



Racism from the Inside Out: Toward Reconciliation and Cure

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Invited to offer my commentary on racism, I do so from the view of an interracial counselor/trainer with much experience in the U.S. and elsewhere. Global listener herein refers to those ascribing to the ideals and definition of listening set forth by the Global Listening Centre. Why would racism be of import to the global listener? Beside moral and humanitarian reasons, effective listening as a constructive process (Burlinson 2011) is predicated on having clear perception through which meaning unfolds. The classic adage pertains: garbage in—garbage out. The more racialized our perception, the less effective listening becomes. The very fact that we are human means imperfection—our minds however sharp can never be pure. That is inescapable whatever stripe of color you might be. My hope is that in a small way, what I set forth might aid us become better global listeners. Herein my purpose will be to chart out the who, what, and where about racism and how we might overcome this bane that afflicts humanity, while sharing actual interracial experiences and the role of listening for a successful outcome.

Racism: Where?

Mention racism and many think of the relations in the U.S. between Black folk and White folk, such marked by a sad and sordid history. I should like to make these relations the primary concern here but not exclusively. Indeed racism involves other People of Color and Indigenous People as well. A major problem in overcoming racism is a universal tendency to deny that it exists in oneself and/or in one's own society. A well-known dictum is that problems cannot be solved until they are recognized or acknowledged. In the case of racism much depends on how people define the term and whom it affects.

“[F]or most people in the world community, racism describes race relations unique and isolated to the United States and Western Europe” (Bowser 1995, p. xi), but I dare say—not to dismiss racism in those areas—that much of this notoriety comes from the enormous publicizing it by US/Western social sciences, as well as the social diversities in the West, and their democracies that empower people to freely push for equality. Racism per se is not unique and isolated to the areas claimed: “Racism is endemic in most societies across the globe and in the digital spaces that youth inhabit” (Mills & Godley 2017). In other parts of the world, social homogeneity, political oppression, or lack of education prevent widespread awareness of racism within their own borders. Consider an Australian journalist on this: “If you're Australian and you think [you're] 'lucky' not to have the same issues as the US, [think again]. ...Australians are being asked to confront their own long and ongoing history of violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples” (Willing, 2020). Korff (2020) concurs: “Scratch an Australian to find a racist. ...Racism exists at all levels of Australian society but Australians are in denial.”

For another example, consider Japan: A nation known for impeccable manners and hospitality cannot conceive that they have a problem of racism—but they do. Many Japanese have grown up nearly without experience of direct contact with non-Japanese. Yet once in interracial contacts, they may be found harboring latent prejudices unimagined. Most *gaijin* (foreigners), and surely People of Color living there, have experienced considerable racial discrimination, even though benign (if ever possible). “No foreigners allowed” posted on establishment doors, though rare today, is not completely out of the question. Japan

previously received a UN citation for its problem of racism, described as “deep and profound” (Arudou 2015, p. 62). Japanese people, however, are no more racist than any other; they simply deny it more. Other countries, China, India, Korea, Russia, and so on have nothing on Japan in this regard, for as Shah (2010) reports they have their own problems as well. Each of these nations has at least certain diversity tensions, even if “only ethnic,” that amount to racism. Calling them by any other name is but delusional.

A Definition

So you see then the need for defining racism, for which I adapt that of Schmitt, Semu & Witte’s (2017): “Racism is the practice of distinguishing [individuals or groups of people] by ascribing actual or construed differences [of biology or culture] (Rommelspacher, 2009) [that results in one’s own group being superior]” or exclusive. This defining has value in avoiding the problematic term “race” as well as subsuming so-called “cultural racism.” Racism is racism. Absence of phenotypic differences simply is insufficient for devising a separate category. And why should culture or ethnicity be included as “race”? That is the usage in English. According to the OED, “race,” among its meanings, refers to “a group of people sharing the same culture, history, language, etc.; an ethnic group: *we Scots were a blood thirsty race then.*”

Such is reflected in the United Nations including “descent, or national or ethnic origin” along with “race” distinctions as racial discrimination (UN General Assembly, 1965). Because “race” is well known not to have scientific basis,² it is ascriptive, not much more than arbitrary, in how “races” are imagined. When the Hindu is forbidden to marry the non-Hindu; as the Christian might, the Jew; and the White, the Black, it would be very unusual if a sense of superiority were unfelt by the first person in these pairings. One could argue that religion sets the first two cases apart, but nevertheless the non-Hindu and the Jew would just as likely feel discriminated against as does the Black. Let it be said that that so-called superiority comes from nothing more than the advantage of being part of a numerical majority. In sum, racism as defined has strong basis by which to include the major societies of the world as sites for this human scourge. (See D’Souza [1995], who tries much to place racism solely in the West.) For further information on my defining racism, see Note 1.

Self-Bias Naturally

Given that racism exists nearly anywhere, denial is probably just as common, as Suroor (2019) points out. Mention was made of Australians in this regard though not limited to them of course. This self-denial is likely rooted in a natural bias that favors oneself as compared to others in judgements of racist behavior (Bell, Burkley, & Bock 2019). Reminiscent of the well-established attributional bias in social psychology known as actor-observer bias or also the fundamental error of attribution, people typically afford themselves situational explanations for negative outcomes, whereas the same people rely on personal characteristics of others as explanations. This bias allows shifting responsibility away from ourselves onto external forces or circumstances; something we typically do not do for others. Late for an appointment, we can explain it away based on traffic or last-minute exigencies, but for others? We likely view it as a sign of their carelessness or insensitivity. Even if we wanted to use a situational cause, we do not usually know enough about it. We can see how if racially prejudiced, our judgements of interracial encounters would likely be impaired. Ah, you might think—“that’s a big ‘if.’” After all we are all well-educated and likely people of good intentions. We would be the last to have prejudices. That makes sense except for one thing—the unconscious mind. It’s beyond our control.

The best intentions are not always carried out. Before my first big game of basketball in Japan, I vowed to myself I wouldn't foul, knowing referees would likely be less kind to foreigners. Visually foreign players stand out and so attract more notice besides the fact that rules can be practiced differently across cultures. Alas I was in foul trouble almost immediately, which taught me a good lesson about intentions. While I agree sometimes referees err, much of my fouling came from my own uncontrollable automatic or unconscious behaviors. In heat-of-the-moment situations, we are unable to do otherwise.

