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CHAPTER TWELVE

Putting a face to institutionalized
racism: The challenge of introducing
a live-supervised training programme
for black social workers in a
predominantly white institution

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Introduction

I have taken the bold step of entitling this chapter "Putting a face to Institutionalized Racism". Bold because talking about racism in any form is often a sure way of losing people's interest. Racism is a word that can evoke powerful feelings of guilt, blame, shame, and anger, leading people to withdraw from conversations that they fear might be discomfiting and/or distressing. In Ruth Erskine's words it is a "conversation stopper" (Erskine, 1994: 30). I think the step I have taken is also bold because writing about a training programme designed solely for black social workers may be perceived by some as a challenge to an unspoken belief that training and therapy—in their delivery and consumption—are colour blind activities.

In a book in which attention is mainly focused on the relationships between supervisees and supervisors, this chapter takes a wider-angled lens to look beyond the supervisor-supervisee relationship to foreground the tensions and challenges of being a black social work manager setting up a live-supervision programme for black social workers in a predominately white institutional setting. I justify this deviation on my part by arguing that there is isomorphism between

the supervisor–supervisee relationship and that of a black manager in a predominantly white institution.

Isomorphism, a concept borrowed from the field of mathematics, “is a systemic reworking of the notion of parallel process” (White and Russell, 1997: 316). In a journal article looking at the relationship between training and therapy, Liddle and Saba (1983) highlight Hofstadter’s definition of the concept isomorphic as referring to two complex structures that can be mapped onto each other in such a way that they correspond with each other; that is to say the corresponding parts play similar roles in their respective structures. The point both these writers are making—and central to my argument—is that isomorphism, as a conceptual framework, enables the exploration of the complex patterns of relationships that connect the seemingly unrelated social worlds of the supervisor–supervisee and the black manager in a predominantly white institution. In my view, it offers a way of understanding how the concept of “power”—in the form of rights, duties, and responsibilities—is enacted in interpersonal relationships. I want to make the argument that these rights, duties, and responsibilities are “played out” in acts of entitlement, obligation, permission giving and withholding and that these ways of acting are legitimated in the discourses we call on when giving accounts to ourselves and others for our actions (Lang and McAdam, 1995; Pearce, 1994, 2007).

I will first of all define the concept of “institutionalized racism” before going on to give an account of the rationale for introducing a programme designed solely for black practitioners. The issues and dilemmas that presented themselves in the process of implementing the programme will be examined and I will conclude with my observations and learning from this experience.

The concept of institutionalized racism

The term “institutional racism” was coined in the 1960s in America and came into widespread usage after the publication of the book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (1967) by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton.

Carmichael and Hamilton were prominent activists for civil rights in America. Richardson and Wood (1999) comment that their use of the term “institutional racism” was a deliberately provocative way of

saying that major changes were still required throughout American society even though racism was no longer enshrined in the legal system. They were intent on making the point that, although racism was no longer institutionalized, racist attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs were still embedded in American institutions and in white American culture. They argued that institutions can act with racist effects even when individuals in those institutions neither realize that this is the case nor intend it to be so.

The British experience of race and racism differed from the American in that the "apartheid" or "Jim Crow" system was not a part of the British experience. The phrase "institutional racism" in the British context has generated a great deal of debate and a range of definitions. Madan Sarup, writing about the politics of multiracial education, defined "institutional racism" as existing in "the policies and practices of agencies and organisations" (Sarup, 1986: 11). The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) in its evidence to the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry also focused on practice within agencies. They defined it as "organisational structures, policies, processes and practices which result in ethnic minorities being treated unfairly and less equally, often without intention or knowledge" (Macpherson Report, 1999 para. 6.30).

These definitions fit within a powerful discourse of custom and practice. It is a discourse that often serves as a backdrop to give meaning to the lived experience of our day-to-day working lives. It provides us with the "common-sense" reasons for our behaviours, the sense of knowing what to expect from ourselves, and others in our relationships and the confidence that gives legitimacy to our actions. Our dependency on custom and practice often goes unnoticed until changes to our familiar patterns of behaviour give rise to feelings of uncertainty and anxiety linked to fears about the unknown.

