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Abandoning Colorblind Practice in School Counseling

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## Abstract

Drawing from three case vignettes and the extant literature, the authors seek to identify, problematize, and expand the discussion on colorblind approaches to diversity within the practice of school counseling. The authors discuss how such an approach to working with students from traditionally under-represented groups subtly blames the victim, limits the development of equity by positioning critical dialogues as counter-productive, and inhibits the understanding of within-group differences. The article concludes with suggestions for how school counselors can enhance the services they provide to students of various social locations by abandoning colorblind practices and choosing to remove their difference blindfolds.

*Keywords:* School Counseling, Multicultural Counseling, Social Justice, Advocacy, Colorblind

### **Abandoning Colorblind Practice in School Counseling**

The purpose of this article is to identify, problematize and expand the discussion on the metaphoric concept of being colorblind to differences—that is, the idea that the way to treat all students equally is to be “blind” to differences. We will begin with a definition and review of the literature on colorblindness. We then offer three examples of colorblindness that we have witnessed in schools and examine the ways in which being colorblind has the effect of minimizing or distorting the everyday occurrences of marginalization experienced by students from traditionally under-represented groups. In the end, we will suggest that school counselors remove their *difference-blindfolds*—a concept we introduce later in the article—so as to provide comprehensive developmental services that both empower and educate *all* of the students, faculty, and families in their school community.

#### **Defining Colorblindness**

The metaphoric concept of being colorblind refers to ignoring ethnic and racial differences among individuals (Manning, 2009), assuming that color or race is invisible or irrelevant (Sue, 2010), and the denial or minimization of race and/or racism (Neville, Spanierman, & Doan, 2006). Those who promote colorblindness, suggest that the intent behind the practice is to be open, helpful, fair and even multiculturally sensitive to individuals who come from marginalized groups (Manning). It is important to emphasize that colorblindness is often practiced by some of the nicest and most well-meaning individuals one might ever know (Tatum, 1994). Many who take up a colorblind position have good intentions, but have, perhaps, lived lives that have been shielded from the very real everyday experiences of systemic marginalization such as racism, heterosexism, ableism, etc. (Choi, 2008). Colorblindness can be summed up by anecdotal statements we have heard from some very well-meaning school counselors such as: “There’s only one race in this

school, the human race” or “To me, the color of my student’s skin is like the color of my student’s eyes—it’s just not that significant.”

Colorblindness is sometimes framed as promoting multiculturalism because it assumes the worth, dignity, respect, and equality of all persons regardless of culture, race or ethnicity (Taylor, 1994). A colorblind perspective underscores the homogeneity of the human experience, while eschewing the variances and distinct experiences associated with difference, e.g., race, ethnicity, ability status, sexual orientation, etc. As Sue (2010) suggests, colorblindness may be based on the beneficent presupposition that being blind to racial differences equates to being unbiased. There is literature that also suggests that colorblindness is grounded in the assumption that such a perspective fosters racial harmony (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009).

Scholars in the field of multiculturalism and social justice have a less charitable perspective on the concept of colorblindness (Choi, 2008; Desai, 2010; Gordon, 2005; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005). Rather than promoting equity, they point out that colorblindness reinforces the marginalization of persons of color by minimizing or denying their personal and institutional experiences of discrimination (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). While traditional and overt forms of discrimination such as racial slurs and conspicuous hate crimes may be recognized and addressed by an individual who takes a colorblind position, heralding colorblind sameness allows other less overt, but still very significant forms of prejudice and discrimination to remain unaddressed. It is these more subtle forms of discrimination—modern and aversive discrimination—that are reinforced through the practice of colorblindness (Zuriff, 2002).

### **The Effects of Colorblind Practice In School Counseling**

To unpack the deleterious effects of colorblind practice in school counseling, we will use three case vignettes taken from our own observations in schools to examine how such an approach:

1) subtly blames the victim, 2) positions necessary dialogues about marginalization as counter-

productive, and 3) interferes with understanding within-group differences. Following this section, we will introduce the idea of abandoning colorblindness by taking the metaphoric act of removing one's difference blindfolds. We will conclude by examining how the school counselors within these three case vignettes might have more effectively met the needs of their students had they made the choice to remove their difference blindfolds.