Japanese people are highly educated and refined but can still emit ungracious acts: At an elevator in an upscale department store, three finely dressed young Japanese women chat while waiting. When a foreign male also comes to wait, "bikkurishita!" (lit., surprise) erupts from one woman while holding her hand to her mouth and giggling with the other two, as they glance at the foreigner. Switch the same situation to the U.S. and the foreigner being Black. Inconceivable. So much so that the ill-mannered behavior might be considered deserving of a face slap. Consciousness has been raised in the U.S. by which most people have become racially tolerant at least in respectable public areas. Until those Japanese women were in that situation, they probably would never expect to behave so rudely.³ And still probably today because it was not brought to their attention.

Another example of microaggression in Japan: An African-American female teacher in Japan reports: "once [my breasts were] groped in an elevator in apparent surprise over [my] figure" by another woman (Rich & Hida, 2020). Other foreign women have had similar experience as do also some men getting groped (by Japanese men in less refined public areas). Although these cases remain quite rare, they suggest that for some Japanese, foreign people are so different that decorum need not apply. A more common complaint heard by foreigners is how, say, on a train some Japanese will chat disfavorably about a foreigner in earshot, thinking that the Japanese language is so exclusively their own. Much of these cases can be attributed to curiosity but at base there still seems a strong feeling by Japanese of difference or exclusion toward non-Japanese. Benign the motive might be, classifying it as racism seems unavoidable considering its essence is othering—casting the other as "outsider" (literally that is the meaning of *gaijin*, a shortened form for foreigner in Japanese). Japan still as yet to enact a law against racial discrimination (Arudou, 2020); oddly however a lone LGBT rights law was enacted in conjunction with the Tokyo Olympics 2020 covering events within Tokyo but **not** those Olympic events outside the city (Human Rights Watch, 2020). All this is likely due to Japan's insularity by its homogenous population (less than 3% non-Japanese), its island status, and its historical self-imposed isolation from the world.

Such is the power of the unconscious and why it would behoove the global listener to consider implicit racism more closely and become acquainted with the IAT (Implicit Association Test): <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html> This test, however, might not be appropriate for everyone, and multiple-times testing appears prudent for others. Implicit bias, thereby the unconscious, is elusive to track, so indirect means may only be possible. "Despite notable concerns, [including limited reliability], the IAT ... remains the most widely used and likely most accurate measure of implicit bias" (Gullo, 2017). The global listener will likely find the test intuitively appealing and arrive at new insights. As mentioned we are imperfect beings and so likely to benefit by the consciousness-raising about racism.

Self-Denial

Understandably Japanese and other nationalities with very limited direct contact with People of Color and/or Indigenous People will deny they are racist. How can they fathom it otherwise without direct experience? In highly diverse societies as the U.S. an interesting

phenomenon occurs by which both Black folk and White folk personally deny it in themselves. Blacks (or African Americans) instead redefine racism as institutional racism, a rightful and important focus but unfortunately sidesteps their own potential prejudice. White folk do no better: Whites typically “equat[e] all racism with White separatist and extremist groups, such as the KKK, Nazis, or skinheads” (Stanford-Asiyo 2019, p. 26). So you see when Black folk and White folk come together for constructive purposes, they will likely end up talking past one another because both have precluded themselves of ever possessing racial prejudices. By so excluding themselves from this personal affliction they become no better than the Japanese or other people low on racial self-awareness. Granted that BIC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) have pressing need for their civil rights upheld, advancement of racial equality will only take place by society as a whole. Glenn C. Loury, distinguished scholar and himself Black, concludes that racial equality will require not only a cessation of White supremacy but also that of “counterproductive behavioral patterns among Blacks”(Loury, 2019). A difficult message for some people focused entirely on institutional racism. All of us are in this together and the first step must be to recognize our humanness—a state of imperfection meaning that all of us are racially prejudiced to some degree.

Let me put it another way: Institutional racism can only exist if there is individual racism. Eradicating institutional racism depends on individuals recognizing they are part of the solution. As pointed out, psychology has revealed a human tendency to externalize blame away from ourselves. Thus, Whites typically believe racism is only found within the extreme fringes of society. Many of them also wonder why they are held accountable for the sins of prior generations. If Black folk take a holier-than-thou view of individual racism, then hardly will White folk be likely to confront themselves about the affliction. Both groups must form a social pact of working together to ameliorate the problem. Similar to an integrated religious congregation that worships together with a common goal of salvation. Never is there a thought that sin is the property of solely one race. So should be the case about racism. That is individual racism. Institutional racism requires a much more top-down approach and squarely aimed at the majority group, usually White. Given their likely low racial awareness, racism-as-original-sin of humanity would seem eventually a necessary approach. Again, society as a whole as equal partners in a social pact to erase racism seems required.

Fluid Meaning of *Racism*

Eminent linguist John McWhorter (2019) in “*Racist is a Tough Little Word*,” points out that meanings of words shift over time. It is so with racist/racism having come to include not just bias but contempt as well. While that is fitting the practicalities of today, it does have limits. In the case of a difference between political allies, one being a Latino who suggested racism by her White ally, stretched its meaning to whatever BIC individuals might say it is. Thus unfortunate excess may occur and why we need equal partnership among racial groups in combatting racism. Once while a student teacher in a high school in the U.S., I was invited to play in the school’s annual basketball game between the faculty and the school’s varsity team. During the game I told the star player of the school, a Black, “Cool it, it’s only a game” in response to his unnecessary roughness. In the locker room after the game I could hear some commotion outside. Later his coach came in to inform me that his player claimed I had called him the n-word. Fortunately, the moment was witnessed by another player, a Black teacher, who came to my defense. According to the school newspaper I was the game’s high scorer and the faculty won. Was it sour grapes on the part of that Black player or his own prejudice twisting my words into something so vile? I shudder to think that if there had been no witness, my career could have ended then and there. Perception must always be a two-way street.

In the rush to righteousness, we err on the side of the oppressed. Reasonably so but later as a parent of children in U.S. schools I came to see that teachers are generally immobilized about interracial conflict. White children may actually become the new disadvantaged in such conflicts at school. I wonder if there might not be a connection with young adult attraction to White extremist groups. Unresolved emotional conflicts in early life are known to affect adulthood. How is it that a pair of White American college students in Japan together regularly made racist rants about Blacks and Jews because they were outside of the constrictions back home? They felt safe because they assumed that Japanese around them would ignore it. An African-American student of mine in Japan, Jerome*, offers a good example of this freedom felt in Japan: Jerome grew up in various White communities, his father being in the U.S. Air Force. Sometimes however amongst Blacks, he felt pressure to act “Black,” for instance walking with a strut. But in Japan he felt he could act any way he wanted and just be himself. The two racist students, unknown to me personally, would probably profess back home that they weren’t racially prejudiced.

