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Article in *Contemporary psychoanalysis* · December 2009

DOI: 10.1080/00107530.2009.10745989

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(2009). Contemporary Psychoanalysis, **45**:93-119

Whiteness as Pathological Narcissism

Arianne E. Miller, M.A. and Lawrence Josephs, Ph.D. ©

White, liberal, educated, upwardly mobile people are often thought to have transcended racism. Consequently, they may not think of themselves as white, as possessing any particular white privilege, or as having any sense of superiority about their whiteness. To confront someone about one's repudiated white privilege is analogous to confronting the person about their defensive grandiosity; the person feels attacked and responds with denial and counterattack. We suggest that white racial superiority, white privilege, and repudiated white racial identity are forms of pathological narcissism driven by an unconscious desire to be a triumphant oedipal winner and to avoid, at any price, being a disgraced oedi-pal loser. White racial superiority, white privilege, and white identity rely on racialized oedipal splitting in which whiteness comes to represent all idealized forms of love and lust while blackness comes to represent the devalued forms.

Racial structures [white supremacy] remain in place for the same reasons that other structures do. Since actors racialized as “white”—or as members of the dominant race—receive material benefits from the racial order, they struggle (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness) to maintain their privileges.... Therein lies the secret of racial structures and racial inequality the world over. They exist because they benefit members of the dominant race.

—*Bonilla-Silva*, Racism Without Racists

The Advantages of Being White, whether acknowledged or not, are what constitute white privilege. In her highly influential paper “White Privilege and Male Privilege,” **Peggy McIntosh (1988)** notes that the denial of white privilege and white racial identity relies on a paradox. Among liberal people, racism is acknowledged as an oppressive force

that should be combated, albeit without recognition of the obvious corollary that someone must be doing the oppressing and is benefiting from doing so (McIntosh, 1988). McIntosh states that privilege and oppressiveness can operate implicitly without conscious awareness; that shame and guilt about the possession of unfair and unearned advantage, and the disinclination to change the status quo unconsciously motivate the denial of white privilege.

The distinction between conscious/explicit racism and unconscious/implicit racism is well documented in the social psychology literature. Research on explicit versus implicit bias suggests that people who score low on self-reported measures of racism may still score high on implicit measures of racial bias (Cunningham, Preacher, and Banaji, 2001). Research on aversive racism has documented that liberal whites who do not identify with prejudiced sentiments nonetheless may discriminate in subtle ways and may not be aware of doing so (Kovel, 1970; Devine, 1989; Dovidio and Gaertner, 2005). From a psychoanalytic perspective, Kovel (1984) suggests that many white people who do not openly reveal any racist tendencies nevertheless possess persisting “mass fantasies” (p. 55) of a racist nature. Such whites may be willing to undertake social reform by remote impersonal means but with a corresponding reluctance to engage in any kind of intimacy with black people. In classical Freudian terms, Kovel indicates that in unconscious mass fantasy white men are the oedipal winners who get to enjoy power, prestige, and wealth, while white women are put on a pedestal as pure and idealized but cold (p. 75). Anxiety and guilt about this state of affairs require that black men be turned into castrated oedipal losers while black women become the repositories of “animal” passion (p. 75).

Hernton (1965) suggested a perverse sexual involvement between white people and black people that spans American history from slavery to the present and that an unwritten taboo against racial intermingling remains. During slavery, white slaveholders loved their wives but lusted after their female slaves, whom they felt free to rape. Continuing after slavery, those repudiated lustful feelings were projected onto black men, perceived to be a sexual threat to white women and thus allowing for the rationalization of white aggression against sexually threatening black men.

The mass sexual fantasies described by Kovel and Hernton are suggestive of the operation of a racialized form of oedipal splitting, the so-called Madonna-whore conflict (Freud, 1910). Oedipal splitting creates a division between love and lust as well as between idealized and devalued

forms of love and lust (**Josephs, 2006**). It becomes racialized when whiteness comes to represent all the idealized forms of love and lust, whereas blackness comes to represent all the devalued forms of love and lust. The split between love and lust tends to be neglected by the more object relational views of splitting. Freud seems to have been the first analyst to have interpreted racialized oedipal splitting when Clarence Oberndorf reported a dream of being pulled in a carriage by a white horse and a black horse. Freud interpreted that Oberndorf, an aristocratic southern gentleman, was conflicted in his love life between marrying a black woman and a white woman because he had been raised by a black “mammy” (Kardiner, **1977**, p. 76). By saying that oedipal splitting is racialized, we are making the observation that somehow in the course of psychosexual development in a racist culture, blacks come to represent symbolically the devalued/socially unacceptable sides of these oedipal splits. We do not claim to know exactly how this comes about, nor do we claim that unresolved oedipal issues “cause” racism, for we appreciate that racism has many causes that are as yet incompletely understood. We simply make the observation that oedipal splitting in mass fantasy has a racial aspect to which there is often selective inattention (**Sullivan, 1953**) and that therefore remains in the realm of unformulated and dissociated experience (**Stern, 1997; Bromberg, 2001**).

Whiteness and white racial identity are social identities through which white people are granted access to unearned “resources, power and opportunity” (Lipsitz, **1998**, p. vii) and use that power to render these privileges invisible. We argue that white superiority, white privilege, and repudiated white identity reflect forms of pathological narcissism driven, in part, by the desire to be an oedipal winner at any price and the dread of experiencing the trauma of being an oedipal loser. Whiteness functions as a kind of denied grandiosity. By the splitting off and projection of repudiated aspects onto black people, whiteness is inherently fragile, unstable, and prone to disintegration. This creates vulnerability to states of narcissistic decompensation characterized by white shame and rage, which through projective identification, may be turned into black shame and rage. Whiteness as a form of pathological narcissism reflects what **Fromm (1955)** called “social character,” a culturally reinforced and ego-syntonic way of being that to greater or lesser degrees is shared by all members of a social group.