### **How Colorblindness Subtly “Blames the Victim”**

This case vignette provides a glimpse into how a colorblind position can unintentionally position a student of color to bear the responsibility for his or her experiences of bias or subtle racism. We will illustrate how colorblindness can propel a school counselor into an ineffective problem-solving approach rather than broaching a conversation about the student's experiences and perceptions of modern racism. We will also discuss how the subtle nature of microaggressions will reveal the importance of seeing color—acknowledging race and ethnicity—when interacting with students, particularly those who attend predominantly white institutions.

#### **Case Vignette 1**

A high school student made an appointment with her school counselor to discuss “feeling left out” at school. This student was a sophomore, heterosexual female, who identified as African American, and the counselor—along with the vast majority of the student body, faculty, and staff—identified as white. When the counselor asked the student to elaborate on “feeling left out,” the student described a recent example of being the last one to be invited into a group for a project in her social studies class. She described feeling like people were “looking past me” while choosing groups, and it seemed to her that the teacher was “acting awkward about it.” The counselor asked her to elaborate on her experience of the incident in class and the student talked about other incidents in other classes and school functions during which she felt left out, saying that she could not put her finger on exactly why she had that feeling, but she knew it was there. The counselor

suggested that the problem may be that she needed to improve her interpersonal skills to better manage herself in large classrooms and make friends, and decided to focus on social skill development in their counseling sessions.

## **Discussion**

Ugly, overt forms of racism, known as *traditional racism*, are relatively easy for school counselors to detect. For example, had the student in the above vignette come to see the counselor after being called the “N” word in class, the counselor could not have avoided the issue and, more than likely, an intervention would have occurred. However, far more prevalent in our schools and communities is the phenomena of subversive, *modern racism* (Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Kopacz, 2008; Swim, Akin, Hall & Hunter, 1995). Unlike traditional racism, modern racism is covert, subtle and insidious (Tarca, 2005). A common manifestation of modern racism is the perpetration of *microaggressions*.

Microaggressions are defined as the everyday indignities and demeaning messages conveyed by members of dominant groups toward members of non-dominant groups (Sue 2010; Wright, 2012). Stereotyping students of color by making assumptions about inferior intelligence, superior athletic ability, or inadequate interpersonal skills, are examples of microaggressions (Sue, 2010). Microaggressions may be so subtle that they are virtually invisible to the perpetrator and confusing and unsettling to the recipient (Boysen, 2012; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). What the student in the case vignette possibly experienced was the microaggression of *second-class citizenship* (Watkins, LaBarrie & Appio, 2010). It is not uncommon for persons of color within predominantly white institutions to be treated as outsiders, to be over-looked as if they are not in the room (Chavous, 2002; Gossett, 1996) and left to feel like second-class citizens in the school community (McCoy, 2011).

In addition to microaggressions, modern racism is also expressed by resistance to engaging in dialogue about racial inequality (Tatum, 2003). Recall that the definition of colorblindness is the ignoring of ethnic and racial differences and assuming that color or race is invisible or irrelevant. A colorblind position does not invite conversations about one's experiences of subversive racism.

The student in the above scenario went to the school counselor for assistance in negotiating modern racism—the marginalization that she felt at her school. Modern racism and microaggressions are often so covert that students of color may even initially have difficulty identifying these experiences as authentic manifestations of racism. With all good intentions, the school counselor in this scenario responded to the student as if her experiences of social isolation were no different than the experiences of some of the white students in this predominantly white school. Thus the counselor's response was to unintentionally blame the victim by conceptualizing the problem as a deficit within the student. A colorblind position prevented the school counselor in this case vignette from even considering that this student was experiencing subversive racism because, when operating from a colorblind position, all but the most overt and acrid forms of racism are hidden from view.