This case tells us that racism is profoundly deep within the psyche of some individuals and likely hidden. Mechanisms for which are multifaceted of course. One feature however I see in the rhetoric of White extremism is an apparent grievance that minorities receive more than their fair share. I am reminded rightly or wrongly of the times that I had to convince my young children that giving up a possession of theirs wrongfully disputed by a Black child was for the best. Educators of all stripes need more effective interracial/intercultural training such that they can handle such disputes fairly for all children. That is, not turn a blind eye because of personal insecurity about such matters. Grievances of racial unfairness felt in early childhood could later foment adult racism. Such can only be magnified by the excess of identity politics as in McWhorter’s (2019) example or common misperceptions that can happen in interracial contacts as in the basketball example. The case of the two racist American students in Japan dismays me, for it reveals racism is far more deeply entrenched a problem as I could have imagined. Racism requires a total effort from all-- Black and non-Black—if we are to defeat it.

How Defining Terms can be a Life Saver (or Almost)

Once when exiting a school cafeteria at a new university I attended in the U.S., a huge muscular man, like a Mr. Universe, clothed solely in gym shorts was doing calisthenics on some grass near the entrance. He obviously put himself on display for that was not the place for that. Some days later, I came into a gym to shoot some baskets when the same person was bullying a scattering of White students there. We happened to be on the same court, but I thought I would just ignore him. Eventually, however, he turned to me and asked menacingly, “You racist?”

“Hmm,” I thought, “yes or no could bring trouble.” So I replied, “How you define it?” That caught him off guard: “Oh, let’s get philosophical!” he said as he walked off, never to bother me again. If it were not for his belligerence, I would have been happy to discuss racism with him. It reaffirmed the importance of defining terms, for he apparently knew less about the subject than he had thought.

I suppose that he viewed racism entirely as “institutional,” so if he wanted a debate, he could have some trouble. Let it be known that he was very unusual for a Black person. You will find, contrarily, most Blacks warmhearted and pleasant to be with. It was his nature apparently to be unlike that, for I noticed he was rather bossy also with his friends. This episode stayed with me because it echoes what I have noticed about Blacks talking about race: They tend to scoff at defining terms, as the institutional view as held precludes themselves as ever being racist. (See Note 1 how my definition includes both levels.)

Color blindness is a fiction.

On a trip to India no sooner had I boarded my flight when the Indian person seated next to me, a retired engineer, said in our conversations, “You White people,” an expression I curiously heard a number of times during my short trip. Never was there ill-intent; rather it was said matter-of-factly. I being American was made to feel uncomfortable because such talk was unexpected for a purely social, first-time meeting. In the U.S., it would be ludicrous to say something like, “You Black people enjoy ___, don’t you?” (the gap fillable by a known stereotype). We Americans learn to avoid stereotyping others, so it was startling for educated Indians to do such. This matter-of-factness is refreshing in one way, but it also enacts the view that the world is divisible based on “race” or color. One of the most wonderful feelings is when others have treated me first as a person without regard to race, gender, creed, and so on. It is a curiosity that the Indians I speak about chose a racial category rather than a national one in addressing me. It would have been more appropriate for them to address me as an American or Westerner than as a White person. I highlighted a danger of “seeing color” if it is actually a part of stereotyping someone, especially a stranger. On the other hand ignoring color (being colorblind) is not as noble as it would seem.

Racial category is avoided in the U.S. (Apfelbaum, Sommers, & Norton, 2008) unless of course our topic is indeed racial. If between interracial friends it can be quite fun, say, comparing cultural differences. If not between friends, then Americans, particularly White ones, generally avoid the topic in interracial contexts. Some Whites risk embarrassing themselves by their ignorance or being misconstrued. The fear of being viewed racist is so great that they think it best not to talk about it. This fear underlies the colorblind approach by which it is thought that not noticing color negates racism. While such might be helpful in avoiding stereotyping others, it is not so if one were to conclude ipso facto that color blindness means not being racist. Stanford-Asiyo (2019) provides some typical statements by adherents of the colorblind approach:

- “I don’t see color; I just see people.”
- “I was taught to treat everyone the same, so I’m not a racist.”
- “I see people as individuals. I don’t care if you are green, blue, or polka dotted.”
- “I work in a diverse environment, so I’m not racist.”

Such statements fly in the face of facts that children as young as three already perceive racial differences of people to which valuations are attached (Stanford-Asiyo, 2019). Granted some of those statements maybe more philosophical, such that the individual wishes to avoid stereotyping or discriminating others, but often such can lead to disillusionment and ultimately less effective interracial relations, if we were to think colorblindness cancels out whatever racism we might possess.

Misunderstanding about colorblindness is worsened by a recent article in the *Washington Post*. The *Post* blarneyed this headline about the founder of Starbucks: “Howard Schultz said he’s colorblind. That suggests a deep ignorance about America’s race problems” (Scott, 2019). Schultz had quipped, “As somebody who grew up in a very diverse background as a young boy, in the projects [government housing for the poor], I didn’t see color as a young boy. And I honestly don’t see color now” (Scott, 2019). Such sentiment rightly or wrongly is associated with a blindness to the reality of racism on the institutional level. The same *Post* article goes on to explain that Schultz’s own vice-president just so happened to have taken up

the topic on a separate occasion in a Ted talk. She “argued that being blind to race can lead to ignoring the challenges people of different races experience” (Scott, 2019). Surely so if one is truly blind to race, but I cannot help but wonder if the backlash to Shultz’s mere words were a reflex of the thought police.