Elements of the argument put forth here have been proposed by **Altman and Tiemann (2004)**, who articulate a theory of racism as a manic

defense in which projective identification, intolerance of guilt, and denial of human vulnerability all come together to reproduce and sustain racism. We add an appreciation of the ways in which racialized oedipal splitting is ubiquitous in that manic/narcissistic defensive organization. This is a kind of splitting to which we believe there has been significant selective inattention in most relational analyses of racial splitting, thus minimizing the repudiated sexual motives that contribute to the maintenance of the racial status quo.

Our focus is on the white, liberal, educated, upwardly mobile persons in the United States who are often thought to have transcended racism and who are also the main consumers of insight-oriented psychotherapy. It has been suggested that white supremacy more appropriately centers on white people whereas racism has a history of centering on people of color (**Bonilla-Silva, 2003**). Our focus on white racial superiority highlights the defensive grandiosity around which white racial identity is constructed as a kind of pathological organization that manages the dread of narcissistic mortification. We are a biracial (black and white) woman (AM) and a white man (LJ) who, in this article, share their experiences working with white patients. We examine those experiences for the ways in which the dynamics of whiteness are unconsciously enacted in the clinical situation regardless of the analyst's racial identifications.

We suggest that the traumatic social mortifications of growing up in an intensely competitive, individualistic, materialistic, and status-conscious society unconsciously create entrenched oedipal fixations. We live in a society in which there is virtually no social support for assimilating the inevitable “narcissistic scar” (**Freud, 1920**) left by oedipal defeat. These traumatic social mortifications generate the “hidden injuries of class” (**Sennett and Cobb, 1993**), a “fear of falling” out of the middle class (**Ehrenreich, 1990**) and a tendency to be “seduced by affluence” (**Josephs, 2004**) as a defensive solution. In the United States, the less affluent have less social status, a condition that stigmatizes them as “losers,” not only financially but as people who are not desirable lifelong romantic partners (i. e., economic loser = oedipal loser in the unconscious). White people unconsciously racialize the issue to insure that there will always be someone in the culture who is unconsciously an even bigger oedipal loser than they are.¹ Our culture of competitive individualism leads to an inner sense of life as an intense and ruthless competition for elevated social status in

¹ See David **Roediger (2007)** or George **Lipsitz (1998)** for a historical discussion of this point.

which the losers are disgraced and ostracized while the winners are triumphant—sexually, aggressively, and narcissistically. It is individualism, in particular, that necessitates that the blame for one's failures be placed exclusively on the shoulders of the loser. Lasch's (1991) “culture of narcissism,” Wachtel's (1989) “poverty of affluence,” and Cushman's (1996) view of the eternally empty consumer self all suggest the pathogenic effects of the American culture of competitive individualism. The dread of falling shamefully behind in this all-consuming, but often denied, quest for elevated social status leads to a cold indifference toward the plight of those less fortunate, a willingness to use every social advantage for oneself and one's children to get ahead in a dog-eat-dog world, and a willingness to exploit others ruthlessly in rationalized ways that enable one to maintain a pretense of one's own moral goodness.

The Cultural Context of White Privilege

American whiteness exists within a capitalist democracy. American capitalism instructs us to compete within the system to succeed, using one's advantages—money, education, intelligence, physical prowess—and one's whiteness, implicitly and sometimes explicitly (e. g., Ku Klux Klan, White Only Clubs). Financial success and the accompanying elevated social status are the ultimate and primary goals. Although we are not explicitly encouraged to break the law, we are unofficially encouraged to use all available resources, whether morally corrupt or not, to get ahead. Within this context, democratic values function more as ideals than as actual practices while individualism and the need to achieve unconsciously subvert them. Consequently, some of us get ahead while others do not, creating a society of winners who have and losers who have not. Capitalism, as a free-trade system of competition, produces inequity—we can't all win and we can't all be rich. Democracy, on the other hand, tries to save us from the very inequity (and guilt) we produce. In our capitalist economy, whiteness is a primary tool, a cultural resource, and even a kind of property (Harris, 1993) that helps people succeed in our culture of competitive individualism.

American culture emphasizes individualism in the context of this capitalist democracy. We aspire to achieve seemingly limitless success, believing that this can be and should be done by “pulling oneself up by one's boot straps” (Gaines, 1995). The reality and appearance of self-sufficiency and meritocracy are upheld at nearly all costs. Even for those who are

born wealthy, there are often family narratives and folklore that glorify the original family members who went through the “boot straps phase,” providing for the following generations, making it all right for them to be wealthy without the work or the guilt of not having worked. In American capitalism, individualism goes hand-in-hand with competition, and both are seen as healthy and necessary components to a free and democratic society.

The narcissistic mortifications of a culture of competitive individualism can be illustrated in the academic competition in which the children of many white professionals are immersed in New York City. Private schools are unofficially segregated as A-list and B-list schools as assessed by how high their entrance standards are and how successful they are in getting their graduates into Ivy League colleges. Stuyvesant, one of the top public high schools in New York City, has an admissions test that 25,000 students take for around 900 seats. One mother whose son was admitted to Stuyvesant told of how the test results were given out in class and that many classmates who were denied admissions burst into tears. Thus educational defeat becomes a spectacle of public mortification as some white professional parents get to boast while other parents get to be embarrassed about where their children go to school.

To maintain whiteness as a pathologically narcissistic organization **(Steiner, 1993)**, there is an unconscious need to omnipotently construct a reality in which black people are denied an independent mind of their own (i. e., “They don't really understand why things happen or how things work”). White winners view black losers as attempting to salvage self-respect by defensively construing themselves as innocent victims of racial oppression and persecution, a paranoid adaptation. The accusations of racism, that the game is rigged, are just the sour grapes of sore losers who cannot admit defeat on a fair playing field. **Ryan (1971)** called this process “blaming the victim.” **Grier and Cobbs (1968)** noted how “black rage” has been unreasonably pathologized rather than recognized as an inevitable response to the many indignities of being black in a racist society.

White defensive grandiosity generates an unconscious need to omnipotently control black people, in fantasy and in reality, so that black people can readily serve as the passive receptacles of the repudiated wishes and fears of white people. For liberal white professionals this feat is accomplished largely by their living a racially segregated life where contact with black people is limited to a token presence so that blacks exist more as imaginary objects than as real people. In the actual presence of black

people, attempts at omnipotent control may be exerted through “micro-aggressions” (Sue et al., 2007), which are implicit forms of racial insult and invalidation that can be easily rationalized and remind black people of their “place” and ideally keep them there.