Indeed, this school counselor's inadvertent response of blaming the victim is a microcosm of what occurs often within our society. The most common way of seeking to explain social inequities that fall along racial lines is to use the "it is their own fault" reasoning, suggesting that social disparities are a result of genetic and/or cultural inferiority, learned behavior or, perhaps, a lack of adequate social skills or interpersonal functioning (Van Dijk, 1992). One can see this reasoning in statements such as "those students just don't work hard enough" or "their parents do not have high enough expectations." These arguments make sense from a colorblind position because if one does not consider the influence of systemic inequality and modern racism in society, then there is little choice but to hold the victim responsible. The result of a colorblind position, intentionally or not, is

to further isolate students of color within educational systems because their experiences of being different are ignored; this is particularly true for students who attend predominantly white schools (Chavous, 2002; Gossett, 1996; McCoy, 2011). Later in this article we will address some alternate actions that could have been taken.

### **How Colorblindness Positions Critical Dialogues as Counter-Productive**

In the first case vignette, we saw how the colorblind position obstructs recognition of modern racism, fostering a blame-the-victim type of response. The next vignette presents another aspect of colorblindness that we have witnessed in schools—the idea that having conversations about diversity is not constructive and may actually foster discord and make people feel uncomfortable. When school-wide dialogues about diversity are viewed as counter-productive, systemic inequality is maintained, and the marginalization of students from traditionally under-represented groups is inadvertently sustained. The following vignette illustrates a parallel application of colorblindness in schools: the position of being “difference-blind” to sexual orientation. The reader is invited to keep in mind how this happens in regard to race as well.

#### **Case Vignette 2**

An elementary school counselor thought it would be a good idea to read the children’s book, And Tango Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) in a unit addressing diverse family structures for the third grade developmental guidance curriculum. The book is a true story about two partnered male penguins at the Bronx Zoo who start a family. The counselor was aware that at least one student in the third grade class was being parented by two moms, and he believed that reading this book to the elementary students would evoke a generative discussion about different family structures, diverse sexual orientations, and respect for differences. When the school counselor shared his plan with the classroom teacher, the teacher immediately expressed apprehension. The teacher stated that the book might “make ‘those’ students [those with lesbian or gay parents] feel

more ostracized,” and that reading the book might also make a lot of parents and teachers uncomfortable—it could potentially cause some discord within the school community. In the end, the counselor was persuaded to drop the idea when his colleague suggested not to use the book because “In our open and accepting school, we don’t need to focus on differences anyway. Isn’t it better to emphasize how families are all similar?”

### **Discussion**

It was a difference-blind approach that informed the classroom teacher’s opinion that reading And Tango Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) to the third grade students and opening up a dialogue about sexual orientation, would be counter-productive to the school community. When members of dominant groups omit opportunities to discuss non-dominant identities, the marginalization of those in the non-dominant groups is reinforced. More specifically, failing to acknowledge LGB and transgender identities has been identified as one form of aversive heterosexism within U.S. schools, as evidenced by the absence of lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) or transgender persons and stories in curriculum (Hackford-Peer, 2010). Such a systematic exclusion of LGB and transgender identities, intentional or not, buttresses societal inequality by suppressing and silencing students and faculty in schools who identify as LGB and transgender (Letts & Sears, 1999). By supporting the teacher’s difference-blind position in this vignette, the school counselor was not only tacitly supporting social inequality and marginalization of the children of same-sex parents within the school, but this silencing would also likely have negative implications for students who may identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual (LGB) or transgender in the not-so-distant future.