Color blindness about which I spoke concerns individual racism; but Scott (2019) and others use the term for institutional racism. Black scholars have tended to define racism to mean institutional, leading to a focus on that level (Taylor 2016). I believe it is a leap to conclude that one’s saying, “I see no color” ipso facto means denial of institutional racism, microaggressions, and the like. Any educated American should be familiar with the sad statistics that Blacks lag other racial groups on various indices (health, education, wealth), that in daily life they may suffer indignities from DWB (driving while Black) to SWB (shopping while Black), aside from fear of being misidentified by police for unrelated crimes (Gross, 2017). For all that and more, educated people would not suspect that institutionally racism occurs? Because of the human tendency of externalizing or shifting blame onto others, it is quite likely that non-Blacks would more likely agree that racism is found in others (institutions) than within themselves. So it is not out of the question that Shultz agrees that racism occurs institutionally but not within himself. And given that Starbucks is his company, he might readily believe racism is absent there but well in existence in other companies and institutions. Even if he overlooks racism in Starbucks, it does not mean that he denies the existence of it in American institutions nor is unsympathetic for the plight of Blacks and other minorities. Furthermore because of his apparent humble background he possibly might be more racially sensitive than other CEOs.

So indeed racist/racism are tough little words. They are complex because their meanings differ according to who uses them. The case of Shultz illustrates how Black folk and White folk very much end up talking past one another even if well intended. Without a common vocabulary hardly can there be mutual understanding. Nowhere does Scott (2019) point out in his article that racism has different meanings. By his racism-is-institutional take, it is easy to claim that Shultz’s “I see no color” is a sign of racism. Why? Because one of his stores had a racial incident. Therefore, Shultz must be blind to institutional racism, as he said he does not see color. In other words, insufficient safeguards against racial discrimination were in place at the store. But if I recall correctly, the Black individuals concerned actually had not bought anything and were using the premises as their rendezvous point (Tornoe, 2018). It so happens, I believe, the store had previous trouble about this, inviting the local manager to eventually mishandle such a situation. The issue is that some individuals, White and Black, had abused the hospitality of Starbucks, and apparently the manager chose the wrong people to correct. Racial discrimination, perhaps, but Scott (2019) and the *Post* seem to misinterpret what “I see no color” means by Shultz, clouding the concept of color blindness for others.

To recap, Whites in saying “I see no color” claim that they don’t stereotype/discriminate, which in turn gives them the illusion that they must be free of racism. Particularly so because they believe it is the extreme bigots who are racist, those that garner news headlines about violent acts of racism. Such news includes incidents of police brutality unfairly made against Blacks, which elicit widespread sympathy in support, further evidence that one must be free of racism. Intellectually also these individuals desire to be “good,” so denial of racism personally seems appropriate. All well and good but it is fantasy, wishful thinking. Colorblindness possibly could help avoid stereotyping, but it does not by itself remove racism completely.

When you go into a foreign culture, what happens? You find many things “wrong” with it: “They drive on the wrong side of the road”; “They give tricky looks”; “They don’t make sense”; “They talk funny” and so on. In other words, your culture is “superior” to theirs. It cannot help but be that way. The father of social anthropology (Malinowski) was found to

have thought privately certain negative things about the people he studied. So what. That is natural. (Of course we try to control it interculturally.) As said before, we desire the familiar or at least feel comfort with such. So why shouldn't we feel more comfort with people of our own kind than with others? Exceptions exist of course as with Gill*, a former White colleague who preferred Blacks and was quite open about it. Why is that racism? Believing one race superior to another is the core semantic element of racism (McWhorter, 2019). Surely you would consider (if American or German) driving on the right side superior to the left. Or English is superior to Chinese or Greek. Suddenly if you had to drive on the left side by instructions given in Chinese or Greek, you would probably be unhappy. Given such strong preference for the familiar, it is highly likely that you feel a bit more comfortable with people of your race than others, given all things being equal. So all of us have some degree of racism, even if a tiny bit, because we are who we are—humans, imperfect beings for sure.

“You turned White!”

My first interracial counseling job was this: “Go to each person assigned to you, knock on their (dorm) room, and tell them you are there to help them.” “Me, a White, will help a Black, how?” I thought. More concerningly, “How do you talk with a Black?” I was in high anxiety for a week about it. As it turns out, I worried needlessly, for I was well suited for the job given my evaluations. In the beginning I was completely naïve. I applied for the job out of curiosity and the wish to learn from our job training. I wanted to know why in the gym I could be pals with Blacks on the basketball court but really not out on campus. Oh we were all cordial and everything, but outside the gym quite segregated. It didn't help that the campus was practically all White, and no Blacks lived on my dorm floor. In the cafeteria(s), Blacks ate solely among themselves. Not once had I seen it differently. I am sure this was not their wish, but a result of being a small minority. So I applied to the PalAid Program to be a tutor-counselor as support for those in compensatory education, ones typically Black from the inner city.

Luckily, on my list of students were two I knew from basketball. They were roommates, so “I will start with them.” So I thought. Their warm welcome put me at ease, but what was to come was something no naïve White boy could imagine: A crash course in Racism 101. For three hours I sat listening to these two students harangue me about racial relations in the U.S. I never said a word. They alternated in updating me on the Black perspective on things racial. They spoke with fury but I didn't take it personally. Although I knew they didn't intend any harm, I left with my stomach in knots. It was painful but valuable in helping me develop different perspectives. I had four other students who I met weekly with, offering them any academic or personal help I could. Remarkable about this was these six students ranged in speaking comprehensible standard English from perfect to almost nil. One student was so eloquent a speaker that you could imagine him a telecaster; oppositely one student I never could understand, his dialect so removed from standard. In the middle range, was a female student named Sharon*. Sharon was bright and hardly ever needed tutoring; much of the time we spent in conversation in her dorm lobby. She felt so positive about our contacts together that unknown to me, she recommended me be assigned for her good friend the next year.

That next year unknown to Sharon, I was promoted at school to be a graduate counselor for an entire dorm, a separate job. I no longer could be paid by the PalAid Program, but I volunteered nonetheless. This was my personal weakness not being able to say no. Because of my new job, I no longer dined with Blacks in the cafeteria but did so with the students I had responsibility for, over 300, and the wish not to appear so exclusive. Sharon probably noticed my new life apart from Black students. One day we happened to come across each

other on campus. We greeted and then she snapped, “You turned White!” Those were her exact words. She was upset because I had unfortunately given her friend little attention, who had been assigned to me as her volunteer tutor-counselor. Remarkable how Sharon saw in colors and so symbolically so. To her it was like I was a traitor. From a Black perspective, U.S. race relations must sometimes be like war—a matter of survival. On the surface that is not what I see. But if we look more deeply, we can see that despite the great strides made in recent years, still room exists for more Black representation in American society.

