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# Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox: A Model for Multicultural Training in Counselor Education

## **Abstract**

The ability to discuss race-related issues is critical to multicultural competence. Counselor educators who address race-related issues in the classroom cite student resistance as a challenge to competency development. The Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) identifies juxtaposed obsession and avoidance about race as a cultural phenomenon. The ROAParadox model was applied in a multicultural counseling course as a strategy for educating counseling students. Teaching scenarios illustrate the use of this model as a strategy to facilitate discussions on race relations and racism. Student responses and implications for teaching applications are provided along with recommendations for future research.

# Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox: A model for multicultural training in counselor education

Rebecca A. Willow

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The ability to discuss race-related issues is critical to multicultural competence. Counselor educators who address race-related issues in the classroom cite student resistance as a challenge to competency development. The *Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox* (ROAParadox) identifies juxtaposed obsession and avoidance about race as a cultural phenomenon. The ROAParadox model was applied in a multicultural counseling course as a strategy for educating counseling students. Teaching scenarios illustrate the use of this model as a strategy to facilitate discussions on race relations and racism. Student responses and implications for teaching applications are provided along with recommendations for future research.

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Specific awareness, knowledge, and skills with regard to race relations are expected of multiculturally competent counselors. The Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development recommended areas of competency including exploration of racial identity, recognition of discomfort, biases, and attitudes, understanding the racial identity of others, and the cultural context of racial content (<http://www.amcdaca.org/amcd/competencies.pdf>, n.d.). The opportunity to address issues related to race and racism in counselor training is vital to the acquisition of multicultural competencies.

It is incumbent upon counselor educators to provide students with the opportunity to develop competencies needed to address race in a therapeutic setting. The ability to discuss racial and ethnic concerns within the counseling relationship is a critical force in counselor effectiveness whereas a lack of ability may impair the counselor-client relationship (Day-Vines, et al., 2007).

Researchers indicated that White counselors who discussed racial and ethnic differences with clients of color were rated

as more credible by their clients (Zhang & Burkard, 2008). Clients of color also rated those working alliances as more positive and stronger than did clients of color whose White counselors did not discuss racial and ethnic differences (Zhang & Burkard, 2008). In addition to consideration of therapeutic effectiveness is the ethical imperative which states that the ability to address client concerns related to race, ethnicity, and culture is the responsibility of all counselors (<http://www.counseling.org/Resources/CodeOfEthics/TP/Home/CT2.aspx>). In fact, lack of competency in the area of race-related concerns may be viewed as an ethical violation due to its potential for client harm (Day-Vines, et al, 2007). Counselor educators are challenged to prepare counselors for racial and ethnic interaction. However, counselor educators report that facilitating educational experiences to address racism can be fraught with challenges (Alexander, Kruczek, & Ponterotto, 2005; Day-Vines, et al., 2007; Estrada, Frame, & Williams, 2004; Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Rothschild, 2003; Watt et al., 2009). Many of the challenges discussed were related to student anxiety

and resistance to race-related dialogue. Swigonski (1999) reflected, "The task of constructively engaging students in the process of learning about racism can be daunting" (p. 124.). Further investigation into strategies that may help counselor educators prepare trainees to broach the subjects of race, ethnicity, and culture is needed (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Rothschild, 2003; Steele, 2008).

Race-related dialogue is foundational to development of counselor multicultural competencies. The purpose of this article is to describe a model that facilitates race-related dialogue. First, the Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) is described. The paradox presents a framework for understanding cultural influences on race relations. Second, the ROAParadox is presented in the form of a model that visually depicts the paradox. Finally, teaching scenarios that illustrate the application of the model in a multicultural counseling course are presented. Student responses and implications for teaching strategies are provided and recommendations for future research are explored.

### **The Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox)**

The Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) is a phenomenon that emerged based on an extensive review of the last two decades of literature on race relations and racism in the United States (Willow, 2003; Willow, 2008). Although I noted many factors that have influenced race relations in the United States, the themes of obsession and avoidance were remarkable because of their frequent repetition throughout the literature. The ROAParadox describes the simultaneous existence of these two themes which creates a previously unarticulated sociocultural paradigm that may be used to view race relations and racism in the United States. *Race relations* refers to the way people "get along" racially and to a general sense of racial climate. *Racism* refers to the

system of oppression based on racial prejudice and power. The phenomenon is further detailed by examination of the two disparate elements of the paradox, obsession and avoidance.