The degree of marginalization and systemic inequality for LGB and transgender youth in our nation’s schools is such that some scholars consider school environments to be the most heterosexist institutions within the United States (Unks, 2003; Smith, 2013). Overt heterosexist

discrimination, harassment and assault of LGB and transgender students is the norm in schools nation-wide (Kosciwk, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz; 2010). In a recent GLSEN school climate study of 6, 906 students, for example, 84.6% reported being verbally harassed due to their sexual orientation and 63.7% due to their gender expression (Kosciwk, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz). The study also found that 40.1% of LGB and transgender students report having been physically harassed—pushed or shoved—because of their sexual orientation and 27.2% because of their gender expression. Moreover, 18.8% and 12.5 % were physically assaulted—punched, kicked or injured with a weapon—for their sexual orientation and gender expression respectively. This study contains data that is particularly germane to school counselors: 62.4% of students who were harassed or assaulted did not report the incident to school personnel for fear that the discrimination would become worse.

Owing to the conditions cited above, youth who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (non-transgender) experience high emotional duress (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009). In a study that examined the experience of LGB youth throughout the District of Columbia Public Schools, 40% reported feeling sad or hopeless in the past two weeks compared to 26% of their heterosexual counterparts (District of Columbia, 2007). Research has found that LGB youth are twice, if not three times as likely as heterosexual students to consider suicide (District of Columbia, 2007; Almeida et al., 2009), and transgender youth report rates of suicidal ideation at four times the rate of cisgender youth (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009).

For the school counselor in this vignette, adopting the perspective of being difference-blind deems substantive dialogues about sexual orientation to be non-productive in the school community. This suppression of discussion—or even mention—of sexual orientation further marginalizes LGB and transgender students and their families in the school community. The choice to not read books like And Tango Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) allows the school

counselor to position himself as “protecting” the children of same sex families from further marginalization of their peers. It may even, perhaps, keep the school counselor safe from community members who might be upset that he is broaching the topic of sexual orientation. However, the literature suggests that by maintaining the invisibility of LGB and transgender identities within his school, the school counselor is dangerously reinforcing the heterosexist status quo (Hackford-Peer, 2010; Letts & Sears, 1999; Smith, 2013). Later in this article, we will discuss how this school counselor could have advocated for greater social equity for the LGB and transgender parents and students within his school.

### **How Colorblindness Minimizes Within-Group Differences**

There is a core concept within the field of multicultural studies known as *within-group* differences (Banks & Banks, 2010; Sadowsky & Plake, 1992). The fundamental idea is that there is always greater variance within any social group of people than there is between social groups. For example, there are numerous important cultural and social differences between a group of white students and a group of African-American students. However when considering either group on its own, there is far more variance represented amongst the individuals within each group than there is variance between the two groups. In other words, not all African-American students are alike—there is great variance *within* this group, and the same, is true, of course, within other racial and ethnic groups as well. In the final case vignette we will exam a more subtle form of colorblindness, that is being blind to within-group differences.

### **Case Vignette 3**

A middle school counselor was working in a community with newly resettled refugees from East Africa. When meeting with a refugee mother and her son from South Sudan along with the host family mother, the counselor provided a warm welcome. The school counselor expressed that she had worked with many refugees and assured them that “in this school, we treat everyone

equally. It does not matter what people look like or where they come from.” When drafting the student’s schedule she told the student that she would place him in classes with the Somali refugees in the school so that he could have immediate contact with other students from Africa. At the close of the meeting she made a referral for the student to attend a trauma group being run by the local community mental health center, thinking that because he was a refugee, he would likely need some support working through his experiences of trauma.

The mother appeared concerned, and with the aid of the host mother, asked why the counselor was placing her son with the Somali students. The counselor responded that she knew that students from minority groups found safety and support in the presence other minorities, so she wanted to be sure that this young man had someone to relate to. The host mother was also uncomfortable with the referral to the mental health center. When she asked why the student was being referred to a trauma group, the counselor told her “we always refer our refugees to the trauma group because they usually have difficulties and this way they can better adapt and figure out how fit into their new lives here.”

