

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CRESS THEORY OF COLOR CONFRONTATION

EDDIE S. GLAUDE, Jr.
Temple University

Western psychology has attempted to serve as the guiding framework for the critical and systematic evaluation of human behavior. Consequently, all human psychological phenomena are subjected to the constructs and theories of Western psychology. However, a contingent of African-American scholars continues to argue against the extant hegemony of Western psychology. Their arguments are primarily predicated on the relative nature of the human response to social/physical reality. As a result of this position, African-American scholars have posited the need for an African psychology. Presuming this need, African-American scholars have proceeded to engage in an intricate discourse about the nature of this new endeavor.

Historically, the notions of epistemology have served as the fulcrum of dialogue regarding knowledge. Ranging from intuitive processes and spiritual illumination to objective validation, the process of inquiry has dictated the consequence of knowledge. The paradigmatic orientation toward inquiry has perforce established the purpose of knowledge acquisition and implementation. The superordination, however, of one particular method of inquiry necessarily determines the modus operandi of seekers of knowledge. Consequently, the established primacy of a particular modality of inquiry is construed to be a universal; its primacy dictates mass usage, which in an illusory form implies universality.

At various points in Western history, different notions of inquiry have been suggested as the only valid method of knowledge acqui-

sition. The most prevalent of these forms is the notion of scientific inquiry, more specifically labeled empiricism. Empiricism is usually construed as meaning that all knowledge originates in experience (a posteriori). It was from this basic assumption that the rudimentary framework of scientific methodology was created. A derivative of empiricism is the philosophical concept of positivism. This view holds that "all knowledge of reality is limited to what we can know by concrete experience, mainly sensory or scientific" (Hakim, 1987, p. 731). As a result, positivists state that only those things which are verifiable are meaningful. This particular modality of inquiry has entrenched itself in the minds of its practitioners.

It is important to note that the paradigmatic orientation toward inquiry necessarily establishes the purpose of knowledge acquisition and implementation. This simply means that the implicit assumptions dictate not only the perspective but the object under investigation as well. Consequently, the degree of centrism of a given mode of inquiry dictates the purpose of investigation. Proponents of African psychology have challenged this centrism in Western psychology on the basis of its inapplicability to African-American psychological functioning.

The discourse regarding new definitional constructs and theories served to create distinctive interpretations of the role and function of African-American psychologists. The question of the origin of African psychology, and consequently its essence, invited intense dialogue, which created distinct schools of thought. Karenga (1988, p. 325) categorized the varying schools as traditional, reformist, and radical. Traditional school adherents are those Black psychologists who employ basic Western psychological methodologies to explain African-American phenomena. For some, the traditional school uses models embedded in racism to explain African-American psychological functioning.

The reform school is characterized by its proclivity for oscillation. Adherents usually oscillate between an acceptance of Western constructs and a rejection of those models as racist. They argue that "Black" psychology should be "defined out of the black experience" (Karenga, 1988, p. 329). This position resulted in what some scholars consider a tenuous bifurcation between Africans in the

diaspora and those on the continent. The oscillation of reform school proponents, according to Karenga, led to an attempt to redeem Western psychology.

Contrastingly, the radical school posits that the variation in deep structure between African people (diasporan or continental) and Europeans mandates a distinctive *modus operandi* of psychological investigation (Karenga, 1988, p. 337). This notion of deep structure is firmly based in the commonality of African (diasporan and continental) responses to cosmological, ontological, and axiological questions across spatial and temporal lines. The responses to these specific questions would then serve as the basic philosophical framework for African psychology, thus, providing the field with a centric-specific base. This question of deep structure, according to the radical school, is the rudimentary point of departure between African psychology and Western psychology. Consequently, constructs embedded in Western deep structure must be rejected if/when they are incongruous with African deep structure. The residual effect of a centric-specific base is the reorganization of investigative orientation. The object of investigation is no longer determined by tacit assumptions that are negative to African existence. As a result of this paradigmatic shift, several African psychologists posited theories from this radical school orientation. One of the more controversial theories has been presented by Frances Cress Welsing—the Cress theory of color confrontation.