### **Obsession**

Obsession refers to a recurring and habitual focus, preoccupation, or fixation. The term obsession captures the tenor of race relations in America. Terkel (1992) interpreted this national climate in his work, *Race: The American Obsession*. Obsession accurately reflects the tone of social science literature related to race. D'Souza (1999) discussed America's "neurotic obsession with race that maims our souls" (p. 431). Michaels (2006) portrayed the United States as "eager to keep race at the center of the American experience" (p. 49). These references are representative of the obsession theme throughout the social science literature on racism.

Professional counseling literature also reflects this fixation on race. For example, Day-Vines, et al. (2007) described counseling within "a racially-charged society" (p. 402). Tomlinson-Clarke and Wang (1999) noted that within counselor training contexts, "silence...screams, begging to have issues of race and racism addressed" (p. 160). Lee observed that, "Race is the big dead elephant in the room" (as cited in Kennedy, 2007, p. 24). Lappin and Hardy (1997) stated that "therapy in the United States occurs in one of the most race-conscious countries in civilized society today" (p. 47). The theme of racial obsession is consistently represented in popular, social science, and counseling literature.

### **Avoidance**

The other major theme throughout the literature on race is the propensity toward avoidance, which refers to the act of dodging or denying. Representative comments illustrate this recurrent theme. For instance, "talking about racism is one of

the most difficult endeavors in America . . . The color line is a curtain of silence” (Shipler, 1997, p. 473). In addition, “racial inequality persists in the United States, even if it does not have an urgent place on our national agenda and it is not fashionable to discuss it...” (Shapiro, 2004, p. xi). Similar observations are reflected throughout the social science literature. The tendency to self-consciously shy away from frank and open discourse on the topic of racism is well-documented. Likewise, the counseling literature reflects the theme of avoidance. Lee said, “We are still so reluctant as a nation to talk about [race]” (as cited in Kennedy, 2007, p. 24). Bernard and Goodyear (2004) referred to counseling in a culture that is “phobic about race” (p. 125). Lappin and Hardy (1997) stated,

Although race is one of the principle ways in which the self is defined, it is often ignored in virtually all areas of clinical practice. Clients, trainees, and supervisors alike whose lives are impacted profoundly by skin color and/or racial identity are often expected to deny this dimension of themselves in therapy and supervision. (p. 48)

The tendency to avoid racial content in counseling is a widely addressed theme throughout the multicultural counseling literature. Estrada et al. (2004) stated that discomfort and avoidance of addressing race in therapy resulted in the marginalization of racial issues and was perpetuated by counselor trainees who were inadequately prepared for diverse clinical practice. A motif of silence on racial issues in therapeutic sessions is “like a system whose shared denial evolves over time” (Lappin & Hardy, 1997). The theme of avoidance of race-related topics is consistent and repeated throughout the examined literature.

### *The Paradox*

Obsession is defined as preoccupation or the focus of energy. Avoidance is defined

as evasion or the withdrawal of energy. I have termed the phenomenon the *Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox* (ROAParadox). Although they are contradictory, the concepts of obsession and avoidance are both valid descriptors of the nation’s racial climate. These contradictory themes elucidate a paradox that identifies a paradigm for examination of race relations in the United States. Because this is a sociocultural phenomenon, individualized experience with race relations occurs within the context of this paradox. The examination of the ROAParadox through the use of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory is useful to describe the experience of the individual within a sociocultural environment.

### **The ROAParadox as a macrosystem phenomenon**

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory identified the significance of understanding human development within the context of the multi-layered environment. He articulated the bi-directional interaction among the environmental layers and between the individual and the environment. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model was depicted using concentric circles or layers surrounding the individual in the center. The innermost layer was the microsystem, which referred to the setting in which the individual lives, for example, the family. The mesosystem referred to relations between microsystems, for example the relationship between family and teacher. The exosystem included the social settings or broader community in which the individual lives, for example, a workplace or school system. The macrosystem described the culture in which individuals live, and included values and customs. The chronosystem, referred to environmental events and sociohistorical circumstances, such as an earthquake. The ROAParadox is best described within an ecological model as an element that exists within the macrosystem. The review of the literature suggested that the

ROAParadox is a cultural phenomenon embedded in the national consciousness.

