining the status quo (Moodley, 2007). Within a Whiteness course, the historical construction of race and Whiteness is identified (see Table 1), including the ways it has systemically embedded itself as the dominant or normative culture of the nation (Hitchcock, 2002; Katz, 1999; Nagel, 1994). In turn, the effects of the normative culture of Whiteness upon Persons of Color is identified, including the manner in which those outside the 'norm' are denied access to multiple career, community, political, legal, and social resources (Sue & Sue, 2008).

The course applies activities or media to illustrate the topic. This includes use of creative activities to examine the manner in which Whiteness informs their perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. Related to counseling, we identify how Whiteness permeates the profession by asking students to consider under which norms the following were created or would fall: what are deemed healthy versus pathological behaviors; values/world views considered compatible with counseling and the counseling process itself; coping and healing practices considered valid; assessment and diagnosis practices; and theoretical orientations (Sue, 2006).

A main goal of the course is to help students move from understanding how Whiteness permeates their own thoughts and behaviors to considering ways it has been institutionalized in a racist manner across multiple systems (e.g., health, mental health, educational, legal, political, financial, and housing; Miller & Garran, 2007). Critical awareness of the systemic presence of racism builds the foundation for identifying ways that we play a role in those systems and how we can begin to change that role (and empower our clients to do the same). However, as counselors, we know that awareness does not necessarily result in action. Indeed, a recent study of White racial activists by Harvard scholar Mark Warren (2010) found that Whites will not act for racial justice merely due to learning of the presence of systemic, individual, or personal racism. Rather, Whites need to actually learn to *engage* in antiracism actions, ideally in a cross-racial alliance with Persons of Color. Therefore our course incorporates numerous antiracist White models, illustrated through media and various activities, and also requires students to practice responding to racism. The course culminates by asking students to make a commitment to action, whereby they select future actions they will take to address racial injustice.

Over time and through experience, we have discovered the necessity of reserving regular class time for addressing students' affective reactions to the course. Suggestions from the literature and our own personal experiences have given us several useful tools. First, we attempt to remove a tone of moralism from our instruction by discussing our

own White privileges and racism and disclosing personal challenges in confronting others' racial bias. We decrease student likelihood of resisting course content and self-reflection by stressing that our environment gave us our racism, we are not inherently 'bad' to have it, and we can also 'unlearn' it. We also incorporate journaling and discussion regarding student affective reactions, to normalize those reactions, while stressing guilt or shame as counterproductive (Chick, Karis, & Kernahan, 2009).

Finally, addressing race topics with others can be highly difficult. Consequently, we believe that the most powerful antiracism instruction is best done with support of a community that reaches across disciplines and racial lines (Warren, 2010). Such allies can act as guest speakers, assist in processing challenges with students or colleagues, reduce a sense of burnout that comes with the work, and can aid instructors in their own personal growth.

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**Table 1**  
*Some Aspects or Assumptions of White Culture*

Aspect	Traits
Rugged individualism	Self-reliance; independence and autonomy highly valued/rewarded; individuals assume to be in control of their environment, “You get what you deserve”
Competition	Win at all costs; winner-loser dichotomy
Action orientation	Master and control nature; must always ‘do something’ about a situation; aggressiveness
Decision making	Majority rules; hierarchy
Communication	“the King’s English” rules; written tradition (as opposed to oral & story telling); avoid conflict, intimacy, emotion, personal info.; politeness as lack of debate/lowered tone (do not raise voice)
Holidays	Based on Christian religion; based on White history and male leaders
History	Based on Northern European immigrants’ experiences in U.S.; heavy focus on British empire; primacy of Western (Greek, Roman) and Judeo-Christian tradition
Protestant work ethic	Hard work is key to success; work before play; “if you don’t meet your goals, you didn’t work hard enough”
Emphasis on scientific mind	Objective, rational linear thinking; cause and effect relationships; quantitative emphasis (belief in truth in numbers over other forms of evidence)
Status, power, and authority	Monetary wealth = worth; heavy value on ownership of goods, space, property; your job is who you are; respect authority
Time	Adherence to rigid time schedules; time viewed as a commodity (spent/used/saved)
Future orientation	Plan for future; delayed gratification; change is progress and is always for the best; “tomorrow will be better”
Family structure	Nuclear (father, mother, 2.3 children) as ideal; patriarchal—husband is breadwinner, head of household; wife is homemaker, subordinate to husband; children should have own rooms, be independent
Aesthetics	Based on European culture; woman’s beauty based on White aesthetic—“Barbie”; anything outside of this considered ‘exotic’ or unattractive; men’s attractiveness based on economic status, power, intellect
Religion	Christianity as norm; Anything other than Judeo-Christian tradition is foreign; no tolerance for deviation from single god concept

From “White Culture and Racism: Working for the Organizational Change in the United States,” *The Whiteness Papers, no.3*, (p. 5). by J. H. Katz, 1999, Roselle, NJ: Center for the Study of White American Culture.