It is those, often informal, practices, developed over time, and increasingly embedded in the habits and customs of an organization, that I want to highlight. I shall argue later in the chapter that discourse theory (Foucault, 1972; Burr, 1995) and positioning theory (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Campbell and Groenbaek, 2006; Partridge, 2007) offer us ways of understanding how these habits and customs can become racialized in practice.

First, I will describe the agency, its staff composition, geographical location, and the make-up of the client groups using its services, as

a way of providing a rationale for my development of a training programme for black social workers.

The rationale for the development of a programme for black social workers

The agency is situated in an inner city London borough that is diverse in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, and culture. The multi-disciplinary staff group comprised psychiatrists, psychologists, child psychotherapists, and psychiatric social workers who were also qualified family therapists. I am a qualified social worker, family therapist and supervisor. I worked in the agency as a senior member of the psychiatric social work team and was the only black member of the professional staff group, which numbered thirteen in total.

The clinic received referrals from general practitioners (GPs), social services, schools and a sizeable proportion of self-referrals. Approximately two-thirds of all referrals were for children and families from black and minority ethnic communities. Many of the children and families referred to the clinic via social services and schools were of African heritage (that is, African, African Caribbean, and mixed- race). School referrals were often made by parents at the suggestion of schools, and to that extent they were treated by the clinic as self-referrals. The families, however, perceived themselves as attending the clinic through "compulsion" rather than choice.

A few black parents telephoned the clinic to ask whether they could be seen by a black worker. However, the request for a black worker for black families generally came from social workers, both black and white.

As a staff team, we subscribed to the principle that we needed to be more representative of the community in which we were situated. However, the reasons often cited as stumbling blocks to achieving this objective were lack of finance and the dearth of suitably qualified professional staff from black or minority ethnic backgrounds.

The idea of setting up a training programme grew from conversations with referring social workers. I spoke to colleagues in my agency and wrote a discussion paper in which I proposed that the clinic offered a "clinical practicum" for black social workers. The "clinical practicum" as a method for enabling practitioners to develop their therapeutic abilities while being live-supervised by a qualified

family therapist is an established training model used in a number of family therapy training institutions. It offered a way to introduce social workers to systemic concepts, techniques, and skills which they could then transfer to their own work environments.

The proposal drew heavily on The Just Therapy team's approach which acknowledged and validated the importance of community experience and cultural knowledge in working with particular cultural/racial groups (Waldegrave, 1990).

The proposal

The proposal was for six qualified and experienced Black social workers, mixed in gender, to be seconded to the clinic for one day a fortnight over a period of 9–12 months.

The structure for delivering the programme offered social workers:

- morning seminars comprising teaching from the family therapist, child psychiatrist, and child psychotherapist in the multi-disciplinary team.
- afternoon live-supervised sessions with black families referred to the clinic
- attendance at a referral panel meeting in the role of observer
- attendance at a multi-disciplinary clinic team discussion meeting; and
- an opportunity to undertake a piece of joint work with a member of the multi-disciplinary team.

The objective of the programme was four-fold:

1. to enable the agency to add to its existing range of therapeutic provision by offering families from black communities the opportunity to work with a team of professionals from backgrounds similar to their own
2. to make available to the clinic many more perspectives and expertise to draw on when thinking about its work with families from different races and cultures
3. to provide a way for the agency to give practical expression to the principle in its handbook which stated that it would endeavour

- to provide a service that was sensitive to the culture, race, and gender of service users
4. to provide social workers with practical experience of working in a child and adolescent mental health setting and gave them an "insider" understanding of the agency to which they were referring clients.

Dilemmas and concerns voiced by the clinic team

Introducing changes and new ideas in an established system will often bring to the fore a range of feelings and emotions (Miller and Thomas, 1994). For those already in the system it is likely to raise anxieties about changes in expectations and patterns of relating as adaptations are made to usual routines to make space for new relationships and tasks.

Team conversations brought forth dilemmas and concerns about the difference the introduction of a group of secondees would make to the agency. I have separated them into concerns in relation to the secondees and clients, the agency, and team members.