W.E.B. Dubois has been commonly quoted as having described race in 1903 as *the problem* of the twentieth century. Similar sentiments are still used in contemporary references to race relations (Castillo, et al., 2006; Johnson, 2006; Michaels, 2006). Significant social and political progress has been made to uproot oppressive forces and to improve the lives of people of color in the United States (Dalton, 1995). At the same time, the national climate continues to be characterized by perpetuation of the basic elements of obsession and avoidance of racial issues (Constantine, 2007; Miller & Garran, 2008; United States Department of Justice, 2009). The ROAParadox offers a view of how the opposing forces of obsession and avoidance may act as an impediment to progress on race relations in the United States. The usefulness of the ROAParadox is supported by its description of the essential lack of change in the nation's historical racial climate. As such, the ROAParadox describes a factor within the macrosystem that shapes the individual's experience with race and racism.

Other constructs that address individual experience with race-related material are racial identity development theories. Racial identity theories describe race-related development with a focus on the individuals' management of race-related material (MacAuliffe, 2008). The racial identity development of individuals is dictated largely by racial group membership. White people and people of color develop differently based on their sociocultural experience. Racial identity theories focus on individual development.

The ROAParadox focuses on the macrosystems influence or sociocultural context that affects all individuals in the United States. This does not suggest that the effects of the ROAParadox on individuals or groups are unilateral. As with any macro-level cultural factor, the influence of that factor is filtered through various group and individual identity factors.

However, the existence of this paradox at the macrosystems level serves to frustrate racial engagement, and poses an obstacle to race-related dialogue. Therefore, the elements of the paradox, obsession and avoidance, may contribute to frustration of racial healing.

It is within the same context that counselors develop multicultural competencies. Clearly, counselors are subject to the same forces of socialization as the general population. Counselors grappling with development of race-related competencies may benefit by understanding the macrosystem influence of the ROAParadox. Moreover, unlike the general public, it is incumbent on multiculturally-competent professional counselors to understand the potential implications of such sociocultural phenomena, and to develop abilities to address issues that involve race in the therapeutic environment. Impediments to dialogue such as those illustrated by the ROAParadox are significant because a willingness to engage in racial discourse is considered essential to the reduction of anxiety about race (Dalton, 1995; Hudson & Hines-Hudson, 1999; Johnson, 2006; Kivel, 1996; Rothschild, 2003). Furthermore, the need for counselors to engage in racial dialogue in order to develop multicultural competencies is widely asserted by counselor educators (DeRiccio & Sciarra, 2005; Estrada, et al., 2004; Rothschild, 2003). It is the role of counselor educators to create pedagogical strategies to facilitate race-related skill development.

### **The Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) Model**

The ROAParadox articulates a cultural phenomenon that influences the individual experience of race relations. In order to facilitate race-related discussions in the classroom, I designed the ROAParadox model to aid in the explanation and presentation of the phenomenon (see Figure 1). A model is defined as a "simplified description of a system" (Abate, 1997, p. 509). Models may be criticized for

their tendency to oversimplify or reduce complex concepts. However, they are useful to educators to present complicated systems in an easily understood manner. The two themes in the ROAParadox model, obsession and avoidance, are represented by opposing arrows that come together at a focal point. The center dot symbolizes the impasse that stymies open engagement and healing of racial issues. Meaningful symbols are incorporated. The ideogram means “avoid” in the hobo or gypsy sign system. The numeral II is the alchemist sign for “fixation”. The integration of these symbols into the same figure further symbolizes the paradox. The ROAParadox model is a visual depiction of the paradoxical phenomenon that juxtaposes racial obsession and avoidance in the United States.

#### **Use of the Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) model in counselor preparation**

I am a counselor educator and associate professor in a CACREP-accredited Community Counseling program at a private, mid-Atlantic, co-educational university. I used the ROAParadox model in a course entitled, *Multicultural Issues in Counseling*. My students ranged in age from twenty-five to forty-five and most were raised in the regional area. Students were 90% female and predominantly White, while approximately three percent identified as African American or multiracial. The model was used as a tool to interpret the cultural climate of race relations in the United States and its impact on the race-related experiences of individuals. I used the paradigm to promote understanding and facilitate dialogue on race relations and racism with counseling students. The ROAParadox model was introduced in a *Multicultural Issues in Counseling* course because of its relevance to my course content which includes discussions on racism. When facilitating race-related

discussions, it was important to create a safe classroom environment.