Between Two Camps: Black and White

Despite Sharon’s view, it was not shared by the local African American Association (Afro-Am). After nearly two years counseling Black underclassmen and having solid relationships with them, their group unbeknown to me, petitioned Afro-Am to have me on their basketball team. Later their president told me it was not an easy sell. By sheer number of these underclassmen, a vote decided that Afro-Am invite me on the team. Their president, a man of intellect, explained it would have much symbolic value to the university community having me on the team. I accepted out of gratitude that my students felt so highly of me to think I could represent them—especially with the backdrop of racial tensions in the U.S. I accepted also without knowing what was really in store—becoming a target of both White racism and Black racism. The idea of a White player representing the Black community was too much for some individuals on either side.

All our games in the campus tournament were absent racial overtones except for one. The exception was the game with TKK*, the “jock fraternity.” I would have thought otherwise because several of their players had been my teammates on the school’s varsity team. On varsity I got my share of “splinters” by being a reserve player; so did most of them. I cannot be sure but they likely were the ones who had sent me death threats. One of the players was particularly “dirty” to me throughout the game. That was but the backdrop. TKK had regularly played in exquisite red uniforms, named and numbered. But not this time. They came out in complete White—blank White T-shirts and shorts. Unquestionably this was their dislike for a White playing for a Black team. Throughout the game their supporters chanted, “Get a suntan. Get a suntan.” This left no doubt about whom they had in mind. The hatred was palpable. We won a tough, fought-out game, as if a struggle between good and evil. The hatred depressed me at least until the next day. Even now after many years, I surprisingly got teary from this recounting.

Boommerrang: One Step forward, Two Steps back

Great that Afro-Am won, as we collectively showed how Black and White can work together. Despite this harmony and about as true brotherly love could be, a few years later brought me racial shock as if in a Greek tragedy. On that team was Kyle*, a 6-9, 280 lb. gentle giant of a man, who with me dreamed of starting a record company together. A year before this game, he had invited me to stay in his home during a special school break, surprising the Black counselors on staff, as if unimaginable. (White counselors, as opposed to Black, were doing *interracial* work, and so possibly went through more stringent job interviewing. The Black staff—drawn from the local student body—may possibly have been more racist or less open to interracial friendships. For instance on campus Black males were known to pressure Black females from involvement with White males. That is segregated thought which possibly could extend to all social relations. Of course it was a natural response to being a small group numerically and the wish for strong group coherence. My

point is that Blacks can be racist as well but for different reasons. They also can have “hang ups” about race, so as humans we all need some inward cleansing.)

As soon as my arrival at Kyles’s, I was brought as a guest to visit their various relatives. So impactful being received so kindly though a stranger! Continually I was made to reflect on the artificial barrier between Black and White; and how these Black folk appeared eager to commune with Whites. After our pre-college program finished and Kyle became a regular student, we continued our friendship.⁴ For example we took a camping trip through Canada, sometimes spent a weekend at his home besides doing the usual campus activities. In short, we were best friends. His parents seemed to beam approval as if we were the realization of Dr. King’s dream. In time I went on to graduate school elsewhere and Kyle continued on to finish his BA degree. However during our two-year absence, Kyle changed his view on race. Essentially he became radical by influence from other radical Blacks at school according to him. On my return “back East,” I stopped in to see him at his home. On his front steps of his house, he sheepishly told me he shouldn’t see me. It must have taken a lot for him to flip like that. I knew if I persisted, his place within his Black community could be jeopardized. I would be long gone anyway and so not worth the trouble he might have.

An almost similar thing happened a year earlier when I rung up another fellow Afro-Am player, Earle,* at his home in my same hometown. I was home for the holidays and remembered him. At that moment I realized that school is not part of the real world. It is though you can be best friends on campus but once off everything changes. He lived on the “Black side of town,” so my invitation fell on deaf ears. I myself would not have wanted to walk through his neighborhood, famously dangerous. In reverse he would have had to transit some areas going to my house that could be concerning for a Black man. In other words, we likely felt we were not supposed to be friends. What was okay at school was not back home, for many residential areas are segregated in the U.S. even today. “In a supposed ‘post-racial’ America, dramatic urban segregation persists” (Roberts, Horwitz, Horowitz, & Tomaiko, 2019). “Research shows that many racially diverse neighborhoods—seemingly a sign of progress in racial equality - are, in fact, segregating over time” (American University, 2016). Many of us might not realize this until we try to break out of it and find it can block friendship across races as happened with Earle. (Kyle’s situation differed because he lived in a smaller mid-sized city, though segregated, was more upscale than Earle’s area and relatively free of crime. But still there was something because Kyle talked how his large appearance would allow me to enter Black bars with him there. And we did uneventfully but hardly would I risk it otherwise if so interested.)

As we saw earlier, people typically deny being racist. Given widespread segregation even today in our residential or everyday living, how can people really understand their own prejudices? Racial preference is quite natural for the human being. Most people feel comfort with the familiar—family, friends, free time pursuits. But the unaccustomed or dissimilar brings stress and anxiety. In a roomful of strangers you are likely to feel discomfort; if in the extreme, a holding cell—much alarm. Being at home with friends feels better, superior to being with strangers potentially harmful. Similarly strangers who speak your language and have the same customs are superior being with than with strangers who do not. Granted this does not always hold true. Previously, I mentioned Gill, a known math genius, who taught in the same pre-college compensatory education program (PreCo) where I was employed as a counselor. He was known for something else: He was a White ex-convict who avowedly hated White people. I didn’t get to know him partly because being on different staffs our work schedules were very different. He was never uncivil but neither was he particularly outgoing. He, much older, did volunteer some advice to me as I was new: “Smoking” with Blacks was a way “in.” This advice would not be much different from anthropological advice

of breaking bread with the folks of a new community. I didn't take him up on it as it wasn't my thing. I don't recall him "hanging" with any other of the few Whites on staff either.

Gill, we can say, was racist but against his own kind. Perhaps that was his way "in" as well. He also was not colorblind as he did not deny his having his special prejudice. For his part, he was a master teacher in that he made his kids feel they could do math, no small feat considering the beleaguered schools from which they came. Even if White, a child could receive Gill's best I am sure. But could he operate as a teacher in a mainstream school is an open question. He was someone who let you know where he stood. He likely found his niche teaching inner city children and continued that as a career.