This is not to say that black people are essentially passive victims of white projective identifications. Aron (1996) has noted that mutuality and coconstruction are just as intrinsic to highly asymmetrical relationships with an imbalance of power as they are to more symmetrical relationships with a more even balance of power. Black people respond to their position in liberal white people's psychosexual imaginations, as well as to daily microinsult and microinvalidation, in heterogeneous ways, sometimes identifying and sometimes disidentifying with the traits whites attribute to blacks. For example, black women may intentionally play to stereotypes of the angry black woman for protection; producing fear in others often results in people leaving one alone. Young black men may intentionally scare white people on the street to access a moment of power over them, whereas in most other situations they have no such power over white people. There is a well-documented historical tradition of black people—from slavery to the current day—using their knowledge of how white people view them to achieve a goal or gain strategic power (Kelley, 1993, 1996).

White Racial Identity

What happens to the self-identity of whites who do not succeed? Liu (1997) has traced the history of white identifications post-1960 from what he calls the “Left Behind White” (i. e., white oedipal losers), who in the face of Black Power laid claim to Irish, Italian, or Polish heritage; to the “Angry White Male,” who claimed reverse discrimination and victimhood in the face of minority preferences; to the return of the “Left Behind White,” who now is searching for his or her own racial identity in the context of ever-changing identity politics. The “Left Behind White,” however, faces a major obstacle: how to convincingly discover and maintain pride in white racial identity without that identity's being spoiled by its deep association with racist sentiments. Understandably, white people may be highly resistant to any attempt to “identify the ways that whites remain blind to, and blinded by, an unspoken faith in race—and to expose the means by which white skin and “white attitudes” still confer social advantage” (Liu, 1997). Even whites who succeed quite effortlessly may still

rationalize that they deserve their success rather than acknowledge the workings of unearned privilege.

Given that white people possess a rich variety of ethnic identities in which to take pride, it can seem as though they possess no underlying racial identity that unifies them and that separates them as a group from people of color. White people may acknowledge their varying ethnic heritages at strategic moments to claim a lack of white privilege and white identity when it is convenient to do so. It is better to view oneself as a member of an ethnic minority (e. g., Italian, Jewish, Irish, etc.) so that one is not seen simply as white.

Parents possess a strong narcissistic investment in their children (**Freud, 1914**). Most white people still want to sire white babies. This investment in whiteness expresses an unconscious desire to maintain and pass on white privilege to their children, thereby maintaining a clear reproductive color line. The politics of adoption is such that an affluent but childless white couple is more likely to adopt a child from Asia, South America, or Eastern Europe than they are to become parents to an orphaned black baby born just a few blocks from where they live. Attitudes toward intermarriage and adoption suggest an underlying oedipal split in which there is an unconscious search for white marital partners for making babies (i. e., love). Yet there may be a search for more dark-skinned partners when there is a desire to gratify a certain type of transgressive sexuality (i. e., lust). An infertile couple looking for donor eggs would prefer to obtain, if possible, the eggs of an athletic, tall, blonde, blue-eyed young white woman attending an Ivy League school despite the fact that they are themselves swarthy, short, and B-list educated (Yale Daily News, **2005**).

White Identity Threat: When Black Analysts Treat White Patients

Leary (1997) suggests that race has been deemphasized as a part of personality development and as such is considered only “skin deep.” And, perhaps related to this idea, the field has been “slow to develop effective clinical theory about race and racial difference” (Leary, **2000**, p. **648**) because race originally did not fall under the purview of psychology. Many writers suggest that “race and ethnicity have been largely emphasized as pertaining to people of color, rather than as dynamic constellations with relevance to all persons” (p. **648**). **Leary (2004)** makes the point that psychoanalysts in particular, people who have no problem entertaining the idea they might have sexual urges toward one or both parents, cannot

seem even to approach, let alone delve deeply, into their unconscious thoughts about race. And, it might be added, sexual preferences as they relate to skin color, especially aversion to intimate sexual or affectionate contact with black skin or making a sexual fetish of black skin, are especially difficult for white patients to discuss openly.

According to **Helms (1984)**, the development of white racial identity is characterized by disavowed racial identity, because it is an identity that is associated with racism. As Eric **Liu (1997)** suggests, white people of almost any ilk have “an almost allergic reaction to any serious consideration of the ideology of privilege we call ‘whiteness.’” This reaction creates a resistance to their analyzing white racial identity. It seems to be virtually impossible to raise the issue without arousing persecutory anxiety about being perceived as racist, so the issue tends to be avoided. Yet **Leary (2000)** has noted that, even if race is not openly discussed, it might still be unconsciously enacted in the therapeutic relationship. She defines racial enactments as “those interactive sequences that embody the actualization in the clinical situation of cultural attitudes towards race and racial difference” (p. 640) and suggests that they often take the form of silence (p. 647) while covertly creating shame and guilt. Citing Stern, she suggests that our experiences with race are akin to what he calls “unformulated experience— experience that is not yet reflected on or linguistically encoded but is very much a part of our psychic grammar” (p. 641). As a result of the frequency with which racial enactments occur and our lack of experience to define, understand, and express these enactments, conversations about race “are extremely fragile and easily subject to collapse” (p. 642).

Holmes (1992) and **Leary (1997)**, both black female analysts, cite clinical examples of white patients who were unwilling or unable to engage in uninhibited conversation because they were afraid a racist comment might “slip out” while at the same time they were articulating that race was not a problem for them. When trying to locate the self using a black therapist as a reference, a white patient may become aware of herself as a racial being for the first time in her life. For some, this acknowledgment may also carry with it additional hostilities aimed at the therapist for forcing this recognition, as the process of identifying as a white person often includes consciously or unconsciously identifying with racism, either historically or personally. White aggression toward a black subject has a long history, which white patients actively avoid contemplating while consciously tending to focus more on the dread of black aggression toward white subjects (e. g., crime, race riots).