#### **Establishment of Safe Environment**

Students’ resistance in multicultural classes can be rooted in their resistance and lack of preparedness to manage the emotions that emerge during discussions of race (Mio & Barker-Hackett, 2003; Steele, 2008; Watt et al., 2009). When difficult dialogues are introduced in the classroom, it is important to establish a respectful training climate (Utsey, Gernat & Hammar, 2005). I acknowledged the intense work expected in the course and asked the class to establish ground rules that would allow them to feel safe in taking personal risks, being vulnerable, and challenging one another or me during the course. I informed them that they may anticipate feeling a possible range of emotions like anger, guilt, shame, frustration, fear, and hurt. I required students to complete a weekly reflection paper to channel their reactions and feelings. Students were reminded that, “this is difficult work” that contradicts cultural norms. Open discussion of race relations and racism counters common social practices (Swigonski, 1999). This makes the establishment of clear classroom norms essential for providing a safe and trusting therapeutic environment.

#### **Establishment of Sociocultural Context**

Within the course, I emphasized a systemic view of privilege and oppression with assigned readings, classroom discussions, experiential assignments, and lectures. Consistent with this philosophy, I presented the ROAParadox as a systemically-rooted, macrosystems level obstacle to racial dialogue. This represented a paradigm shift for students in their understanding of why they may lack self-efficacy with regard to racial issues. My use of the model gave them permission to “not know” how to discuss race and other forms of oppression because they were raised in a culture that discourages such conversation.

One implication of ROAParadox is that failure to acknowledge the context of cultural awkwardness about race promotes an inadequate understanding of the individual's experience with race-related issues. I suggested that this recognition of the macrosystems level influence may require a paradigm shift. Conceptualization of oneself as influenced by a larger system that has discouraged honest discussions of race relations is a more accurate paradigm than to attribute one's anxieties strictly to personal incompetence.

Articulation of the paradox is not intended as a rationalization for abdicating individual responsibility. However, it may validate individual anxiety and lack of competency regarding race. Multicultural competencies suggest that it is also critical to take individual responsibility for developing race-related competency. Use of the paradigm can promote the idea that counselors are responsible to challenge the pressures that create the paradox. In the following teaching scenarios, the pedagogical strategy of situating racial discomfort within a socio-cultural context seemed to ease classroom racial dialogue, and both validated and provided an explanation for the individual experience of race-related anxiety.

### **Teaching Scenarios Illustrate Application of the ROAParadox Model**

The ROAParadox model was used in a classroom setting to: (a) offer an alternative paradigm to consider racism; (b) enrich understanding of macrosystem influences on individual experience of racial issues; (c) facilitate racial dialogue; (d) prompt student self-reflection. Three teaching scenarios are described. In the first scenario, use of the ROAParadox model prompted student self-reflection on a client relationship. In the second scenario, students used the model to contemplate contemporary racial attitudes. These examples depict how the ROAParadox model may be used to inform discussion of macrosystem influences on individual

experiences with racial issues. In the third scenario, use of the model provided an alternative paradigm to examine current political discourse. This example demonstrated how the ROAParadox model may be used to enrich discussion of contemporary cultural (macro) experiences. In each scenario, it was my observation that use of the model encouraged students' propensity toward racial dialogue and self-reflection. Student names and identifying features were masked in order to protect confidentiality.

### **Teaching scenario #1**

This scenario provides an example of how I used the ROAParadox model in my multicultural class as a tool to stimulate student reflection on personal experiences with race relations and racism. A few weeks after I explained the ROAParadox in my multicultural class, a student volunteered to share her reflections on the application of the paradox. Michelle worked in a residential treatment facility (RTF) for adolescents. Michelle is White, as were most of the other counselors at the facility. The clients who they served were mostly African American or Hispanic.

Discussion of the ROAParadox caused Michelle to reflect upon her experience at the RTF. She recalled feeling defensive about her treatment of the clients and believed that she needed to prove to them that her behavioral decisions were not racially-based. She described her feelings of discomfort as a distraction from her work with clients and a barrier to authentic relationships. She reported that she did not feel empowered to explore or express her discomfort because she observed that there was a culture of silence surrounding the interracial environment at the institution. She shared that only a few days before she left that position she had an occasion to speak with an African American client about the unacknowledged racial dynamic between the two of them. Michelle described that conversation as "freeing" and wished that it had occurred much earlier

than it had. She acknowledged her supposition that the relationship would have been much different if race had been addressed.

