

The White Professional and the Black Client Revisited

Originally published over a quarter century ago, "The White Professional and the Black Client" confronted the difficult issues that face social work as a discipline attempting to improve the lives of marginalized groups. Just as racism persists today, so does the article's vision of fighting interacial tension by building worker-client relationships founded upon mutual respect, honesty, and trust. The article is presented on page 71 as it appeared in Social Casework, 53, (MAY 1972) pp. 280-291.

by
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Alex:
 We were situated in six-room ground-level apartment in one of the buildings. As the faculty field instructor and director of this service, I attempted to provide community, group, family, and individual services which could then be duplicated in other public housing complexes. We worked with individuals who had personal difficulties: marital troubles; concerns about their children; or difficulties with institutions which impinged on their daily lives, such as the Department of Welfare, the Housing Authority, and the Board of Education. We organized a tenants' association and building safety systems, initiated orientation programs for new tenants, and developed group services in the public schools.

The work of one of my students, Alice Schaeffer, was particularly memorable. Alice, a young, white, middle-class

woman, had a natural gift for practice. I wish I could take credit for her professional talent, for her ability to provide genuine caring and support and, at the same time, to probe and explore painful and taboo material. However, the truth is that while I was her formal supervisor, she was my informal teacher.



Her work with a thirty-year-old, black mother of seven children crystallized practice issues confronting white workers and black clients in the helping encounter. Her practice spoke to me. This young woman had the courage and skill to deal with explosive and sensitive racial content.

Her practice resonated with me. I began to focus more on issues related to race in my other students' practices as well as in my own supervision and teaching of students of color. Several years later, I invited Alice to collaborate with me on this article. At that time, I was

very much into existential literature and it provided the framework for the article. As I reflect on the article, more than twenty-five years later, I realize that I was too enamored with existential thought and should have explored other bodies of knowledge (e.g., oppression). I do, however, believe that the article made an important statement and captured Alice's and my vision.

Alice:

Mrs. R., one of my first black clients, told me that our working together made her feel less alone. She said it felt better to share her troubles with someone who cared, even if the caring didn't always produce results. She said that my caring about her made it easier for her to care about her kids, that each small success showed her kids that they, too, could succeed. She said she had learned a lot from our work together—how to work the system, how to try different approaches, how to deal with the social workers who took my place. She knows I learned a great deal from her. She said that her life had become better in so many little ways that really mattered, even if the overall picture had not changed. She said she was glad we kept in touch even after I left the agency. She encouraged me when I returned to school, although she warned me not to get too smart or I'd never catch a man!

And then she died. She was only 35, but because I was younger and so much more protected, her years seemed greater. She had lost over 100

pounds, had become a speaker for Weight Watchers, and proudly displayed her "before and after" pictures. She had helped her older kids through the ups and downs of high school and was looking forward to their graduations. She was talking about trying to get a GED. She said she no longer felt like the loser of her family, that her mother and sisters had begun to give her respect. Her marriage, while still difficult, had become more of a partnership. She and her husband were excited about her unexpected pregnancy. Although it was unplanned, it seemed to symbolize many positives: she was thin enough to actually become pregnant; looked good enough to attract her husband; felt good enough to want him to want her again; felt ready to bring a new life into the world. She said the baby would be special, born of strength rather than weakness, born of hope rather than despair. But her strong spirit could not sustain her body, weakened by nine pregnancies, chain-smoking, and regaining and losing hundreds of pounds. Mother and baby died in childbirth, leaving a motherless family of seven.

I was the only white person at the funeral. I sat with the family and cried with them, even as I tried to give some small comfort. They included me in their grieving and in their planning for how to go on. They obtained services to supplement the extended family's efforts to keep the children at home together: financial aid to supplement Mr. R's meager earnings

and after-school care so the older kids could continue their high school programs and activities. They had all learned how to work the system.

Alex and Alice:

As poverty, racism, and oppression continue to permeate our society, both white worker and black client are ineluctably affected by their respective experiences and social roles. More than twenty-five years ago, we wrote about our vision for overcoming the mutual unknowns and mistrusts emanating from the societal racial divide. Today, in our respective professional roles, we remain committed to challenging the interpersonal tensions rising from racism and other prejudices in order to build relationships based on mutual respect, honesty, and trust. We also recognize that workers and clients sharing common backgrounds may also experience differing perceptions and expectations. We remain committed to confronting the anger, resentments, and fears—whatever their source—which inevitably affect each of us but need not paralyze us. Our vision remains intact: professionals and clients can and must overcome their fears for "only to the extent that the worker and client are able to reach and touch each other as real human beings is it possible for genuine services to be delivered."

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