

A Gardener's Tale

Camara Jones, MD, MPH, Ph.D.

Imagine a gardener has two flower boxes, one filled with rich, fertile soil and another filled with poor, rocky soil. This gardener has two packets of seeds for the same type of flower. However, the plants grown from one packet of seeds will bear pink blossoms, while the plants grown from the other packet of seeds will bear red blossoms. The gardener prefers red over pink, so she plants the red seed in the rich fertile soil and the pink seed in the poor rocky soil. All of the red flowers grow up and flourish, with the fittest growing tall and strong and even the weakest making it to a middling height. But in the box with the poor rocky soil, things look different. The weak among the pink seeds don't even make it, and the strongest among them grow only to a middling height. In time the flowers in these two boxes go to seed, dropping their progeny into the same soil in which they were growing. The next year the same thing happens, with the red flowers in the rich soil growing full and vigorous and strong, while the pink flowers in the poor soil struggle to survive. Year after year, the same thing happens. Ten years later the gardener comes to survey her garden. Gazing at the two boxes, she says, "I was right to prefer red over pink! Look how vibrant and beautiful the red flowers look, and see how pitiful and scrawny the pink ones are."

This part of the story illustrates some important aspects of **institutionalized racism**. There is the initial historical insult of separating the seed into the two different types of soil; the contemporary structural factors of the flower boxes, which keep the soils separate; and the acts of omission in not addressing the differences between the soils over the years. The normative aspects of institutionalized racism are illustrated by the initial preference of the gardener for red over pink. Indeed, her assumption that red is intrinsically better than pink may contribute to blindness about the difference between the soils. Where is **personally mediated racism** in this gardener's tale? That occurs when the gardener, disdainful of the pink flowers because they look so poor and scraggly, plucks the pink blossoms off before they can even go to seed. Or when a seed from a pink flower has been blown into the rich soil, and she plucks it out before it can establish itself.

And where is the **internalized racism** in this tale? That occurs when a bee comes along to pollinate the pink flowers and the pink flowers say, "Stop! Don't bring me any of that pink pollen—I prefer the red!" The pink flowers have internalized the belief that red is better than pink, because they look across at the other flower box and see the red flowers strong and flourishing. What are we to do if we want to put things right in this garden? Well, we could start by addressing the internalized racism and telling the pink flowers, "Pink is beautiful!" That might make them feel a bit better, but it will do little to change

the conditions in which they live. Or we could address the personally mediated racism by conducting workshops with the gardener to convince her to stop plucking the pink flowers before they have had a chance to go to seed. Maybe she'll stop, or maybe she won't. Yet, even if she is convinced to stop plucking the pink flowers, we have still done nothing to address the poor, rocky condition of the soil in which they live. What we really have to do to set things right in this garden is address the institutionalized racism. We have to break down the boxes and mix up the soil, or we can leave the two boxes separate but fertilize the poor soil until it is as rich as the fertile soil. When we do that, the pink flowers will grow at least as strong and vibrant as the red (and perhaps stronger, for they have been selected for survival). And when they do, the pink flowers will no longer think that red pollen is better than pink, because they will look over at the red flowers and see that they are equally strong and beautiful.

Although the original gardener may go to her grave preferring red over pink, the gardener's children who grow up seeing that pink and red are equally beautiful will be unlikely to develop the same preferences. This story illustrates the relationship between the three levels of racism. It also highlights the fact that institutionalized racism is the most fundamental of the three levels and must be addressed for important change to occur. **Finally, it provides the insight that once institutionalized racism is addressed, the other levels of racism may cure themselves over time.** Perhaps the most important question raised by this story is: Who is the gardener? After all, the gardener is the one with the power to decide, the power to act, and the control over the resources. There is particular danger when this gardener is not concerned with equity. The current Initiative to Eliminate Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health by the Year 2010 is to be lauded as the first explicit commitment by the government to achieve equity in health outcomes. Many other questions arise from this simple story. What is the role of public health researchers in vigorously exploring the basis of pink-red disparities, including the differences in the soil and the structural factors and acts of omission that maintain those differences? How can we get the gardener to own the whole garden and not be satisfied when only the red flowers thrive? If the gardener will not invest in the whole garden, how can the pink flowers recruit or grow their own gardener? The reader is invited to share this story with family members, neighbors, colleagues, and communities. **The questions we raise and the discussions we generate may be the start of a much-needed national conversation on racism.**

Note: This is an edited version of the original printed: August 2000, Vol. 90, No. 8 1212 American Journal of Public Health Levels of Racism: A Theoretic Framework and a Gardener's Tale