After considering the implications of the ROAParadox concept, she reported that she understood her experience at the RTF more clearly. She had believed that she was personally inadequate and flawed for her feelings of discomfort and her awkwardness with the racial dynamic at the facility. The ROAParadox provided a different lens for viewing her RTF experience. This new paradigm illuminated that speaking about race and racial differences was not part of the RTF culture, as the RTF's culture was a byproduct of the larger culture's tendency to both fixate on race and avoid racial engagement. In other words, Michelle could see that her own preoccupation and silence about racial issues was a direct parallel to the obsession and avoidance in the larger culture described by the ROAParadox. She reported her belief that she felt more equipped to address racial differences in a counseling relationship based on her understanding of the ROAParadox concept and subsequent classroom discussions. In this case, use of the ROAParadox model: a) invited the student to examine her own fears and anxieties regarding racial interactions; b) offered the student a view of her own experience as situated within the larger sociocultural context and as a byproduct of that context; and c) increased the student's self-efficacy as she imagined future opportunities to broach the subject of race with clients and supervisors.

### **Teaching scenario #2**

This scenario exemplifies how I used the ROAParadox model to facilitate classroom discussion of racism at the sociocultural level. I introduced the concept of the color-blind racial attitude and engaged the class in discussion. Color-blind racial attitude is the claim that race is no longer a relevant issue and is often used as a rationale to avoid race as a topic (MacAuliffe, 2008).

I asked students to generate demonstrated examples of color-blind racial attitude. Examples included comments like, "I just see the human race, not skin color" and "I don't see you as Black". I asked the class to consider color-blind racial attitude using racial identity development theories and the ROAParadox model. Both frameworks provide insight into the avoidance of dialogue about race. Color-blind attitudes which deny or distort the relevance of race are associated with less advanced racial identity development statuses (Gushue & Constantine, 2007). Because of this denial, the color-blind racial attitude leads to avoidance of racial dialogue.

The color-blind racial attitude was confirmed as being inconsistent with multicultural competence. The denial of race as a meaningful factor in determining identity may be seen as a mechanism to avoid dialogue about race. This was illustrated through the use of both racial identity development theories and the ROAParadox model.

The examination of color-blind attitude from different frameworks seemed to create an awareness of the complexity of racism. Students observed that there may be multiple factors that influence an individual's facility with discussion of racial topics. Students noted that lower level racial identity development status typically indicates that a person will display less ability to manage racial content. The ROAParadox model posits the idea that there are societal pressures to avoid racial discussions as well. Through this discussion, students said that they better understood the critical nature of their ability to broach the topic of race in the therapeutic environment.

### **Teaching scenario #3**

This teaching scenario provides an example of how I assisted students in use of the ROAParadox model in my multicultural course as a lens to analyze current events. I invited my class to read the speeches that

characterized current controversy in national politics surrounding racial dialogue. An overview of the speeches is provided here for clarification.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, there was significant controversy reported in the media surrounding comments made by Reverend Jeremiah Wright, who was Senator Obama's pastor. Wright's commentary expressed anger toward White people and the policies of the United States. Obama offered a response to the controversial comments in his own speech on race when he characterized the country as being in "a racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years" (Obama, 2008). Several months later, newly appointed Attorney General, Eric Holder made a speech that also sparked controversy when he characterized the United States as having an "ingrained inhibition against talking about race" (United States Department of Justice, 2009). The following excerpt captures the spirit of Holder's speech.

...In things racial we have always been and continue to be, in too many ways, essentially a nation of cowards. Though race-related issues continue to occupy a significant portion of our political discussion, and though there remain many unresolved racial issues in this nation, we, average Americans, simply do not talk enough with each other about race....We must find ways to force ourselves to confront that which we have become expert at avoiding... We know, by "American instinct" and by learned behavior, that certain subjects are off limits....Our history has demonstrated that the vast majority of Americans are uncomfortable with, and would like to not have to deal with, racial matters .... We are then free to retreat to our race protected cocoons where much is comfortable and where progress is not really made (United States Department of Justice).