In response to an article by **Straker (2004)**, suggesting that whites are “unwilling beneficiaries” of the system to which they are apart, **Altaian (2004)** asserts that “part of the guilt that attaches to holding a privileged position in a racist society may derive from a sense that we want and feel we need our privileges and comforts and would not give them up so easily” (p. 442). White guilt leads unconsciously to a dread of black retribution, not simply for past discrimination, but for whites' continuing to benefit from white privileges that they refuse to acknowledge or relinquish. Most contemporary whites plead innocent and deny blame for past discrimination of which they or their ancestors may have had no part. Focusing on the past evades the touchier questions of the degree to which white people should be held accountable for the current status quo and the extent to which that status quo maintains white privilege at the expense of others. Among whites, there is considerable dread of what seems like “irrational” black rage for racial injustice and considerable hostility toward blacks for seeming to blame them unfairly for something for which they feel essentially innocent. Thus, white rage toward black people is rationalized and its roots in the inherent narcissistic instability of white racial identity are never addressed.

Leary (1997) notes that, although her black patients often directly mention race as a shared experience, her white patients usually do not. Leary offers that whiteness is unnoticed for many white Americans and is not typically explored in a white dyad. In either case, when race is not mentioned by the patient, Leary has found it useful to acknowledge it, in part because “[flailing to acknowledge racial difference is not neutral” (p. 166) and may be seen as avoidance or fear of the tension that race may arouse. **Holmes (1992)** comments that at times her white patients wished they had a white therapist so that race would not be an issue or would not be interpreted. Whiteness functions as a kind of forbidden secret identity that may exist outside the conscious awareness of the people who possess it. There is a comfort level around whites that incrementally diminishes in the presence of nonwhites. Identification as white enters conscious awareness in the presence of people of color. To be the only white person in a room full of black people is not an entirely comfortable experience for many white people.

White colleagues and friends of mine (AM) have expressed a fear and active avoidance of being “a minority” among a group of people of color, and they earnestly worry aloud that they do not want their children to “be the only one,” nor do they want to “be the only one.” It is not clear the

degree to which even white mental health professionals are aware of what a lone black professional person would experience in majority white settings. There seems to be a lack of awareness of the white class privilege that is exercised by avoiding situations in which they would be a minority. Moreover, while whites feel that there is nothing for a black person to fear in *their* presence, they hold significant fears, for themselves and for their children, of being a minority among people of color.

In the frenzy to get their children into the best schools, most white professional parents take little notice of the more-or-less token presence of a few black faces at these elite educational institutions, but they certainly notice when white children are in the minority. Affluent white parents of Manhattan's Upper West Side, a supposed bastion of liberalism, are up in arms when their bright pre-K children are denied admission into the local gifted program. One parent complained, "Honestly, I don't want to send my white middle-class kid to a school where there's 2 percent white children.... I don't think it would be comfortable for him" (Ryzik, 2006, p. 16).

The challenge in analyzing white identity is that the issue cannot easily be raised without putting the white patient on the defensive and arousing considerable persecutory anxiety and counterhostility. It seems that the analysis of white racial identity seldom goes beyond the touchy issue of white racism into the analysis of white privilege and the deeper dread of losing it. The underlying fear of an unspeakably shameful competitive defeat should that privilege ever be relinquished is what seems to remain in the realm of unformulated experience. It is also politically incorrect in a liberal culture that valorizes tolerance and suspension of moralizing judgment to acknowledge intense pleasure in feeling morally superior to racialized oedipal losers who are devalued. To the extent that racism, sexism, classism, heterocentrism, phallogentrism, and patriarchy are held accountable for the ills of the world, it is difficult to admit to sadistic/ narcissistic pleasure in wishing to become and remain a member of a superior ruling class. This is how we have come to what **Bonilla-Silva (2003)** calls "racism without racists"—the acknowledged belief that racism exists and yet there are few, if any, racists in existence.

I (AM) was raised in a middle-class, multiracial community in New York City in which there were numerous children from interracial families. My father is black, my mother is white, my younger brother is adopted and black, my older half-brother is black, and I am biracial. From first through twelfth grade, I attended an expensive private school in Manhattan with a predominantly white and Jewish student body. Despite living in a multiracial

community, I spent most of my time at school, where I was acutely aware that I was different. Although there were students of color sparsely scattered throughout the school, virtually none were in my classes until I was 10. There were frequent communications about race, what it meant, what it stood for, what it said about you. It was not lost on any of us that most of the black kids were on scholarship, and most of the biracial and white kids were not. The unspoken communication was that to have one white parent (as most of the biracial students did) meant to have more money. What was lost on us was the reality that many white students were also on scholarship but did not have the same stereotypes applied to them. Unfortunately, few adults were open to acknowledging these disparities. Moreover, when racial incidents did occur, we did not have the language or courage to speak face to face about it; the moment was thus left in the realm of unformulated experience.

For most of my life, and certainly most of my precollege schooling, I was one of the invisible and privately wounded. I had few outlets and little comprehensive understanding of the daily racial enactments I faced and the systemic privilege structures surrounding me. My assessment was that my hurt feelings were due to my oversensitivity and my reading too much into things. Early on, when given the opportunity to speak, privately or publicly, most of what came out of my mouth was often a shock to myself and those around me. Later, as I developed my own analysis and began to trust my perceptions, the dilemma was whether or not to voice them and who might be unsettled or offended by my perceptions. I had seen what happened to black women who called it as they saw it; they were deemed angry, paranoid, overly sensitive and were usually dismissed, implicitly if not explicitly. In some ways, my opting to stay silent was perhaps my way of passing and avoiding the activation of the negative stereotype of the angry black woman. Black women are often perceived as embodying a certain type of racialized oedipal splitting: the masculine, sexually threatening, castrating woman.

I had few interactions with white working-class people, much less dealt with racism from them. Thus in my clinical work with white working-class patients I had to negotiate my privileged position in terms of social class, yet devalued position in terms of race.