Concerns for secondees and clients were, in the main, framed in terms of equity and ability. For example, team members questioned whether black social workers participating in the programme were being exploited. The thought expressed was that they were, potentially, being used as a cheap source of labour. The basis for their concern about the secondees' abilities lay in assumptions held that the social workers did not have the theoretical knowledge and therapeutic experience to draw on when working with the complex and difficult client group seen in the clinic. The concern for clients focused on their right to see a qualified staff member. The question posed was what would happen if the client did not want to be seen by the black social worker secondees.

The concerns about secondees and clients were closely linked to those about agency duty, responsibility, and obligation. Conversations centered on whether the agency had a duty to be more proactive in employing qualified, black, therapeutically trained, professionals and pay them according to their professional status and abilities. Also raised in discussion was where and with whom responsibility would be held for supervising the seconded social workers and how their role would be explained to clients.

Continuing professional development (CPD) was another area that provoked disquiet as some team members voiced their concern that the secondees might be seen as the "experts" to which all black service users would be referred. They thought that this would have the effect of invalidating the skills, experience, and knowledge of white professionals working trans-racially and trans-culturally and diminish opportunities for their future development.

These are without doubt important and relevant issues for discussion. Conversations about recruitment of clinical staff that would more closely reflect the demographics of the population the clinic served had been on-going for years: this had, however, not resulted in a change in the composition of the staff group.

The agency, in common with most agencies providing a child and adult mental health service, has a history of offering training placements to student social workers, clinical psychology, art therapy, child psychotherapy and family therapy trainees, child and adolescent psychiatrists on rotation as part of their training, and counsellors. It has a structure, which is discipline-led, for managing the induction, supervision, and training of professionals wishing to develop their therapeutic skills working with children, young people, and families. I, therefore, found myself challenged, and sometimes confused, by the conversations taking place around, what was, from my perspective, the creation of additional training places in the agency.

Reflecting on these conversations several years later, I find it useful to draw on ideas from discourse theory (Foucault, 1972; Burr, 1995) and positioning theory (Harre and van Langanhove, 1999) to give meaning to an experience that I would describe as a racializing process. I will say something about my understanding of discourse and positioning theories before going on to discuss the way in which I have used them to identify the process of racialization.

*Discourse theory, positioning theory,
and the racializing process*

Discourse theory and positioning theory are embedded in the wider philosophical framework of social constructionism (Burr, 1995; Pearce, 1994; Gergen, 1992). The belief that underpins a social constructionist world view is that there is no objective reality. One way

of putting this is to say that "our experiences of reality are based in part on the physical world that we inhabit and the things that we literally and metaphorically bump up against (for example, people, objects and our interaction with them)" (Ekdawi et al. 2001: 7). In this way of thinking we shape our social worlds in language (verbal and non-verbal) and interaction with others and, in turn, we are shaped by those events and people who make up our social world. Who we are (our identity), what we can and cannot do, and what we can or cannot say are social constructions "made" in conversations with others (Pearce 1994). This way of thinking positions us as "actors" and, therefore, moral beings in the making of our social worlds (Pearce, 1994, 2007).

Foucault's contribution to social constructionism helps us understand the power of language in shaping reality. Foucault defined discourse as "practices which form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault, 1972: 49). From his perspective, "discourse" could be understood as a system of representation. Foucault's interest lay in "the rules and practices that produced meaningful statements and regulated discourse in different historical periods" (Hall, 2001: 72). The hypotheses he pursued were rooted in the belief that language, structured in discourses, has the power, in practice, to determine the "rules" that govern what a society thinks are acceptable and less acceptable ways of "being" and "doing" any particular time in its history.

The proposal for a training programme for black social workers and the agency's agreement to run the programme can be understood in the context of an equal opportunities discourse. Edwards (1990) locates the concept of equal opportunities in two competing discourses:

- i. the discourse of equal opportunities as access to the "glittering prize" (1990: 22); foregrounding competition and reward and;
- ii. the discourse of equal opportunities as a means of self-development; foregrounding social justice.

Fishkin (1990) introduces the ideas of compensatory justice between generations to the discourse of social justice foregrounding the argument for compensation as a means of creating a more "level playing field". I would argue that these discourses are interdependent rather than competing. However, when we make the kinds of distinctions

that Fishkin and Edwards make, it allows us to frame and validate some actions as legitimate and others as not. Missing from discussions of this nature is, invariably, an analysis of the power structure engaged in determining which of the discourses become more dominant in society at any given period in time.