Contrast him with people in general: People generally socially accommodate with others and avoid conflict. Thus they likely take the colorblind approach and avoid noticing racial difference (Neville, Gallardo, & Sue, 2014). That is most so by White Americans but quite opposite for African Americans, who report that "it is impossible for African Americans to be colorblind in America" (Carr, 1997). White thinking is that doing so is uncomfortable and probably would offend People of Color, as previously discussed. Seeing color (figuratively) in their view is the root of racism. If you don't notice color, then you can't be racist. Although well intended, this colorblind approach presupposes that color is bad. Thus it denies People of Color their personhood, for it is at the core of their identity. An offshoot of colorblindness is that it stifles talk about racism with others, especially with People of Color, who contrarily, in most cases, favor civil and frank talk about the subject.

Checkpoint: Who has racism?

Consider the following cases for evidence of racism:

Case 1: A White boy (aged 7) with his family from the suburbs visit his grandmother in an older part of an American city on a summer day. His older step-brother takes him to the nearby public swimming pool where he swims alone. He sees African Americans up close for the first time in his life. The pool has been integrating such that Blacks predominate in number. While at play, the boy notices that two Black boys about his age stalk him from behind. Even when he gets out for a drink, so do they. On his return, he notices the same boys shadowing him. Alarmed he raises his fist to them as he goes back into the water. Later he glimpsed a mass of Black bodies just before they smothered him from behind, pushing him under. After release he coughs his way out of the pool where he sits shaking uncontrollably from his ordeal. He no longer returns to the pool.

Case 2: Three years later that same boy is at summer play in the suburbs in a neighborhood woods. He happens to sit on a large rock, feet away from his four White friends ravaging on a walking path. The sound of bikes ring on the path. It's two Black kids. His White friends spring into action by throwing things at them—sticks and stones literally, and yell, "Get out" with the n-word. The boy stayed on his rock feeling sorry for the two boys on their bikes.

Aggression by both groups of children was territorial in nature. Each group protected what it viewed as their territory. If the aggressor and the target child(ren) were of the same race, the aggression is unlikely to have happened because the target would be unmarked. Race more easily marks the target as of an outgroup. Both groups then were likely motivated by racism, as we recall earlier noting that children as young as three perceive racial differences. The two situations differ subtly, however, in that Case 2 happened in a natural surrounding absent security or corrective force (e.g., lifeguards and other staff as in Case 1).

I still marvel today (confession: I was the boy) that I did not drown, showing obvious restraint by those boys; but in a natural setting the result could have been tragic. Remarkable also how our young children can react racially so instantaneously—despite the humanistic education at school they receive. I received messages for racial tolerance as I am sure my friends did, and likely the children at the pool in their schools. Yet we see those messages fail time and time again (Bronson & Merryman, 2009). More powerful than formal education at school is the informal that pervades everyday living in our homes, neighborhoods, communities, but perhaps more importantly the society at large. All these levels from the top-down need to be aligned toward ameliorating racism. So of course besides individual racism, the primary focus of our discussion, institutional racism looms large as well. My point though is that both the individual and institutional levels must be linked, enjoined--bringing Blacks and non-Blacks together as equal partners to resist if not defeat racism. In the U.S. what presently prevents this union most from happening is identity politics—the infighting within American society by different interest groups for their share of power.

Identity Politics

In the U.S. surely racial relations has been enjoined by politics. By political power, much racial equality has improved over the last fifty years an epoch development toward greater civilization. However, racism is alive and well. If it ever will be put in its place, our segregated thinking about the races must be dispelled to allow concerted effort by Blacks and non-Blacks together to defeat racism. Consideration of Table 1, a racial event in the NBA will illustrate the thinking necessary for unity against racism but also opposition that identity politics can play.

During an NBA basketball playoff game, a Black player called a White one, “White boy” (point 1 in Table 1) (Owens, 2020). Jay Williams, a sports telecaster, former NBA player, and himself Black, publicly called on the Black player for the racist act (point 2) (Owens, 2020). Williams (2020) made an important point: Blacks cannot have it both ways. If Blacks demand redress for racist acts suffered, then so should Whites be allowed the same kind of redress. Thereupon a beautiful moment occurred the next day when “handshakes, hugs, and words” were made in apology and reconciliation (point 3) (Owens, 2020). Here Black and White are in unity and symbolize the cooperative action needed to fight racism. This beautiful moment however was marred by an identity-politics reply of “it is your own race bro”

Table 1: NBA racial incident: black player calls white player, “a white boy” during a game.

- 1 
- 2 Jay Williams of ESPN, and former player, was quick to reprimand Harrell for his racist statement: “It’s not acceptable, man. ...We don’t need that in today’s game; especially with everything that we’re fighting for as it relates to equality” (Williams, 2020).
- 3 **Apology by the black player**

- 4 **Backlash against Williams, a black sportscaster**


<https://www.yahoo.com/sports/luka-doncic-montrezl-harrell-talk-pregame-appear-to-settle-white-boy-incident-210949013.html>

to Williams's saying, "You mean the human race. You got it wrong if your mentality is it's them vs. us." (point 4) (Williams, 2020). Apparently, in identity politics no inch can be given by Blacks in their struggle for racial equality, in view of wrongful police shootings of Blacks, and so on.

In other words, admission of personal racism could undermine the position of right by law that Blacks hold. It is important to maintain the upper hand, lest society be sidetracked by other matters. And besides as indicated previously, the Black perspective is generally focused on institutional racism. A White activist for Black Lives Matter states it clearly: "Racism is a [W]hite person problem, not a Black person problem" (New, 2020). Agreed here as already discussed about institutional racism within the U.S.; but of course not necessarily elsewhere and surely not about individual racism. Both levels of racism must be dealt in tandem, and for the individual level, exempting no one regardless of race, culture, or ethnicity.

It is very unfortunate that Jay Williams simply by voicing universal principles (i.e., we are all of one race—the human race; etc.) has his racial identity questioned. Yet identity politics questions anything possibly "White." In what seems a science fiction story of a reversed world, universal principles of hard work, rationality, politeness are branded for disregard as part of "White culture" by the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of African American History and Culture (Ford, 2020; Hess & Martin, 2020). But impugning these same principles is counter to what Black parents actually favor teaching their children (Hess & Martin, 2020). At the same time this Smithsonian museum claimed that Christianity is "White" (Hess & Martin, 2020); yet Christianity is the predominant religion in the sub-Saharan Africa, for example, with over 550 million adherents (Pew Research Center, 2010), nearly twice the population of the U.S.