The following case illustrates the challenges I faced in clinical work with a white couple, in which the husband is from a Christian family that has been consistently working class throughout his life and the wife is from a Jewish family that was working class but eventually earned enough

money to become solidly middle class. In one session the wife tried to explain how mean and “nasty” her husband could get when angry, but she did not seem to feel that I sufficiently grasped just how offensive he could be. She then attempted to make her examples of his behavior more personal to me as her therapist, a person of color. In her efforts to convince me of his behavior, she informed me that he yells “nigger” out of the car window if someone black cuts him off and that she really didn't want their child to be raised in that kind of environment. She seemed to be airing her husband's “dirty laundry” to humiliate him by provoking my moral outrage toward contemptible behavior that she suspected I would take personally

Before that moment, as a biracial woman sometimes assumed to be either Hispanic, black, or partly Asian, I occasionally wondered about the couple's thoughts about my racial identity. It was not clear if the wife thought I was black and that I would be personally offended, or perhaps she thought I was of some other race and might implicitly share her husband's racist sentiments. Class, and possibly even religious differences, were also likely being enacted, as it was not entirely clear whether the wife was more offended by her husband's racism or by his vulgarity, which threatened her Jewish, middle-class aspirations. She called her husband “white trash” (i. e., a racialized oedipal loser) both at home and in front of me, in an unsuccessful attempt to ally herself with me. Provocatively throwing out racial epithets was an unconscious test of me, as the patient tried to ferret out exactly where my racial, class, and gendered loyalties resided.

During the session, my countertransference was to feel simultaneously angry toward and threatened by the husband, as well as manipulated by the wife because I was easily pulled into an enactment through my own stereotypes of working-class whites (i. e., white oedipal sore losers), which allowed me readily to believe that her husband used racial epithets. I felt manipulated and furious with the wife, who, it seemed, likely shared her husband's sentiments about black people but believed it would be low class to admit to such feelings and had no problem attempting to shame him for something she herself was probably guilty of consciously thinking, if not also saying. Despite the familiarity of this sort of racial enactment from my previous experiences with white people (although usually not this explicit) and despite my moral commitment to confronting racism openly, I nevertheless felt a paralyzing anxiety about saying anything about it. Did they know I was black? If they didn't know

and I addressed this moment, would it “out me” as a black person and change how they treated me? Would the couple feel irrevocably shamed if they suddenly realized I was an offended and enraged black woman? Would this couple, who had gone to great lengths to express their deference to and appreciation of me, now think less of me as their openly black therapist? Whatever the scenario, I was most struck by my desire to protect all of us from my rage and our *mutual* dread that I might change in their eyes from the empathic, warm, caring, nonthreatening therapist into an intimidating black woman.

Despite the multicultural sensitivity of any therapist, it is still easy to be caught off guard and let such provocative comments pass rather than allow reproachful sentiments slip out overtly that might seem to endanger the therapeutic alliance. In the moment, we may feel compelled to act as though we are not racially offended even though it is quite likely that at least fleeting expressions of shock and offense leak out in our facial expressions, tone of voice, and body language. There is a dread of confronting white racism in a white patient for fear of evoking white shame and rage at being publicly exposed as someone who possesses feelings of racial superiority to black people. There is also the potential dread on the part of the therapist of color of analyzing a patient's racism for fear that it will open a Pandora's box of racism, revealing a multitude of racist feelings that the therapist would perhaps rather not hear. It is the sort of shame and rage that narcissistic patients experience when the unreality of their archaic grandiosity is traumatically deflated and their underlying feelings of vulnerability and weakness are publicly exposed (Kohut, 1971).

White Mutual Admiration Societies: When White Analysts Treat White Patients

White clinicians who work with predominantly white middle- and upper middle-class patients may not feel entirely secure in their own social status or in the stability of their incomes, in an age of managed care and evidence-based treatments (Josephs, 2004). White therapists may not wish to “bite the hand that feeds them” by analyzing the repudiated racial identifications of their white clientele who have no wish to analyze that anxiety-laden issue. White therapists may imagine that to raise the issue would be more an imposition of their own social agendas than a therapeutic response to the patient's actual need, so the issue is left untouched. To the extent that white patients avoid going into private treatment with nonwhite

clinicians, they may be attempting to insure that their underlying racial identification will never be exposed to analytic scrutiny while they are analyzing other issues (**Holmes, 1992**). Thus, the private practice of insight-oriented psychotherapy appears to remain as racially segregated as other aspects of American society despite the progressive aspirations of many of its practitioners.

White psychoanalysts can “cash in” on their white privilege as well-paid analysts of the predominantly white ruling class (middle- and upper middle-class white professionals who pay full fee out of pocket). By treating the white professional class in private practice, they can make enough money to live in predominantly white neighborhoods and send their children to predominantly white schools where their children will obtain a competitive edge. The more white analysts can consciously construe themselves as nurturing preoedipal parents who love all babies equally, regardless of race, creed, or color, the more they can disavow their socially competitive and status-conscious oedipal aspects that seek to retain white privileges for themselves while obtaining even more for their own children. Perhaps oedipal theory has been downplayed in contemporary psychoanalysis because oedipal theory makes central to human nature our sexually competitive, individualistic strivings in some of their most morally offensive forms, the very strivings that most progressive social critics find repugnant in contemporary American society. Yet oedipal theory also suggests that, as oedipal splitting is overcome, it may be possible to begin to relate to people more as whole objects, each in possession of a full humanity, than as part-objects who have been reduced to social stereotypes.

The acquisition and maintenance of privilege are strongly linked in the minds of most people with romantic success (being an oedipal winner). Resource display is a primary male tactic for attracting desirable mates. Self-report measures, worldwide, suggest that, when choosing a mate, women, even affluent women of independent means, place a high premium on access to economic resources (**Buss, 2003**). Sexual competition among heterosexual men for desirable women translates into fierce economic competition for economic resources. White privilege, therefore, enhances the mate-value of white men while decreasing the mate-value of black men as long-term romantic partners. Thus there is a strong psychological link between economic privilege and romantic desirability. Heterosexual men will compete fiercely and often unfairly among themselves for power and privilege as long as they believe that the most desirable women will mate only with the most economically privileged men

they can win. Much critical theory on power and privilege overlooks the possibility that the quest for power and privilege is unconsciously driven by sexual competition for the most desirable mates (processes of Darwinian sexual selection).