### **Discussion**

We applaud the school counselor in this case vignette for recognizing the importance of finding a support system for this new student, particularly considering his non-dominant status in this school (see Tatum, 2003, for more on this topic). However, this counselor demonstrated a naïve form of multicultural competence. She had enough multicultural knowledge to know that a new student from Africa would have different needs than a new student from a nearby community, but she was blind to the within-group variance among students from Africa, and thus inhibited from asking the student and his family about their own unique experiences and needs. It also may have led her to offer inappropriate services. While counselors clearly cannot know the personal history

of every newly arrived student in their schools, making wide-sweeping assumptions based on titles and terms such as “refugee” or “African” is potentially damaging.

In this particular vignette, a lack of knowledge of the within-group variance of East African refugees undermined the school counselors desire to effectively meet the needs of her student from South Sudan. For example, Sudanese and South Sudanese represent two different countries that were embroiled in civil war for decades. Most refugees from South Sudan identify as Christian and do not speak Arabic while most Sudanese identify as Muslim and likely speak an Arabic dialect (Walzer, 2008). Also, the Somali student refugees that were referenced by the school counselor are not only very culturally distinct from South Sudanese, but Somali refugees differentiate themselves into two distinct ethnic groups of Somali and Somali Bantu. While most members of both Somali groups speak Arabic and identify as Muslim, the groups consider themselves to be ethnically different, have unique histories, vary in language dialects, and have a long history of posturing, discrimination, and violence against each other (Besteman, 2012). The counselor’s assumptions about the importance of connecting the South Sudan student with Somali students would not be too dissimilar to assuming that a new student from Ireland would find social support with a group of new students from Ukraine. It is quite possible that the student in the vignette may have preferred being placed with American students so he could learn the English and customs more quickly rather than being in classes with other refugee students who did not speak his language.

Finally, while a majority of refugees from all regions of the world have witnessed war and suffered trauma first hand, there are some refugees who have never directly experienced trauma or who do not demonstrate trauma symptoms (Bridging Refugee Youth and Children’s Services, 2013). The student in the vignette may not have experienced significant personal trauma. By making assumptions about mental health needs, the school counselor in this vignette may have missed the opportunity to address other emotional and social challenges that may have been more

pertinent for this particular student. For example, for many refugees, the stress of exile and resettlement can be equally as challenging as the pre-exodus experiences of war, warranting different types of support (Walzer, 2008). Below, we will discuss some ways in which this school counselor may have better served this student.

### **Moving from Blindness to Blindfolds**

Let us address again, briefly, the concept of colorblindness that we have been using so far in this article. To do so, we point to the work by Smith & Shin (2014) who introduced the concept of *queer blindfolded*, which we use as a parallel construct to colorblindness. Queer blindfolded alludes to dismissing the lived experiences of people who do not identify as heterosexual. Notice that in this concept, the *colorblind* metaphor is replaced with the image of a *blindfold*. These authors crafted this new term as a more generative metaphor for ignoring of differences because it avoids reinforcing the marginalization of those with visual disabilities, and also because it connotes an agent or active positioning in the “not seeing.” In other words, being ‘blindfolded’ indicates that at some level, one’s way of viewing or not viewing diversity is chosen. The philosophers Derrida (1997) and Foucault (1978) remind us that language is not merely descriptive, it is constitutive. Their point is that language has a structuring influence on societal notions of appropriate roles and behaviors (Monk, Winslade & Sinclair, 2008); the ways in which we describe experiences and individuals affect the ways in which they are interpreted and perceived by others. The use of *blind* suggests that one has no choice; *blindfolded* reminds us that we do, indeed, have choice about how we approach matters of diversity.

### **Suggestions**

Scholars are beginning to identify the debilitating and sometimes fatal outcomes experienced by persons from traditionally under-represented groups as a result of individual, systemic, overt and passive prejudice and marginalization. Such experiences may result in chronic

stress, frequent states of emotional duress, depression, anxiety, lower self-esteem, increased number of sick days, and higher rates of suicidal ideation (Almeida et al., 2009; Brondolo et al., 2008; District of Columbia Public Schools, 2007; Nadal, Rivera & Corpus, 2010; Purdie-Vaughns, Davis, Steele, & Dittmann, 2008; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009). It is therefore important for school counselors to untie their color blindfolds, queer blindfolds or any other type of difference blindfolds, and recognize their role in supporting students who identify in marginalized social groups.