Welsing attempted an etiological investigation into the present existence of racism. Her argument stemmed primarily from the work of Neeley Fuller, author of *A Textbook for Victims of White Supremacy*. Fuller (1984) attempted to provide a systematic analysis regarding the question of racism. He defined racism in relation to the degree of functionality; thus, the degree of successful implementation determined its (racism) existence (Welsing, 1974, p. 33). From this assumption, Fuller induced that the only functional and operational racism was that of White superordination; consequently, he viewed racism and White supremacy as synonymous. He further suggested that most societal operatives were functioning simply to maintain the existence of racism. This resulted in his observation that racism was/is a system in which the effective

majority of the world's White people participate (Welsing, 1974, p. 33). Fuller deduced that the system of racism centered itself in the daily operations of White people and "others." This positioning of racism at the center of analysis placed racism as the "cause" not the "caused." Thus, racism, according to Fuller, is the reason for the development of certain operatives (e.g., economic systems of exploitation). According to Welsing, Fuller's emphasis is primarily focused on those empirical realities that can be verified. Welsing concluded that Fuller's primary contribution was that "his description of the relationship between White and non-White has been defined and elucidated in such a way as to account for and to illuminate many past and present observable patterns of behavior" (pp. 33-34).

Welsing assumed the validity of Fuller's argument vis-à-vis the systemic nature of racism and its imposition across the globe. As a psychiatrist, however, Welsing's primary focus was on the motivational force behind the notion of racism itself. At this juncture, it is important to reiterate the position that racism and White supremacy are synonymous. Thus, any analysis of the notion of racism would mean an analysis of the collective psyche of White people.

In seeking the etiology of racism, Welsing looked to Fuller for the answer. Fuller (1984) simply stated:

Many white people hate black people. Those white people who hate black people do not hate black people because black people are black. They hate black people because white people are not black. (p. 334)

Welsing (1974) justified this statement by using a Freudian axiom regarding human behavior. She reasoned that any "drive for superiority and supremacy is usually founded upon a deep and pervading sense of inadequacy and inferiority" (p. 34). She stated that numerical inadequacy on a global level served to augment feelings of anxiety among White people. Concomitant with the notion of numerical inadequacy was the concept of color deficiency. Welsing reasoned that White people realized that whiteness was, in fact, an absence of color. This reality was further reinforced by the majority

of the world's population possessing color. This fact implied, according to Welsing, that "the state of color [was] the norm while the absence of color [was] abnormal" (p. 34). Each of these elements served to provide the motivational basis for the establishment of superiority and supremacy, and it is from this that the Cress theory of color confrontation is derived.

The Theory of Color Confrontation states the white or color-deficient Europeans responded psychologically with a profound sense of numerical inadequacy and color inferiority upon their confrontations with the massive majority of the world's people all of who possessed varying degrees of color producing capacity. (p. 34)

As a result of this reality, White people developed a sense of hostility and aggression toward people with a color-producing capacity. According to Welsing, the greater the capacity to produce color, the more intense the aggression and hostility.

Both the color deficiency and feelings of numerical inadequacy resulted in what Welsing (1974) termed "psychological defensive maneuvers or defensive mechanism" (p. 35). (Note: this concept has its origins in Freudian analysis.) She cited three primary reactions—repression, reaction formation, and projection. Repression, according to Welsing, was simply a denial of the painful reality of being colorless and deficient in numbers. The subsequent mechanism served to reinforce this repression. The notion of reaction formation reinforced this denial by relegating that which was desirable to that which is disdained. Thus, the veneration of skin color is rendered despicable because of the inability to achieve the status of possessing skin color. The last of the psychological maneuvers is that of projection. This is simply the reversal of hatred, where White people state that people of color hate them. According to Welsing, projection served to allay feelings of guilt regarding the aggression and hostility toward people of color (p. 36).