Also we have Chimamanda Adichie, a Nigerian novelist and a U.S. intellectual, claim on BBC *Newsnight*, a news and current affairs TV program, that "if you are a White man you don't get to define what racism is" (BellaNaija.com, 2016). Ironically, the first to coin the word historically was White (Demby, 2014); the first to define it, White as well (Naguib, 2014). Ironically also, the museum and Adichie commit racism in the very attempt to deal with it. Such is excess that identity politics can produce in the name of anti-racism. An extreme form goes radical, as with the case of my friend Kyle. Being radical engages two processes: 1) segregated thinking—a closing off from at least White society and domineering the dialog about racism (as with Adichie); and 2) othering "White culture" or "Whites" by which to elevate one's own, Black culture (as with the Smithsonian's African American museum). Segregating ourselves and othering races or cultures hardly bodes well for achieving a post-racial society.

Exactly why racism is not solely a White problem, but a human problem demanding cooperative action by all. This position is inescapable considering my intended application is worldwide and my focus is on individual racism. Even if locked-in to solely the institutional level, ultimately racial equality rests on non-racialized behavior by *individuals*. That requires not segregated society but an integrated one both in spirit and in deed. If one particular race—Black, White, or Green—precludes themselves from being racist, then hardly can social integration ever be achieved. Exceptionality is antithetical to equality. If regarding the U.S., then as Whites need to shed White supremacy, so do Blacks need to shed denial of racism. Black CEOs and managers are just as capable as White ones of racially discriminating at the workplace. All races must unify cooperatively toward a better society.

My Approach

Gill shared his secret as we saw, so what was mine? Four elements were most integral for a one-time naïve person in being successful interracially. I mentioned one already: my crash

course in “Racism 101” courtesy of my two students. Without question it primed my mind to see the Black community as a culture and all that entails. For example it being before the internet age, I hadn’t known that there were various Black media (far more than just *Ebony* or *Jet*), that Black music consisted of much, much more than what mainstream America heard, and that they bought clothes suitable for Blacks through Black outlets.

Another element important to my success was cultural participation. In this case it was playing basketball. Indeed today when travelling internationally, I will bring a basketball as it is sure way to plug into the local community even if alone. China, Germany, Italy, Japan, Mexico, Taiwan are brought to mind. Invariably at the end, someone says, “See you here, tomorrow?” Compare the tourist experience whereby much is spent visiting historical or famous sites but little real interaction with local people. Sports is a leveler and an international “language.” Everyone can play together in common pursuit. So I was able to develop a commonality with my Black students that would have been more difficult otherwise. Even the non-playing students could share this commonality I had with the others.

Although cultural perspective and cultural participation proved vital, they were less important than the next two elements for mention. The first of these two was a social ritual of greeting, one much more intricate than found in mainstream America. This ritual consisted of a special handshake (*dap*) and script (sociological). The handshake was not simply grasping the other person’s hand but a shift of the hand between four different types of grasping, followed by one’s other hand knocking the other person’s grasped hand. Simultaneously, the scripted dialog went thusly,

“Hey, bro, what’s happenin’?”

“You bro, you.”

“Not me man, you.”

Dropping the ‘g’ in happening was something they appreciated but not easy for me at first. Happening meant, as I took it, “styling” or making a special presentation of one’s self. So the accusation was always negated by the other. And depending on the greeters, the series of accusation and negation could be repeated multiple times, usually accompanied by smiles and laughter. Often it was a joyful encounter as well as an affirmation of mutual membership in the Black community. I marveled, as compared to mainstream greetings, how this Black greeting resulted in a strong feeling of group cohesion. A corollary handshake exists in the bikers community, for example, but not quite as elaborate as this Black ritual.

The fourth element of my success was the most powerful: active listening. Much of my early interactions interracially were spent practically speechless. I described my Racial 101 experience by which I sat and listened for hours. That was getting lectured, so not unusual to be speechless. But one of my most memorable times from that period was at meals with six or seven Black students—a social context. (Surely eating meals together is cultural participation, but active listening made it possible for me.) In North America, speaking is privileged. When meeting new people or going abroad, people generally worry about their speaking. For example, some White folk imagine if they speak Black lingo, they’ll make a winning impression. Contrarily I resisted doing that. Black English is language unto itself—a variety with its own system of grammar and vocabulary.

Someone like Gill could do that probably after many years of practice. Instead I was content to be myself, but wanted to learn about them. It was easy because I was so fascinated by the sounds or rhythm of Black English. Each language has its own rhythm. In the case of English rhythm, it is unlike that of most west European languages. Black English and that of European American English share the same type of language rhythm (syllable stressed) but some differences inhere, so far elusive to fully identify (Thomas, 2015). Grammar difference contributes (as does prosody) such as the expression, “*He be* going ...,” rhymes, making Black English distinctive and pleasant to hear. So I was content at meals to listen and watch

the animated banter between these students while no doubt offering backchannels (e.g., head nods, minimal encouragers [*hmm, great*] etc.) in active listening fashion. But such must be done in sync with others in the conversation. My purpose was nothing more than trying to develop good relationships. It was probably my underlying positive attitude and sincere interest in them that helped me be a good listener.

Finally, we must understand and accept that being human entails some racism. That does not mean we are evil. Some people make the mistake of equating feeling and action. You can dislike something but not act on it. Racism has many degrees from subtle to ultra-strong. Incidentally my IAT score was a balance between preference for Black and White people ("little or no automatic preference" as said). I am treating this tentatively for what was discussed about the test. If the test has any worth, then I can say that we as individuals can counter much of the racism naturally absorbed from our surroundings. The key is self-awareness. You must be on the alert for racialized thoughts or feelings and check them for their reasonableness. When you see a news event do you decide immediately that race was the causative factor? Or do you tell yourself to wait for the full facts? Can you detect racist talk? When you do, how do you react? Are you aware that such is typically made at someone's expense and probably promotes, reinforces racism? If your sister wanted to marry someone of the 'X' race, how would you feel? How do you feel when you see/meet members of 'X' race? How might it differ if your own race? You likely have a hero who happens to be of 'X' race. Does that mean you are not racist? If yes, could it mean you have selective memory or perception? Can you accept some personal racism but be willing to try to erase it? Such questions can help "cure" racism if part of a daily dialog and conscientiously followed.