Discourses are multilayered (made up of discourses within discourses). The discourse I privileged when I proposed the training programme was informed by my knowledge of the agency as a promoter of training and professional development in the therapeutic disciplines. Located within an equal opportunities discourse, it foregrounds equal opportunities as self-development. At the same time, when taking into account that the social workers on the programme are black, it can also be seen as being located in an equal opportunity discourse which argues for "compensatory justice between generations" (Fishkin, 1990: 41).

The questions raised by the team illustrating their concerns, suggests that within the wider equality of opportunities debate, they too could have been foregrounding a discourse of self-development. However, it seemed to me that their higher context marker (Cronen and Pearce, 1986) was one which foregrounded differences made visible in terms of race and colour and with it models of deficiency in which much of the discourse on race in Western society is embedded.

Discursive Psychologists also talk about discourses. When they use the concept they are drawing attention to the performative qualities of discourse. That is to say how people position themselves and others with their talk. Harré and van Langenhove (1999: 22) define positioning as "a discursive practice in which people position themselves, position others and are positioned by them". Discourses make available positions for persons to take up which provide them with a way of being in relation to others. So, for example, a gender discourse which assigns the task of caring and nurturing to women and competing and rational/analytical thinking to men, ascribes each gender acceptable identities and "rules" for behaving within that society, its communities, and family structures. We can say that positioning gives each of us an identity in a storyline (episode) that confers a set of rights, responsibilities, and obligations which are legitimated by dominant societal discourses. The act of positioning is, therefore, both relational (Holloway, 1995) and moral (Harré and van Langenhove, 1999; Pearce, 1994, 2007).

A major aim of the training programme was to enable the agency to have additional resources to draw on in its objective of providing a more racially diverse and culturally sensitive service. Training black social workers from locality teams, who were already linked to one of the agency's significant referral sources, presented itself as an ideal opportunity. However, with hindsight, this proposal could also have been experienced as a "challenge" to the agency's usual practice for allocating training places.

The agency's usual custom and practice was to recruit trainees already in training in a host training institution. The "challenge" can be articulated in the question: Who has the authority to change the rules that govern how invitations are made as well as who gets onto the invitation list? In designing and delivering a therapeutic programme for black social workers, I had positioned myself as someone moving outside of the established way of doing things.

The training placements being provided were different in that:

1. The trainees were all seconded workers from the local authority social services departments in the borough.
2. They were a group of six.
3. They were all black.
4. They worked only with black families.
5. They did not belong to a training institution.

One way in which my breach of protocol was fed back to me was in comments like "it's not so noisy today" made within my hearing on the days the seconded social workers were not present in the clinic.

Wetherell and Potter (1992) remind us that the language we use is not neutral. On the face of it a comment like "it's not so noisy today" could be about levels of noise. However, when said in the context of a societal discourse that describes the arrival of black people in any number as "an influx" or as "an invasion" and the effect of their presence as "swamping" the host population, the phrase can take on the meaning of unwanted or uninvited guests. This sense of being an unwanted or uninvited presence was further highlighted by the reservations expressed about the secondees being present while the team conducted its usual business (that is, referral meetings and case discussions). The point that I am making

here is that a racializing process that lends itself to the charge made by Macpherson (1999) of institutional racism is subtle and can be seen as residing in the way comments may be made by members of the majority white group with no understanding of the effect hearing what is said could have on members of the minority black group.

If I were to hypothesize (Palazzoli et al. 1980) about the performative function of the communications referred to above, using the "lens" (Hoffman 1990: 1) of positioning theory I would have to consider how congruent my positioning of myself was with the expectation of my team. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) talk about the place of "gossiping" in the process of positioning as a way of showing trust but also as a form of moral reproach. This makes sense to me in that by "gossiping" within my hearing about the difference that the presence of the secondees made to the life of the clinic, team members may also have been letting me know that they were unsure where my loyalties were.

