

David L. Condit

The Laboratory and The Flower: Cultural Assumptions in Interracial Doctor/Patient Relationships.

William Carlos Williams, M.D., more often mentioned these days with regard to his literary output, once called his pen-wielding contemporaries to task:

*"Shame on our poets,
they have caught the prevalent fever:
impressed
by the 'laboratory,'
they have forgot
the flower!" (1)*

Having worked with black adolescents in several nurturing capacities over the past decade, it has come to my attention that too often white medical doctors are overly concerned with the "laboratory" when dealing with black youngsters. I am not speaking, however, about clinical detachment; indeed that might have been preferable to this "laboratory" - ensconced amid cultural ignorance and self-righteous assumptions arising therefrom.

Consider the following scenario, reported to me by the distraught foster parents of an adolescent girl-black, 15-years old, waiting for psychotherapy to relieve guilt aroused by a pregnancy, suffering from lung infection and therefore hospitalized. At the girl's (we will call her Eva) bedside:

*Dr. Augustus: The nurse said this girl was taking some other medication?
Parent: She takes birth-control pills.
Dr. Augustus: You should have checked with me since she's also receiving
medicine I prescribed. What does she take the pills for?
Parent: (shocked) Well . . .
Dr. August: Was there a pregnancy?
Parent: Yes.
Dr. Augustus: (looking at Eva) Kind of young . . . isn't she?
Parent: There have been younger girls . . .
Dr. Augustus: Not very many . . . Lungs are in bad shape . . . (to Eva)
Do you smoke?
Eva: Yes.
Dr. Augustus: (to Eva with a smirk and snide drawl) Is there anything
you don't do?
Parent: (angrily) I don't think that's fair.
Dr. Augustus: Well . . . I do. I'm not making any value judgments .
. . . . I generally consider myself liberal and enlightened*

but . . . we'll have to sit down and talk about it some time.

Shortly thereafter, the doctor left the room but there was at that time a final expressive bit of dialogue:

Eva:L (in tears) That man don't need to be no doctor.

Chief among the arrogant assumptions of the doctor was the racist-reasoning that since this black girl had been pregnant, she was a whore who played a game of musical-beds - diving in at each suspended half-note.

Dr. Augustus, being liberal and enlightened of course would never dream of literally lynching a black child, but this was certainly a psychological lynching albeit the *vigilante* had a professional degree reflecting laboratory proficiency.

In discussing the preceding incident with a head-shaking psychiatrist, his acidulous comment was, "*That's something they don't teach in medical school.*"

If the preceding incident was an isolated one, it might only bear passing mention, but I have encountered frequent similar assumptions, apparently based on race. When bringing a 14-year old black adolescent for an examination due to severe discomfort around his genitalia, the doctor informed me, prior to the examination, "*You know the clap isn't unknown in kids like that!*" I could have said, "*Like that? What do you mean?*" But I stood dumbfounded, being painfully aware: **that** meant being black and being nurtured in alternate circumstances, due in this case to insurmountable family tensions. The examination incidentally showed that venereal disease was not a factor.

In a guide called **The Black Parents' Handbook** by Clara J. McLaughlin, M.D., the author states, "*A doctor of your own race would be less likely to make assumptions about you based on color.*" (2) The implication is that we need more black doctors . . . but meanwhile?

Perhaps there should be some curriculum shifts made to involve those in medical school with cultures dissimilar from their own. I have seen white doctors capable of perspicacious diagnoses and empathetic intercommunication with varying racial and ethnic groups so the doctor-patient relationship can be excellent when the doctor is willing to examine himself first, spiritually and socially, and then to reach out.

Black poet Henry Dumas spoke of his people,

*"like black pearls
trapped
in the white cerebellum
we glisten out of reach" (3)*

Unless we extend our institutions (our laboratories) as well as ourselves individually, the flower will still be forgotten, the pearls will remain trapped and all people will be much poorer because we would not truly try.

(1) William Carlos Williams, "*Deep Religious Faith*", from **The Desert Music** now available in **Pictures from Brueghel and Other Poems**, (New York: New Directions, 1962), p.96.

(2) Clara J. McLaughlin, M.D., **The Black Parents' Handbook**, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), p.29.

(3) Henry Dumas, "*Harlem Gulp*", **Play Ebony Play Ivory**, (New York: Random House, 1974), p.33.

John G. Reynolds

SOCIAL TRANSACTIONS AND THE NATURE OF SELF

Marx was once moved to write: "*Let us assume man to be man, and his relation to the world a human one.*" (1) We may find this an astonishing thing to say, but all of us are only too aware of how people use others in their social relationships both at work and play. Indeed, we are all too ready to treat others as 'objects' and be preoccupied with the instrumental usefulness of our encounters. However, involvement in such manipulative relationships inevitably has repercussions on our own selves and the selves of our 'objects', and also of course on the social world which we constantly create and recreate through our social transactions. It is the intention here to briefly examine these repercussions consequent upon adopting what might be termed an alienated stance in our interactions and to point up the ineludable commitment that we all have to the social life which we inevitably transform. The foundation on which such discussions must of course be grounded is that most fundamental of all notions in the human sciences - the nature of self.

Becker (2) has expressed the view that the main problem of modern social psychology is to reconcile the view that man is a more or less integrated personality with the view that man is an historical actor. Thus if one follows for example the tradition of James or Mead, an integrated theory of personality is sacrificed even while an understanding of the social and historical nature of the human self is gained. On the other hand, if one recognises a really tight theory of personality like Freud's, it can be argued that the view of man as a highly modifiable, historical creation, is lost. However, the problem for a social psychology is not to divine purpose in nature, to explain human actions in terms of the meeting of inner drives. To seek to explain the forward momentum of conduct is, as Gerth and Mills (3) have stated, a *pseudo/problem*".