White analysts may need to reflect on the construction of their own racial identity. For example, I (LJ) grew up during the 50s and 60s in a working-class, predominantly Jewish community in which few blacks lived. I remember overhearing my aunt complain about the “shfartzas” (Yiddish for black persons) during the civil rights march on Washington. When we drove through Harlem, my parents would make sure that we closed the windows and locked the car doors. The first black person with whom I strongly identified was Jimi Hendrix, the legendary rock guitarist, and I grew a “Jewfro” to emulate his “Afro.” There were no black students in my honors class in high school. The only blacks that I interacted with personally were either roving groups of black kids who might try to shake me down for money or black rock musicians with whom I jammed. Thus I was instilled with two views of black masculinity: a criminal threat to be avoided (psychopathic phallic sadism) and a rebellious countercultural icon to be emulated but ultimately outgrown (excitingly transgressive phallic awesomeness).

Thus whiteness came to mean, for me, an exclusionary sense of in-group safety and security as well as actualizing, more “mature” (genital rather than phallic) ideas of masculine romantic and professional success (married psychologist rather than rock star with groupies). Nevertheless, the civil rights influence of the 60s also led to an uneasy feeling that it might be a kind of self-betrayal for a fair-skinned Jew to cash in on his white privilege if a real “*mensch*” (Yiddish for a decent human being) went against his self-interest to act with nobility and decency. Yet that dread of self-betrayal conflicted with an equally strong dread of becoming a “left behind” white loser. In a post-Holocaust world, being a left-behind white, Jewish, American loser raises a variety of existential anxieties and is particularly shameful given all the Jews who have “made it” in America.

We suggest that the dynamics of white racial identity are unconsciously enacted when white analysts treat white patients. For the most part, white patients with white analysts implicitly form white mutual admiration societies in which whiteness remains invisible while being unconsciously mirrored. There is a need for validation that both patient and analyst are whites who have made it, or will eventually make it, and will not be left behind in disgrace. White patients may seek more explicit affirmation of

their white racial identity when some idealized aspect of their white racial identity seems threatened. Racial enactments around validation and invalidation of white identity are likely to occur on what **Ehrenberg (1992)** calls “the intimate edge” of psychoanalytic interaction, the interactive nuances that may be revealed only in the microanalysis of fleeting moments.

When white patients are discussing their love lives, skin color is implicitly in the room as an object of sexual attraction or repulsion. Although white patients may be highly attracted to olive and tan skin tones, there is often an unstated antipathy toward dark brown skin tones that is seldom openly discussed. Moreover, olive and tan skin tones are not seen as racialized choices. The issue comes up most explicitly when there is a decided sexual preference for a dark-skinned romantic partner that may be experienced as perverse.

Linda came for treatment because she was in love with a black man and her family did not approve. Over the course of treatment, Linda was embarrassed to admit that for some strange reason she was sexually attracted only to dark black men, and she worried that I (LJ) might think it was some kind of sexual perversion. Of course, once Linda implied that she was incapable of a sexual response to a white person regardless of his character, I did begin to wonder if she had made a fetish of skin color. Nevertheless, not wishing to seem moralistic about what might be considered fetishistic tendencies, I inquired if she felt there was something wrong with making a fetish of skin color. Linda giggled as though admitting a forbidden pleasure and said, “I guess not.” Although my intervention alleviated her self-criticism about her sexual preferences, it did occur to me that unconsciously I may have been implying that white people are entitled to fetishize black people as sex objects if they are sexually inhibited from expressing certain aspects of their sexuality with white people.

White patients may find it difficult to openly express their sexual preferences for skin color because aversion to black skin may suggest an implicit racial bias against blacks as romantic partners, while intense attraction to black skin may suggest a perverse interest in black people as sex objects. Some white patients may be embarrassed to admit that they may lust after black skin but would never marry a black person. Many white teenagers and young adults hope to have at least one sexual experience with a black person just to see what it's like before they move on to looking for a white mate with whom they can make white babies.

Rachel's father was a reform Jewish rabbi who encouraged her to have black friends, yet it was understood that a “nice Jewish girl” would not

have a black boyfriend. So Rachel had a black boyfriend whom she kept secret. When the time came to attend her senior prom in high school, she attended with a “nice Jewish boy.” White patients conflicted about cross-racial marriage and raising a biracial baby may protest that personally it makes no difference to them but that they do not want the stress of dealing with families and a society that never lets them forget that they made the wrong choice.

Kyle came for treatment conflicted about remaining married to his African American spouse, Keisha. Kyle reported that Keisha was beautiful and that he was intensely attracted to her but they had an extremely volatile relationship, which he could no longer endure. His family had always advised him against marrying her, and he thought in part that he might have married her just to prove his opinionated, overbearing, and sexually repressed parents wrong. Keisha expressed her anger freely and openly. Although Kyle was attracted to her emotional spontaneity, he never could express his anger openly and could not endure the way his wife aggressively overstimulated him. It gradually emerged that Kyle lusted after black women, whom he perceived as “bitchy” and unsafe, whereas he felt safe and comfortable with white women, who repressed their anger, as his mother did, but toward whom he felt little sexual interest. Evidently the universal tendency to split love and lust may become racialized by feeling attachment security with white skin yet lusting after black skin.

In my countertransference, I felt pulled into feeling responsible for helping Kyle resolve the obsessional dilemma generated by his racialized oedipal splitting. Sometimes I thought Keisha was too emotionally unstable and he should leave her. At other times I thought Kyle was too repressed and that this passionate woman was good for him. Yet the issue became racialized because I was aware of the negative stereotype of the angry black woman and became confused by whether we were racially stereotyping his wife or she was really too “borderline” for him. I raised these issues with Kyle but, true obsessive that he was, it only added fuel to the fire of his obsessional tendencies. To some extent, this racial enactment mirrors the wider cultural phenomenon that liberals seem endlessly to obsess about how to solve the problem of race but never seem to make much progress in that regard.