Interpersonal relationships in a multi-disciplinary agency are complex. This complexity encompasses differences in professional training, class, culture, race, and gender differences to name a few. I have been arguing above that such differences have implications for how people are positioned and position themselves in their relationships with each other. It can also become the site for "status contradiction" (Littlewood and Lipsedge, 1989: 58; Downs, 2000: 62). This phrase succinctly describes the situation where status from one level of context creates incoherence with status at another level. For example, in a wider societal context being black and being female translates as being less authoritative than being white and being male. In relational terms this places white men at the top end and black women at the lower end of the social pecking order

In the context of my agency, my professional identity as a senior member of staff with decision-making responsibilities for the staff group that I managed conferred on me a status that was at the higher end of the agency's hierarchical structure; a position not compatible with the status accorded me as a black woman in the wider societal context. In my view, the concept of "status contradictions" gets to the heart of the difficulties experienced in many of

the interpersonal relationships that are described and rationalized in acts of institutionalized racism.

Suman Fernando (1996) touches on this in an article entitled "Black people working in white institutions: lessons from personal experience", in which he describes how his position as chair for the national standing committee on race and culture in the Mental Health Act Commission was questioned on the basis that he, as a black man, could not be as effective as a white chair. While Fernando's experience would not be unfamiliar to many black people who find themselves in positions of authority in predominantly white institutions, it is, nevertheless, one that is little addressed in either organizational or therapy literature.

Discussion

At this point I want to comment on the link I made between the supervisor-supervisee relationship and that of a black manager in a predominantly white institution and how I see this as isomorphic. To do this I need to say something of my experience of joining the agency as a Senior Psychiatric Social Worker.

The Psychiatric Social Work Service, like the Education Social Work Service where I worked before joining the agency, were both run by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). Prior to joining the agency, I worked as a Deputy Divisional Officer in the Education Social Work Service. I was recruited to my post as Senior Psychiatric Social worker under a policy known in employment law as "Genuine Occupational Qualification" (GOQ). This meant that in addition to my academic and professional qualifications, managerial experience, and skills in social work, being black was a qualification that made me suitable for the post. Promotion to senior posts within the Psychiatric Social Work Service was usually made from within. I, as an "outsider" had no experience of working in a clinic environment and, so the thinking went, would have difficulty in taking on a management role.

I learned that there had been fierce discussions in the team about employing me at a senior level; that there were strongly held views that customary recruitment practices were being set aside in favour of positive discrimination; and that there were concerns that my appointment smacked of tokenism and sufficient thought had not

been given to the implications of this action and possible consequences that might follow in its wake.

From my perspective, I had been positioned as an intruder; an unwanted guest with very few rights or entitlements. What I recognize—although not at the time—is the similarity in the pattern of behaviour repeated some ten years later when I proposed the live-supervision programme for black social workers. In both episodes the pattern of relationship foregrounded is that of wariness, tension, and resistance. It seemed to me that there was no space in the first episode and only heavily circumscribed space in the second, to discuss and explore the fit between my own aspirations, hopes, and expectations and those of the team.

In systemic family therapy training, the supervisory relationship calls for a fit between supervisor and supervisee in order that each person is able to fulfill his/her tasks in the partnership. Schwartz says:

"The degree of fit between the expectations that the trainer and trainees have for the training experience will often determine the degree of initial difficulty in their relationship. For example, if the trainer subscribes to the ethic that successful family therapy training involves total transformation of epistemology, but the trainee simply wants to add some techniques to his or her treatment armamentarium, the potential for a resistant relationship is high."

(Schwartz, 1988: 173)

Scaife makes a similar argument. She says:

"Failure to take account of the learning process and its relationship to the interaction between supervisor and trainee may lead to difficulties in the relationship arising from a mismatch of expectations, values or models of work which are likely to be more difficult to resolve as they become entrenched and consolidated."

(Scaife, 1993: 162).

It is easy when reading statements such as these to "not see" or to be unaware of the power relationship being commented on as

this is implicit and invisible. Talking about "fit" implies an ease and equality in negotiation leading to a mutual co-ordination of meaning and action. Another way to look at what is being said is by being curious about the relationships in focus in the context of entitlements. By this I mean asking questions such as, "Who is entitled to say what is acceptable/not acceptable?" "Where is his/her authority located?" "Is the authority legitimated through gender/race/professional status/age?" "What are the obligations of each person in the relationship?" "Who or what are their obligations to?" "What does it allow them to do?" "What does it disallow or prohibit them from doing?" "What are the values and beliefs that support each of their ways of thinking at societal level?"