To this end, we propose that when school counselors remove their difference blindfolds they may then: 1) make the shift to a *social justice vision* that expands the focus of change to include advocacy at the individual, school/community, and public arenas, 2) engage in conversations that broach differences, and 3) engage in strength-based counseling conversations that locate the roots of social problems affecting students from traditionally under-represented groups within the social context. Ultimately, the call for removing difference blindfolds lies at the very heart of effective school counseling: to assure equity and access in the educational, social and emotional development of *all* of our students, regardless of their social identity (for more on a comprehensive model of school counseling practice, see the National Model, American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012).

### **Replacing Colorblind Practice with Advocacy and a Social Justice Vision**

The first step towards removing difference blindfolds in school counseling is to acknowledge the unequal playing field in society—to recognize that students from traditionally under-represented groups do not routinely have the same experiences of privilege as their white, heterosexual or non-disabled counterparts (Kiselica, 2004). Seeing clearly how individual as well as systemic and institutional forms of modern racism, heterosexism, sexism, able-ism, cisgenderism

and classism severely interfere with the educational, social and emotional development of students from under-represented and under-privileged groups is the first step in having a social justice vision.

A second step is to recognize that school counselors must sometimes move away from responding to an issue at the individual level and to directly address the social forces that adversely affect their students lives—a shift to advocacy and facilitating sociopolitical change (Toperak, Lewis & Crethar, 2009). Current models of practice in the field of school counseling (i.e., The National Model; ASCA, 2012), encourage counselors to speak up to interrupt inequity through actions that focus on prevention, psychoeducation, community outreach, and engagement in public policy (Dahir & Stone, 2012).

What does this look like in practice? Had the school counselor in case vignette #1 taken up a social justice vision, she would have recognized the microaggressions occurring within the school, and likely would have focused the work on interrupting microaggressions in the school community rather than de-facto blaming this student of color for her own social isolation. The counselor in case vignette #2 would have the insight to disagree with his colleague, pointing out how the absence of books like And Tango Makes Three (Richardson & Parnell, 2005) fosters the marginalization of students with same-sex parents, as well as students who identify as non-heterosexual or may be questioning their sexual orientation (currently or in the future). While this type of advocacy may be risky for many school counselors, we point out that such steps do not need to be taken on by the school counselor alone, and that sometimes, taking a series of small, intentional, sequential steps is the best way to achieve one's vision of equity. School counselors can develop a coalition of allies and engage them in helping with a focus on public advocacy, working with the school board and the larger community—educating on the need and legal right to include stories about all forms of family structures within the school. Additionally, the counselor could wisely point out that not embracing such topics proactively has the potential to make the school liable to claims that it did

not provide equal protection to its students, particularly in states where sexual orientation is a legally protected category. Regarding case vignette #3, a social justice vision entails seeking to develop awareness and knowledge of within-group differences. Offering education and advocacy at the school/community level might entail educating the faculty and staff about differences amongst the refugee community, and advocacy at the institutional level might entail lobbying the school board for additional funding in order to hire translators and strengthen the English Language Learners (ELL) program.

### **Broaching Conversations about Race and Strength-Based Counseling**

Taking off the difference blindfold in school counseling clearly necessitates the unwavering practice of initiating and participating in conversations about cultural identities and diverse social locations. Day-Vines, et al. (2007) use the term *broaching* when speaking about introducing race, ethnicity or culture into counseling conversations. Broaching can also be applied more broadly to the practice of inviting or initiating conversations about any of the various social locations and diverse identities of students and parents in the school community.