Race is implicitly in the room whenever there are discussions of where to live when the time comes to start a family. White professional patients are often conflicted about whether to move into a poorer and more racially diverse neighborhood to obtain more living space for the money,

or to move into a more affluent and exclusively white neighborhood but obtain less for the money. Gentrification is sometimes called moving into “pioneer territory” with the hope that over time the schools will improve, housing prices will go up, and the neighborhood will become filled with upwardly mobile white professionals just like oneself. The term “pioneer territory” erases the existence of poor people of color that live in those neighborhoods and often do not have access to good schools and services despite their efforts to demand more. Implicitly, it is a form of colonization that will eventually generate a racially segregated neighborhood once the process is complete. When gentrification succeeds, all poor non-white people will be priced out of the neighborhood.

The split between colonizer/ruling class and colonized/servant class unconsciously resonates with a certain repudiated aspect of oedipal splitting. Oedipal splitting creates fantasies of devoted but asexual maternal (the Madonna) and paternal (loyal but asexual men) caretakers who possess no sexual subjectivity of their own. The desexualized aspect of that oedipal split is split once again into idealized and devalued types of asexual caretakers with black people put in the role of the devalued caretakers, the “mammies” and the “pappies.” This process allows white people to feel entitled to the idealized asexual caretaker roles of patriarch or matriarch. For white people to inhabit that idealized asexual caretaker role, they must live in a home and in a neighborhood befitting their exalted position in society. The adoption of the idealized asexual caretaker role permits white people to disavow their more sexually competitive aspirations for themselves and for their children. Idealized asexual caretakers unconsciously seek and usually attain a certain immunity from criticism. How can they be faulted for exploiting white privilege when they have only their children's best interests at heart?

Another patient, Mark, had lived for many years in a small but affordable two-bedroom apartment in Cobble Hill, a trendy neighborhood in Brooklyn. Yet the apartment was too small once he was married with two children. He was upset that he had been priced out of the neighborhood if he wished to buy an apartment. His choice was either to move to another part of Brooklyn where the local school would not be as good or move to a house in the suburbs so his children could benefit from the schools. Yet in the suburbs he faced a similar dilemma: buy a small house in an affluent, exclusively white suburb with a highly touted school system, or get a larger house in a more racially diverse community where the schools were not so highly regarded. Mark had attended an exclusive

Manhattan private school and felt ashamed that he could not afford to provide his children with the same sort of education he had received. Mark claimed that he had no problem living among poor or black people, but he felt he had to obtain the best possible education for his children, even with his limited financial resources and even if that meant moving into a more racially segregated community.

Mark was also choosing between the relative status of a suburban community and the lower status of a pioneer territory, a choice that would need to be justified to himself, his family, and his friends. Even if there happened to be a good school in a “bad” neighborhood, Mark would still have to justify his decision to an endless stream of family and friends who would raise doubts about the wisdom of his choice by making seemingly innocuous inquiries about the safety of the neighborhood and the quality of the school. The mere fact of living in pioneer territory would mark him, in his own mind and in the minds of his counterparts, as an economic failure, at least until the neighborhood had successfully gentrified and he could boast about the exponential increase in property values.

In my countertransference, I felt sorry for Mark as a “left-behind white loser”; I had successfully been able to acquire Manhattan real estate before the market skyrocketed. Nevertheless, I also identified with him as a “left-behind white loser” when senior analytic colleagues displayed fleeting microfacial expressions of shock, disbelief, and horror whenever they discovered that I was sending my children to public school in New York City.

The issue of race also arises when white professional women (the idealized but asexual maternal role) discuss their conflicts with their non-white nannies (the devalued but asexual maternal role). These affluent professional women may feel guilty about not being full-time mothers or needing help with their children despite being full-time mothers. They want to assure that their children get the best mother-substitutes that money can buy, and they chronically worry that their nonwhite nannies are never quite good enough. One mother, a busy lawyer, complained that the daycare center at which she left her four-year-old son let the children run wild, and she was worried that the other children were roughing up her son. When she complained to the daycare workers, they told her that her son was often one of the instigators and that they did not see any problem because they occasionally wrestled with the children themselves. The mother, in conspiratorial tones as though someone might overhear her, told me, “What can you expect from daycare workers from the inner city [i. e., black] who don't know any better?”

A full-time mother, Karen, who left her child with a nanny to attend therapy sessions, would sometimes answer her cellphone during the session when the nanny called about problems consoling the baby. The mother, while politely walking to the nanny, would make faces (rolling her eyes in exasperation) suggesting that she thought that the nanny was a “moron” who could not do anything right. It was clear that she felt privately disgusted with her nanny although overfly she felt compelled to treat the nanny diplomatically so as to not antagonize her, perhaps provoking her to quit in anger and leave Karen in the lurch. Clearly, those white professional mothers view themselves as psychologically sophisticated, trying to save their children from the psychological damage that might be inflicted on them by the incompetent mothering of women of color on whom they have become dependent for childcare.

In my countertransference, I felt that Karen was treating me rudely by answering her cellphone during a session, and I felt annoyed that she was making me complicit in her secret contempt for her babysitter. I believed she was anxiously overinvolved with her children and defensively needed to see the babysitter as incompetent in order to justify her anxious overinvolvement with them. After the phone call, I interpreted her seemingly overblown separation anxiety from her children. Bursting into tears, Karen told me that I was unfairly scolding her just as her husband did, that he treated her with contempt for becoming overwhelmed by domestic responsibilities despite having a lot of expensive help. I had implicitly shamed her for her narcissistic sense of entitlement as a white woman of unearned privilege who looked down on working-class women of color. Yet I felt hypocritical, because it was not as though my wife and I had not experienced similar issues in our own dealings with the women of color whom we employed to care for our children. Maybe I felt offended and implicitly chastised Karen because she was not treating me deferentially, as I felt a high-status, white, male analyst was entitled to be treated.

