CHAPTER TEN

MOVING FROM ATTITUDES TO BEHAVIOR: USING SOCIAL INFLUENCE TO UNDERSTAND INTERPERSONAL RACIAL OPPRESSION

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Research suggests that whites’ attitudes and ideologies towards racial minorities are improving. At the same time, racial minorities continue to experience racial discrimination at the hands of whites. If white attitudes are improving, then whose acts are maintaining racial oppression? More to the point, how do “liberal” or “progressive” whites’ racial behaviors create, maintain, or challenge racial oppression? What do progressive and liberal whites do when they witness racial oppression? Are progressive and liberal whites engaging in racially oppressive behaviors?

While we are inclined to believe that racial attitudes guide and influence racial behavior, I propose an alternative perspective. Like most behaviors, whites’ racial behaviors are subject to social influences. Despite positive racial attitudes and ideologies, whites’ racial behaviors are a large factor in the maintenance and creation of interpersonal oppression for people of color. By posing racial oppression as 1) perpetuated through racial behaviors and 2) shaped by social influences, I hope to expand current knowledge on the maintenance and reduction of racial oppression in U.S. society.

In this chapter, I discuss why it is important to focus on racial behaviors. I also review how a few popular theories of interpersonal racism address racial behavior and directly address how racial behavior can be conceptualized via social norms. Next, I provide illustrations from my own research that demonstrate the impact of social norms (one form of social influence) on racial behaviors. After the illustrations, I re-iterate why interpersonal racial oppression theories need to evolve and what I believe are necessary features of that evolution. I end the chapter with a short discussion of the potential implications of racial behavior as a function of social influence.
Racial oppression is often described via its structural consequences, or as caused by oppressive racial attitudes or ideologies. I am interested in studying the actions and the inactions, i.e., the behaviors that lead to racial oppression. Of course, we recognize the behaviors that maintain racial oppression (e.g., proposing a race-based policy, not challenging a racial joke, etc.), but we rarely study what influences these behaviors. Instead, we examine the assumed source of racial behaviors in attitudes and ideologies. Racial oppression has real, lived consequences for people of color, but we rarely focus on the cause of the discrete racial behaviors that create and maintain it. I believe that everyday interactions reveal how inequality is “done,” produced, and reproduced (Goffman 1969; West and Fenstermaker 1995; Essed 1991, 2001). With this in mind, my work focuses on detailing how structural oppression is created at the interpersonal level through interpersonal behaviors.

To demonstrate the existence and persistence of interpersonal racial oppression, researchers conduct their work from the perspective of people of color. This work extends the literature by examining interpersonal racial oppression from the perspective of whites whose behaviors maintain, create, or challenge it. Specifically, I encourage the use of social influence concepts (e.g., racial behavior norms) as alternative explanations for whites’ racial behaviors.

**Attitudes and ideologies**

The most popular theories of interpersonal race oppression assume that racial attitudes and/or ideologies are the basis for behaviors that contribute to or challenge racial oppression (e.g., discrimination). In the text below, I briefly highlight how several popular theories of interpersonal racial oppression conceptualize racial behavior.

The racism of years ago is referred to in much of the literature as “old-fashioned racism” and is what many people think of when defining racism. This form of racism involves stereotypic beliefs about the intelligence and character of people of color (Dovidio and Gaertner 2005), support for segregation, and overt discrimination. The concept of old-fashioned racism does not directly address the cause of racist behavior, yet assumes that racial behavior results from stereotypic racial beliefs.