Conclusion

Racism is a worldwide phenomenon not only in the U.S. Thus a broad topic, and broader still as it includes not one level but two: individual and institutional. In the U.S., Blacks and Whites tend to define racism differently by emphasizing one level to the exclusion of the other: Blacks, institutional; Whites, individual. However, probably due to natural tendency of humans to shift personal responsibility away from themselves, Whites tend to locate racism within extreme individuals, such as the KKK or the stereotypical White southern cop. As a result, both Blacks and Whites personally exempt themselves from racism, perhaps simply from the desire to be good. Denial of racism by individuals is widely found. A problem however is the human unconscious, which is beyond individual control. Already children by the age of three, if not earlier, have absorbed society's distinctions about race. Inculcation of racism continues no doubt through the life span at least unconsciously. Such is called implicit racism and some success has been found testing it. Nevertheless racism is in us all. Logically speaking, institutional racism presupposes individual racism. So to combat racism, both institutional and individual levels must be approached in tandem.

Colorblindness is the ignoring of race or racism. At least at one time, parents and schools taught this as an approach with the thinking that consciousness of race is a root of racism. A corollary thought is that mention of race might offend People of Color. Colorblindness is a fiction because color is perceived at least at the unconscious level. Moreover, ignoring race can rob part of the personal identity of many People of Color. African Americans report colorblindness is not an option because they must live life as part of a target group. Some dispute exists as to the meaning of colorblindness: From the Black perspective, colorblindness concerns the ignorance or denial of institutional racism. Some Whites, however, take a more restrictive view that colorblindness can offset stereotyping others—if we don't categorize others racially, then we will likely stereotype less. This could be useful interracially if colorblindness remained solely with that. If used as a claim for self-denial of

racism then, the strategy would be an overreach. As there is definitional discord between Black and White about racism, so is there about colorblindness. Both these concepts depend on whether the focus is on individual people or society at large. Without indication of such, some writings about colorblindness muddle the subject leading to false claims of racism.

So the necessity of defining terms of racism is no exception. Because institutional racism cannot exist without racism individually, the latter level is the focus of choice. Without getting too political, it is fair to say that institutional racism in the U.S. puts the onus for change on mainstream America, mainly Whites. But it is difficult to imagine such without 1) at least an equal focus on individual racism; and 2) a top-down approach that involves all sectors of society including Black as well as White. Using a racially integrated religious congregation as metaphor, racism is the sin that all congregants, members of society, must work together to defeat. This racial unity is likely dependent on Black and White equally viewed as potential “sinners” about racism. However justified blaming present-day Whites for systemic racism in America, ultimately there will be at least a few who balk. They perhaps being reasonable people might be more likely to accept the facts about the imperfect nature of humans and the offshoot of racial discrimination and other racist acts. No one is immune regardless of color. To that extent, Blacks could contribute even more greatly to a better society by partnering equally with Whites in addressing racism within ourselves—however small or large the amount.

What might upset the balance is identity politics, which in the name of Black rights, attempts to denigrate “White culture,” perhaps to shore up Black pride. Identity politics in the extreme goes radical by engaging in segregated thought and othering White culture while pressuring Blacks to “act Black.” “‘White culture’ in fact [however] reflects the ideas, experiences, sensibilities and perspectives of people of all races -- especially African Americans whose contributions to American culture are as widespread and profound as those of the stereotypical Mayflower pilgrims” (Ford, 2020). Radical politics and tactics seem counter-productive if the goal is to achieve a post-racial American society. The goal is reachable only through a unity of the races.

First toward that goal is our own personally held racism. Suggestions for dealing with it are provided within this article. Another important element listening, specifically active listening, should prove useful. Going across cultures inevitably brings language differences, a gap listening can overcome. Even without knowing a word of the target language, listening can help learn its rhythm, the place holder or frame for the entire language (or variety). Rather than words, we can attune ourselves to language rhythm thereby learning a basis of the language, as well as developing good relationships interracially. That is, active listening enables one to participate in conversations when the language/culture/worldview is not fully shared. Active participation in the other culture shows respect and appreciation, “gifts” universally welcomed.

Notes

*Asterisk indicates an assumed name.

¹The reader is encouraged to consult their favorite dictionary for the word *racism*. How I came to the present definition, so as to satisfy a curious editor, let me explain: I noted that the definition herein avoids “race” (not scientifically supported, see Note 2) while still including the *practice* of same in so many words based not only on phenotypic but also cultural categorization (which entails ethnicity as well). What was most appealing in Schmitt, Semu & Witte (2017) (by way of Rommelspacher, 2009 [but unfortunately not referenced by them])

is their expression, *ascribing actual or construed differences*, denoting the social psychological process involved, something absent in the typical dictionary definition.

Moreover, *practice* in an anthropological sense entails activity at either level, individual or institutional, implying that ideology or policy is involved, an issue underpinning the definitional anecdote on page 5. This issue—which level?—is sometimes ignored in standard dictionaries. To their definition, I added *exclusive* as a possible basis of perceived social hierarchy as an alternative to the attitude of being superior.

Finally, in my pursuit of conciseness, one can judge how successful, for here is the original wording from Schmitt, Simu & Witte's (2017): "Racism is the practice of distinguishing between people and groups of human beings by ascribing actual or construed differences to an alleged diverse biological ancestry of humans and/or assumed cultural differences (Rommelspacher, 2009). The binary group construction results in a hierarchy that elevates one group and devalues the other as inferior."

²"Across the world, humans share 99.9% of their DNA. The characteristics that have come to define our popular understanding of race — hair texture, skin colour, facial features — represent only a few of the thousands of traits that define us as a species. Visible traits tell us something about population histories and gene–environment interactions. But we cannot consistently divide humans into discrete groups" Nelson (2019).

³Let it be known that these women were in an upscale section of town and appeared to belong there. Microaggressions happen to minority people in the US, as well, but impressionistically the sort here—mere physical presence triggering verbal surprise or discomfort—seems more Japan-related. On the other hand though, hate crimes are rare in Japan.

⁴By then I was promoted to a supervisory counselor position for the PreCo Program, a summer live-in compensatory education prior to entry as regular students. This meant I did not have Kyle directly assigned to me as part of a client load. Rather I and another colleague were to oversee dorm living of the students and provide individual tutoring or counseling where needed. He, in fact, was never my client nor did he apparently have the need.

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