Many white professional mothers may fear an inability to care competently for their own children and may feel insecure about actually having the monetary resources to afford someone they imagine they would not have to monitor anxiously. These professional mothers underestimate the intellectual and emotional intelligence of their nannies, who try to do a good job despite being underpaid. Yet, paradoxically, the mothers might feel resentful that they are overpaying their nannies. They experience a request for a pay hike as a manipulative “shake-down”; the nanny is supposedly incompetent and therefore undeserving of a raise. More important,

the threat of quitting raises the specter of the child's being traumatized by a broken attachment to the nanny. Being an underpaid nanny may be better than nothing when better paying jobs with benefits are scarce. Yet nannies may resent the implication they do not really care for their charges if they contemplate quitting because they are underpaid.

Cross-cultural conflict is enacted when nannies perceive white professional mothers as encouraging a narcissistic sense of entitlement in their children through overly permissive, spoiling, overly stimulating, and overly protective mothering that undermines the authority of the nannies as parental surrogates. The mothers fear that the nannies will be negligent, cold, harsh, and insufficiently stimulating when the parents are not watching. The children often intuit that it is permissible to disrespect and disregard the nanny's instructions. Yet the parents come home and complain that the children are running amok. The nannies are caught in a double bind—they are damned if they do and damned if they don't discipline the children. Privileged white children grow up assuming that women of color exist to happily indulge the children's narcissistic sense of entitlement.

Race is also enacted when a black family faces difficulties finding a nanny. Nannies, like most others working in the United States, share or develop stereotypes of black people and believe that they will pay less, will live in a bad neighborhood, or will not treat them well (**Kantor, 2006**). And, in their desire to climb the social ladder, a nanny of any race may also avoid the narcissistic mortification of being a nanny who works for a black family. It is not that upwardly mobile black professional couples do not have these same conflicts about where to live, where to send their children to school, and how to obtain quality childcare when professional mothers go off to work. They often make the same choices that their white counterparts make. Yet unconsciously, or even consciously, there may be some anxiety that they are becoming “white” in the process of allowing their own status insecurities, rather than considerations of social justice, to become their overwhelming priority in making such choices.

The racial element in issues is often expressed in passing as an insignificant aspect of a larger, nonracial issue (or masked as solely a class issue) on “the intimate edge” of psychoanalytic interaction (**Ehrenberg, 1992**). The path of least resistance is often to ignore the racial side remark and simply continue analyzing the official presenting problem. Lack of open discussion does not mean that at the level of affective communication the issue is not being unconsciously registered and negotiated. The simple

lack of mirroring when a patient expresses implicitly racist statements may communicate that the therapist does not support those sentiments but feels uncomfortable putting the patient on the defensive by making an issue of it.

By raising the racial issue directly, the analyst may have to abide being perceived as a certain type of bad object; a moralistic, self-righteously indignant, and punitive object who persecutes the patient by making slanderous accusations of racism. The white analyst is put in the hypocritical role of someone who is unconsciously racist, analyzing the repudiated racism of a white patient. Simultaneously taking on the dual roles of explicit racial accuser while remaining a closet racist oneself may often be just too much for the white analyst to bear in one emotionally charged, paranoid, psychotic micromoment.

Whiteness, as pathological narcissism, allows white people to defensively maintain an idealized role in all forms of oedipal splitting, be it as the idealized romantic hero or heroine or as the idealized but asexual maternal or paternal caretaker. Overwhelming paranoid anxiety traumatically floods the psyche when these ego-syntonic forms of defensive grandiosity are unexpectedly threatened. Thus, these “hot-button” issues in the current sociocultural moment seem to be more often than not negotiated implicitly rather than explicitly. **Pizer (1998)** has noted the importance of the negotiation of paradox, even nonverbally, in the clinical situation. To some extent white privilege is one of those paradoxical issues, because liberal whites may be implicitly racist in some ways but not in other ways (**Dovidio and Gaertner, 2005**) and may be unfairly privileged in some ways but be “left-behind losers” in others. And this complex experience and ambiguity of meaning can often be unconsciously exploited to obscure white complicity in maintaining the racial status quo by granting whites the benefit of the doubt in situations in which racial bias is neither obvious nor incontrovertible.

Conclusion

We have seen the elements of tragedy in race relations in America. The socially progressive and liberal white professional class is connected to black America at many different levels—sexually, romantically, culturally, financially, and through empathic identification with their suffering. For whites, blackness represents many valued but repudiated aspects of self that, sadly, have been sacrificed in the compulsive pursuit of becoming

white oedipal winners. Yet when push comes to shove, they are unwilling to relinquish the privilege that comes with the possession of a white racial identity. The prevailing tendency to marry a white person in order to sire white babies who will be given every advantage leads to the conscious and unconscious reproduction of white privilege through white racial identity. In the end, competitive individualism trumps the desire for social justice. The oedipal splitting that maintains a paranoid-schizoid level of object relations covered over by well-rationalized narcissistic defenses predominates over the attainment of a genuine depressive position in which reparations are made for the damage wrought on oedipal losers by oedipal triumphalism.

Wishing to raise successful white children and grandchildren who will reflect well on their parents and grandparents maintains the status quo. White teenagers and young adults may defiantly rebel against that oppressive expectation by emulating stereotypes of black people from an inner city ghetto and having sex with black people. Yet when these white youth grow up, get married, and have children, their repressed identifications with white parental wishes and expectations take precedence over their adolescent rebelliousness. They correctly perceive that to be black in America is, in part, to learn to live with narcissistic mortification, a thousand daily microaggressions (Sue et al, 2007) and the all too frequent violent attacks on one's racial self-respect, as well as on one's body. And while they may also be envious of blackness as a rich cultural-historical tradition, the dread of searing narcissistic mortification insures that white people will be motivated to keep themselves and their white children as far away from the apparent psychic trauma of blackness as they possibly can. It seems unlikely, then, that the racial status quo will ever change until the white professional class is no longer so strongly motivated by an ethos of competitive individualism that is unconsciously buttressed by culturally reinforced oedipal splitting that has been racialized.

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Article Citation [\[Who Cited This?\]](#)

Miller, A.E. and Josephs, L. (2009). Whiteness as Pathological Narcissism.
Contemp. Psychoanal., 45:93-119