In my supervisory relationships, I am ever mindful of my obligations to those I am supervising. This informs how I position myself and them. These positionings are informed by discourses embedded in the professional code of conduct to which I subscribe, as well as gender, cultural, ethnic, racial, and other stories that influence my perception of myself and my supervisee(s) and, in turn, their perception and positioning of me. This process is also "acted out" in relationships with clients, with colleagues who I manage, and with who manages me. When race is a pertinent or key factor in the conduct of those relationships, it is important to be aware of the many discourses at a macro level of context (for example, societal, economic, political, and legal) that informs and influences actions at the micro level.

At the beginning of this chapter I gave a definition of isomorphism that can be summarized as "mirroring". What makes it a useful conceptual framework, in my opinion, is that it encourages us to look for "patterns that connect" (Bateson, 1972: 8). This provides a way to think of issues of power and how they show themselves in interpersonal relationships; in acts of entitlement, obligation, prohibition, and validation.

The point I am making here is that highlighting patterns helps to move the focus from the content of individual episodes and foreground connections between and across episodes and relationships (Bateson, 1972). This, in turn, offers a way to appreciate and understand how our values and beliefs give meaning to and inform what

"fit" implies an ease of mutual co-ordination of what is being said is a focus in the context of questions such as, "Who is acceptable?" "Where is it legitimated through?" "What are the obligations?" "Who or what are their obligations to do?" "What does it mean?" "What are the values of thinking at societal

or mindful of my obligations is how I position myself by discourses embedded in which I subscribe, as well as theories that influence my () and, in turn, their perspective is also "acted out" in who I manage, and with that or key factor in the context to be aware of the many for example, societal, economic influences actions at the

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highlighting patterns helps individual episodes and foreground episodes and relationships to appreciate and understanding to and inform what

we do and say in the many interpersonal relationships that make up our day-to-day experiences of life.

Conclusion

I am aware that this is a highly personal account of my experience as a black social work manager and family therapist supervisor working in a child and adolescent mental health setting that was predominantly white. In giving it, I have described some of the dilemmas I encountered when I set out to design and deliver a practice-based training programme for black social workers from the local authority area offices that were a source of many of our referrals.

The programme was successful on many levels. The social workers who took part in it commented that the theoretical ideas they learned help them to think differently about their practice and helped to raise their self-confidence and self-esteem. Three of the four adults seen during the life of the programme took part in a qualitative research study which evaluated their experience of the service they received. They commented on their sense of relief at being in conversation with people with whom they shared similar world views and the effect that that had on helping them find new ways of thinking about and approaching the difficulties and concerns that had initially brought them to the clinic (Bond, 1997). Colleagues who participated in running seminars expressed satisfaction and enjoyment at being involved. Perhaps the best tribute and validation to the programme's success was the number of enquiries from social workers wanting a place on the next programme. Disappointingly, the programme was not repeated and my sense of having failed in what I had set out to do, that is, develop a resource that would benefit the clinic as well as the community it served, was great at the time.

I have argued that my experiences can be understood in the context of a process whereby customary practices can become institutionalized and enacted in relationships that are racializing and marginalizing in their effect. I have articulated the episode of designing and delivering a training programme for black social workers as a challenge to custom and practice. In so doing I have brought to the fore the issue of power and invited an exploration of acts of

entitlements and obligations and the discourses in which these are legitimated. I have commented on my understanding of this using both discourse and positioning theories.

I still struggle to articulate my learning from this experience. In part this is because it was not a unique experience for me. Reflecting on it, it occurred to me that it has resonances with many points in my professional life and development including my arrival into the team under an equal opportunities initiative. The most positive and hopeful learning from the experience that I see is an awareness and acknowledgement that recurring experiences bring with them opportunities for taking small steps in the evolutionary process of change.

I have no doubt that my experience will also have resonance for people who are not black or female as the effects of exclusion and marginalization are not limited to any one group. I have written from a perspective that fits with who I am with the hope that my contribution will encourage more personal and public debate and discussion about the interactional aspects of institutionalized practices—one of which is racism.

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