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Journalism and Unconscious Racism: A Perspective from South Africa

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Abstract. This article describes psychological problems in accurately identifying racism in public policy discourse.

The South African Human Rights Commission recently has subpoenaed editors and writers to answer charges that they have engaged in the development of racist public communications. If the editors and writers fail to comply, they could face incarceration and fines.

Given South Africa's history and legacy of apartheid and given that country's post-apartheid constitution that is, perhaps, the strongest in the world in proscribing discrimination, one might assume that the Commission's subpoenas are but another step in approaching a discrimination-free ideal. However, a closer examination of the situation merits concern about where the step may, indeed, approach.

For example, one newspaper is being accused of exposing corruption among black politicians more than white politicians. Yet, is such exposure--if supported by adequate data--necessarily racist? Would it not matter how many black versus white politicians there are? The differential frequencies and intensities of black versus white corruption? Whether blacks involved in corruption have higher or lower positions of trust and responsibility and than whites involved in corruption? Does the legacy of vehemently anti-black journalism of the apartheid era justify an operational definition of racism that comprises not minimizing black corruption compared with white corruption? (Note also that the very terms "black corruption" and "white corruption" suggest that corruption is somehow endemic and intrinsic to a particular socially constructed racial grouping as opposed to the phrase "corruption perpetrated by a black (or white)" that more easily implies that the act is separate from the essence of the individual or that individual's racial grouping.)

Another newspaper has been accused of depersonalizing the deaths of blacks by using the headline "60 people killed in Nigerian clashes over the weekend." The accusation is seemingly based on not explicitly noting that the people killed were black. Yet, would it be racist to explicitly note that these people were also killed by blacks? And might it not be racist to differentiate deaths by some notion of race--as if various race labels bring a surplus value of increases or decreased worth--as opposed to necessarily ascribing tragedy and personhood regardless of race?

Still another accusation is that various media representatives are guilty of a construct: unconscious racism. This seems to denote that these representatives have engaged in racist behavior in a manner unknowing of that behavior, its consequences, and/or ethical and moral implications. At other times the accusation seems to denote that there is an inevitability of racist journalistic reporting in the social perceptions of certain recipients of the reporting regardless of media representatives knowing or unknowing behavior and/or consequences¹.

The intent of the Commission's acts is to be applauded if that intent is to minimize all forms of racism as much as humanly possible. However, it is as likely that the intent may be effected as a political correctness that too often loses its conceptual moorings from racism and can even add to it. Of these

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consequences for racism, the Commission seems to be unconscious. (See Butts, H.F. (1971). Psychoanalysis and unconscious racism. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 3, 67-81; Kloss, R.J. (1979). Psychodynamic speculations on derogatory names for Blacks. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 5, 85-97; Schofield, G. (1999). Unconscious dynamics of oppression. *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture & Society*, 4, 318-322; South Africa's embattled press. (February 26, 2000). *The New York Times*, p. A30; Tan, R. (1993). Racism and similarity: Paranoid-schizoid structures. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 10, 33-43.) (Keywords: Republic of South Africa; Unconscious Racism.)