

Decision Making Model

White Privilege

Gurleen Sangha

There are many ways racism can exist within organizations. Be it through policies, hiring decisions, interactions between leadership to staff, staff to staff, clients to staff or any aforementioned combinations. This type of interaction adds to the oppression women and children who are accessing services are already experiencing, racialized staff who carry the cumulative burden of wearing their racial heritage on their skin, and also results in influencing the organization's overall messaging of (in)tolerance. One of the most damaging things a professional can do is further oppress a racialized person while attempting to do good (Gorski, 2007). Organizations that do not have culturally competent leaders and policies can become breeding grounds for racism. It is vital for those in power to recognise what they bring into the room via privilege, bias, self-awareness and how they are prepared to address racism if and when they come across it. As leaders, the first step to being able to address racism in the workplace is to do the work yourself. Engaging in self-reflective practice creates the foundation of how to engage with staff when the topic of racism comes up.

Through previous research, it has been suggested that when a white professional is working with a racialized person, they may not be aware of their own cultural conditioning and implicit bias. This lack of knowledge and awareness can result in subtle forms of unintentional racism unfolding during an interaction with staff and colleagues. It is crucial for service workers, and leaders alike, in the helping professions to do more than learn tactics, tips, and behaviours; instead, they should develop a shift in consciousness (Gorski, 2007). If a staff member is seeking support because they have perpetrated, experienced, or witnessed a racist act, leadership must work alongside them in social reconstruction, which is only possible when the supervisor themselves understands their social location and privilege (Gorski, 2007).

Reflection Questions for Supervisors:

1. In your childhood, who were you told was beautiful? What did they look like?
2. When you flipped on the T.V. while growing up, what did the 'cool' or 'in crowd' look like?
3. What did your family tell you about indigenous people? South Asians? Asians? White people?
4. If your mother, brother, daughter, best friend etc. brought home a black person how would you feel?
5. What sweeping assumptions and statements have you been told? I.e., You can't trust Chinese people because they're greedy.

“I think we have to constantly remind people that they have to be open to training, education, and engagement. And in the commitment to the work they do, that they incorporate an awareness, and fulfill the needs of all the communities. One component of that is also hiring... Hire people from diverse backgrounds”

- Anti-Racism Research Participant

Racism and Service Users

These subtle acts of racism that are not so easily recognised, can impact the most vulnerable people in the building, the services users. Racialized people live their entire lives with a multitude of experiences that have made them feel othered, unworthy, dehumanized, and like second-class citizens. There are many ways racialized people have been told this message through examples in media, policy, law, the education system, the beauty industry, colourism, and the many social responses they have received from family, friends, and strangers alike. This experience of being unworthy because of their skin colour becomes another thread in the story of their lives, *it becomes an engrained belief*. This ingrained belief, that ‘this is the way things are’ becomes a fundamental reason why racist acts often times go unaddressed. Thus, there is a risk that if an interaction occurs that demeans the dignity of a racialized person, the service user may suppress their thoughts and beliefs, and ultimately question their own views of what happened.

When the subtle acts of racism go unchecked it functions as a silent alarm indicating that this place is not safe. There are many ways racialized people engage in an analysis to see if the environment is going to be safe. It can be as subtle as seeing a poster on the wall of someone of their descent, or a staff member passing by who is of a similar ethnic background. Conversely, if there is nothing indicating that this place or these people are culturally competent, it can contribute to potential apprehension and a sense of suspicion. There are many ways environments act a dog whistle for racialized people when there is nothing in the space that indicates that *‘this place is safe for people who look like me. People like me are welcome here’*. In addition to feelings of unsafety, other potential consequences include early termination of services, weakened rapport with staff, a breach of trust with staff, and potential harm if the service user feels judged and walks out feeling worse than when they came in. If a racialized service user decides to terminate services because they do not feel understood or have experienced racism, they run the risk of not accessing support at all.

Tips for Supervision

Those working in the human services field tend to view themselves as helping professionals who would not intentionally create hostile or derogatory environments. Consequently, those are the same people who run the risk of excusing themselves from a phenomenon that occurs throughout all aspects of society. Racism in Canada has evolved from overt discriminatory acts to subtle, innocuous, and covert degradations. Staff and leaders alike who possess white privilege may not be aware of the daily slights racialized people experience, and, that they themselves could be contributing to the problem. Lack of cultural competency creates room for negative social responses as the dominant group may not even be aware of what they are doing. Helping professionals are not excused from cultural conditioning that we all experience. Here are some things to consider when engaging in anti-racist supervision with staff:

- Does the staff member have a basic understanding of the service users cultural background?
- Has the staff member given dangerous or unhelpful encouragement to the client to speak or act out against their family in a culture that operates from a collectivist perspective?
- Has an interaction occurred that has resulted in the mother or child feeling misunderstood?
- Has the staff imposed White North American values and ways of living as ideal? Or lead the racialized client to believe that their cultural ways of living are inferior or wrong?
- Have they suggested something to the client that would be considered disrespectful or irrelevant to their culture?
- Has the staff applied an individualistic view in a situation where it is not possible, safe, or conducive to the service users situation?

When guiding staff through an incident, they may look at their behaviour in this specific interaction and evaluate what has happened in the isolation of this one incident. They can take the stance that their intentions were good, and miss that their intentions are not related to impact. It is not uncommon when a white person is confronted with their behaviour that they may use their morality as a defence and can righteously deny that their behaviours were motivated by race (Sue, 2005).

A common and damaging response to look out for and address is misguided attempts to show empathy. When a racialized person is speaking about their experience and the white listener tries to relate the incident to their own experience it can do more damage than good. The attempt to convey they understand what the racialized person is going through may result in the non-white person feeling invalidated. An example would be if a racialized person is talking to someone they trust about an incident and they respond, 'I understand. As a woman, I experience discrimination too' (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal, & Esquilin, 2007). The message is that there is no difference between gender discrimination and racism. Furthermore, the matter becomes complicated if the racialized person is female.

Suggestions for Guiding Staff Through Anti-Racist Practices:

- The first step in overcoming fears or transgressions of racism is to become self-aware of one's own racial biases and beliefs
- Help staff overcome assumptions about the ethnic populations they are working with or encounter
- Discuss 'allyship' and how the support of white allies helps racialized people feel validated and supported after a confrontation
- For white service providers in particular, it is important to understand what it means to be white and how it may intrude on racialized populations
- Discuss how to accept responsibility and take corrective actions when an incident occurs
- Engaging in a process of self-examination in ongoing, and never ends

Implications for the Organization

In environments where the social rules around anti-racist practices are unclear, racial degradations can occur without consequence and behaviours goes unchecked, the result becomes a systemic problem. Education and training on cultural competency in organizations is one way of enacting change. Other recommendations include:

- Hiring more racialized staff to reflect the population of the service users
- Assessing if leadership is diverse and representative of staff and service users
- Analyze the ways the workplace is currently addressing the problem of racism
- Building bridges with other community agencies who are already doing the work
- Offer the option when possible to pair ethnic service users with a service provider who is from a similar cultural or ethnic background
- If there are existing structures within the organization, re-evaluate if it encompasses all racialized populations and not only peoples of indigenous decent
- Creating an organization-wide culture of safety, self-reflective practice and accountability

"The other thing about diversity, it's important to talk about it. It's been co-authored by every segment, even those who are racist. Everybody says, 'we believe in diversity', and you get the group hug, but dig deeper. What do you mean by diversity? How are you practicing inclusion and equality?"

-Anti-racism Research Participant