Welsing (1974) attempted to substantiate these defensive mechanisms by illustrating their existence in present White society. She first stated that the attempt of White people to get a suntan indicated a desire to acquire color. She also interpreted the historical attempt

by the scientific community to produce elaborate theories of racial inferiority as a primary example of reaction formation. Projection is illustrated as well in the sexual desire of White people for people of color. This fact, according to Welsing, was reversed, in that people of color are now said to sexually desire White people: "The Color-Confrontation Theory postulates that the Whites desire sexual alliance with the non-Whites . . . it is only through this route that the Whites can achieve the illusion of being able to produce color" (p. 36). She also suggested that the degradation of sex within White cultural reality was a direct consequence of their inability to produce color. This alienation from themselves pervaded their social institutions as well as religio-philosophical thoughts.

Welsing (1974) used these realities to support her Freudian contention that these outward manifestations of hatred were illustrative of feelings of inferiority and inadequacy. She stated, however, that this alienation from self has "evolved into the most highly refined form of alienation towards others as well" (p. 37). The sense of color deficiency and numerical inadequacy served as the impetus for this alienation. Welsing stated unequivocally that "whites will always feel genetically inferior" (p. 38). Consequently, Welsing contended that most social proscriptions are a direct result of a color deficiency consciousness. This state of consciousness guides White people's daily operations, in that most social relations are formulated to maintain racism (Fuller, 1984) which, in turn, has its origin in the color deficiency consciousness. From this reality Welsing (1974) functionally defined racism as "the behavioral syndrome of individual and collective color inferiority and numerical inadequacy which includes patterns of thought, speech, and action as seen in members of the white organization (race)" (p. 39).

Welsing's intention was to provide a theoretical basis for understanding the actions of White racists. She contended that the successful implementation of White supremacy was due primarily to a lack of knowledge of the rudimentary ideations behind its implementation on the part non-White people. This knowledge of White people's feelings of anxiety regarding color and numbers would, in effect, empower the non-White community in coping with and dismantling White supremacy. By reducing all social relations

between White and non-White to color, Welsing attempted to remove all doubt regarding the origins of racism. She, like Fuller, wanted to place race — more specifically, color — at the center of all phenomena regarding social relations. Consequently, many historical occurrences are explained through the notion of color confrontation.

An analysis of Welsing's argument must begin with her basic assumptions and intent. It is clearly evident that Welsing's intent was to understand the motivational force behind racism. Her definition of the term, however, dictated that she would only look at the phenomenon of racism within the context of White psychological functioning. She justified this particular orientation by stating essentially that racism was directly correlated with its degree of functionality. This definition resulted in the assessment that racism was, in effect, White supremacy. This definitional stance foreshadowed the reductionistic result of Welsing's argument: It reduced the existence of racism solely to its successful implementation. This point, however, is not the major point of contention. It can be argued that racism, as evidenced in present reality, is primarily a White operative/phenomenon. The point of contention, however, rests primarily with Welsing's reductionism. She attempted to reduce *all* social relations between Black and White people to color, more specifically, the lack of color in White people. Her reasoning followed from a psychoanalytic orientation in which "any drive for superiority and supremacy is usually founded upon a deep and pervading sense of inadequacy and inferiority." This is not to say that the notions of reality anxiety and its consequences are not viable explanations to aid in understanding the quagmire of racism. It is simply that this analysis cannot be considered the sole causal element of the problem. If one agrees that color is the rudiment cause and all other historical occurrences are a consequence of the color consciousness, one has possibly reached the realm of idiocy.

Welsing used Freudian analysis to assess the motivational force behind racism (White supremacy). By agreeing with Fuller's (1984) assessment that "white people hate black people because white people are not black," she found that particular element which caused reality anxiety. According to Freud, "reality anxiety is a

painful emotional experience resulting from a perception of danger in the external world" (Hall, 1954, p. 63). As a consequence of this reality anxiety, the ego employs certain defensive mechanisms to allay this anxiety. According to Welsing, these mechanisms serve to establish and maintain the system of racism; consequently, all social relations can be explained through this color consciousness.