One of the assumptions behind broaching conversations is that it is the responsibility of the counselor, not the student, to invite conversations about diverse identities (Day-Vines, et al., 2007; Ivey, D'Andrea & Ivey, 2011). In other words, schools counselors need to initiate the discussion on the ways in which race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability status and their concomitant contextual sociopolitical factors may be influencing the concerns that the student has in the school and/or is bringing to counseling. It is not the student's responsibility to initiate such conversations. By inviting these conversations, the counselor avoids being blindfolded to the lived experiences of individuals who are marginalized by society due to their identity group membership, and provides a safe space where exploration of otherwise taboo topics is encouraged. At the very least, broaching *allows the student to decide* whether issues related to race and non-dominant group

membership are directly related to the presenting concern, rather than leaving this decision up to the counselor.

Broaching issues of diverse social location is an intervention that could have been very helpful in all of the examples above. In the first case vignette, broaching the experience of being a student of color in a predominantly white school would have invited the student to explore how subversive racism and microaggressions affect her everyday experiences in school. In the second case vignette, broaching the topic of heteronormativity and heterosexism with the same-sex parents in his school would have been a good way for the school counselor to initiate the construction of coalitions that could support and inspire dialogues and developmental guidance lessons that break the silence of children within non-heterosexual families. Finally, in the third case vignette, inviting the parent from South Sudan to identify her most pressing needs and expectations for her son's first school experience in the U.S., the school counselor might have been able to better serve the needs of this new student.

### **Engaging in Strength-Based Counseling Interventions**

Beyond initiating conversations about race or social location, school counselors also need to be prepared to engage in conversations with students of color that provide support and offer meaning-making without pathologizing the individual or his or her family, community, or ethnic group. This entails providing safe spaces (i.e., individual counseling sessions or small groups) where students can talk about their lived experiences of marginalization, work with understandings that appropriately root their challenges in the social context, and where they can develop strategies of resilience, see their strengths, and feel hopeful. Strength-based models such as feminist approaches (e.g., Tucker, Smith-Adcock & Trepal, 2011), narrative therapy (e.g., Winslade & Monk, 2006) and solution-focused counseling (e.g., Murphy, 2008; Sklare, 2005) are models of

practice that align with this orientation. All of these approaches can be provided in individual and small group formats.

We point out that while individual and group level interventions are critical for addressing modern racism, some scholars (e.g., Albee, 2000; Vera & Speight, 2003) take issue with the ways in which “multiculturally competent” counselors center change at the individual level while neglecting change at the systems level. As mentioned, ASCA promotes a model for school counseling practice that emphasizes the role of the school counselor in providing direct counseling and advisement services to students as well as working on a systemic level to promote change (American School Counselor Association, 2012). We would argue that when difference blind school counselors neglect to interrogate issues of social power and privilege (including their own privilege) in their interactions with students who identify from non-dominant social locations, they are susceptible to taking action that further marginalizes these students. Removing the difference blindfold from one’s view requires the school counselor to both see and act to affect change for students and families in the school community.

### **Conclusion**

Grounded in the literature and informed by case vignettes from the field, we sought to identify, problematize, and expand the discussion on colorblind approaches to diversity within the field of school counseling. We also took the opportunity to suggest that the term *colorblindness* is a poor metaphor for these case vignettes because the congenital condition of colorblindness is not a choice—it is physical condition over which the individual has no control. In contrast, being blind to diversity-related issues really is about making the choice close one’s eyes to the fact that social settings and situations are experienced differently depending upon one’s dominant or non-dominant social group status. It is closing one’s eyes to the fact that people from traditionally under-represented groups regularly experience systematic and institutional discrimination and

marginalization (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Choi, 2008; Markus, Steele, & Steele, 2002; Sue, 2010).

In order to practice school counseling in ways that are consistent with the standards in the field (i.e., The National Model, American School Counselor Association, 2012), school counselors need to actively engage in removing their blindfolds. They need to clearly see the unequal playing field, observe how difference blindfolds promote de facto blaming of victims, reinforce resistance to critical dialogues, and inhibit awareness and knowledge of within-group variance. Removing one's color-blindfold requires taking up a social justice vision, integrating the practice of broaching conversations about difference, and expanding the focus of change to new models of counseling intervention, including advocacy at the individual, school/community and public arena levels.

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