James P. Comer (1980), however, used the same Freudian psychoanalytic base as Welsing and arrived at a different conclusion. He defined racism as a "low-level defense and adjustment mechanism utilized by groups to deal with psychological and social insecurities similar to the manner in which individuals utilize psychic defenses and adjustment mechanisms to deal with anxiety" (p. 311). He opined that White racism "grew out of the social conditions of sixteenth century Europe and Africa." This racism was refined by certain socioeconomic as well as psychological conditions. Comer cited Basil Davidson as saying that prior to the 16th century, African people were not presupposed to be inferior. Comer reasoned that the rejection of religious rigidity as well as the trafficking of "black bodies" served to cast the ethnocentrism of Europeans into racism. His psychoanalytic analysis was primarily based in a "projection of evil" that resulted from a repressed rejection of religious tyranny. Man consistently sinned and "its [sin] had to be denied or seen in others" (Comer, 1980, p. 313). The various somatic differences, according to Comer, served to facilitate the "projection of evil" toward African people. Comer concluded that the root, form, and function of racism had its origins in three essential elements: (a) projection of evil, (b) economic exploitation, and (c) social exploitation.

The importance of Comer's argument does not rest in his psychoanalytic ideation but in his analysis of historical occurrences as equal contributors to the present existence of racism. He established that racism as a system was a modern phenomenon and that its enhancement and entrenchment resulted from the social and scientific rationalizations of slavery. These rationalizations, according to Comer, were employed to absolve the religious conscience of the enslaver. This absolution was achieved through the dehumanizing of African people and the codification of racist notions. Welsing (1974) attempted to belittle the significance of racism as a modern

phenomenon by citing diaries and journals of premodern Whites which suggested negative assessments of non-White people. Instead of indicating color consciousness, these statements could be indices of the level of ethnocentrism, not racism. This is simply an example of Welsing reaching to dismiss other relevant factors. Comer (1980) also illustrated that Welsing's psychoanalytic conclusions could be contested. It is important to note that there is "no convincing proof from psychiatric records to document both the great longing and the great fear as presented by Dr. Welsing" nor are there any records supporting Comer's analysis (Drake, 1987, pp. 99-100).

Welsing's (1974) penchant to discount historical events on the basis of color is evident throughout the article. The question must be asked, how can she document her contentions? How can she say that scientific racial theories were not the result of rationalizing exploitation, rather than color consciousness? Her inability to document her contentions hints if not bellows at an a priori assumption regarding the consciousness of White people. In effect, she assessed "value judgements regarding biological matters" and judged White people based upon this presupposed state of consciousness (Drake, 1987, pp. 99-100). In stating that "white people will always feel genetically inferior," Welsing implied that White people were biologically determined to be racist. They are born with both factors necessary for racism to exist, as Welsing has defined it. Welsing's biological determinism, reductionism, and lack of empirical data to support her suppositions serve to vitiate her argument. Her attempt to make color the focal point resulted in an absurd and essentially indefensible position of the supposed genetic inferiority of White people. The reality of the dominance of color and the recessiveness of Whiteness normatively has no value. It is seemingly a reversal of the hegemony imposed upon society by White oppressive agents. This is certainly not to say that race should be marginalized in a discourse concerning social relations between White (European) and Black (African) people. It is stated simply to argue that racism is a social phenomenon primarily determined by social factors that in some fashion affect psychological functioning.

Interestingly enough, a resurgence of interest in Welsing's theory is occurring. This interest must, however, be seen as a cultish obeisance, not scholarly investigation. Welsing's theory has been around for approximately 20 years and no substantial documentation has been presented to verify her position. If African scholars (diasporan or continental) are to aggressively challenge racism, they must reject rhetoric and engage in rigorous investigation. But most importantly, as Frantz Fanon (1964) portended:

A people that undertakes a struggle for liberation rarely legitimizes race prejudice. Even in the course of acute periods of insurrectional armed struggle one never witnesses the recourse to biological justifications. (p. 43)

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Eddie S. Glaude, Jr. is a Ph.D. student in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. His major thrust of research interests is the role of race conceptualization in political formations within the Black community.