Students were immediately able to identify the consistencies between Holder's and Obama's assertions and the ROA Paradox. I engaged the class in the following discussion items: (a) What parallels do you see in the public reactions to Wright's and Holder's speeches?; (b) Explain what contributed to the controversy sparked by both speeches; (c) In interpretation of this controversy, discuss how one's race might influence worldview?; (d) How might your interpretations inform your multicultural competence? Students engaged in a conversation about: a) the veracity of the ROA Paradox as it related to these speeches; b) race and the political environment; c) media treatment of issues surrounding race; d) the tendency of White Americans to insist that attempts at frank, critical dialogue about racism by African Americans be tempered by reference to how much progress has already been made; e) the nuances of tone as they apply to racial speech; and f) how their increased awareness of these issues extended their level of self-efficacy.

### **Student responses**

Based on my observation and student feedback, this model has utility for classroom discussions of race and racism. In general, student comments about the ROA Paradox model suggested usefulness for understanding individual experience with race within a sociocultural context. Students were willing to engage in discussion about their personal experience with both obsession and avoidance of racial content and shared their own observations that related to the ROA Paradox phenomenon.

Furthermore, it was my casual observation that discussions of race relations were eased by my use of the ROA Paradox model. I observed a decrease in student defensiveness when discomfort and awkwardness about racism was discussed as a macrosystem phenomenon. Use of the model appeared to be especially helpful in tempering fears regarding language use,

and not wanting to “say the wrong thing and offend somebody”. Additionally, openness to a range of affective and cognitive responses to racial content was encouraged.

Understanding of the macrosystems influence on their individual experience of race-related issues seemed to be an illuminating experience for students. Students reported that they were able to see their own experiences with race relations within the sociocultural context illustrated by the ROAP phenomenon. They were also able to identify examples of the paradox and its role in individual and cultural events. Students reported that they engaged in significant self-reflection as a part of this learning experience. They reflected specifically on personal and professional race-related situations and reported a range of affective, cognitive, and behavioral responses. From this deeper understanding of the macrosystem influences on individual experiences with race, some students reported increased feelings of self-efficacy regarding their competency in racially-charged situations. Presentation of the ROAParadox model had some unintended consequences as well. In their weekly reflection papers, some students proposed alternative and supplemental interpretations of the model. In conceptualizing these interpretations, they engaged in critical thinking and self-reflection on racial tensions, their own biases, and their own life experiences. Students considered how their personal behaviors related to race have contained both elements of obsession and avoidance. Some students identified a range of affective factors that served as catalysts to promote both obsession and avoidance. They were able to use the model to consider racism on an individual, or micro-level, and on a cultural, or macro-level. In a manner similar to the way an optical illusion can be seen from two different perspectives, one student suggested that the point in the center of the model could alternatively be viewed as the dominant or the oppressed group. The depth of analysis that students

used in their consideration of the model was unanticipated. My goal to facilitate racial dialogue was achieved. In addition, students demonstrated creative and critical analysis of the model and the underlying paradigm.

## Discussion

Counselor educators have widely expressed concerns about the challenges of facilitating race-related learning in the classroom (Alexander, et al., 2005; Day-Vines, et al., 2007; Estrada, et al., 2004; Fier & Ramsey, 2005; Rothschild, 2005; Swigonski, 1999). Student resistance due to anxiety regarding racial dialogue is specifically discussed. The propensity to avoid racial content in counseling is a widely addressed theme throughout the multicultural counseling literature.

I presented the ROAParadox as an alternative paradigm that provides an interpretive lens for examining race relations in the United States. The ROAParadox model is a visual depiction of the phenomenon and was introduced as a teaching strategy to assist educators who want to facilitate discussions of race relations or explore sociocultural variables that provide a context for racial climate. I used this model in my *Multicultural Issues in Counseling* class to explain the racial dynamic created by the recurrent and consistent themes of obsession and avoidance.

It was my observation that use of the ROAParadox model in the teaching scenarios prompted self-reflection regarding race-related issues. The model's use also provided fodder for rich class discussion and promoted understanding of sociocultural factors that contribute to maintaining the system of racism. These uses are consistent with suggested strategies for the development of multicultural counseling competencies (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005; Rothschild, 2003; Tomlinson-Clarke & Wang, 1999).

I observed that use of the ROAParadox model facilitated self-understanding through a cultural context

and provided an interpretive lens to authenticate individual struggles with race-related questions. This is consistent with Tomlinson-Clarke and Wang's (1999) recommendation for the creation of a "paradigm for teaching racial-cultural issues within a training climate that respects practitioners and clients alike as racial-cultural people within their sociopolitical contexts" (p. 160). They contended that such a paradigm would be a catalyst for counselors to understand racism beyond the cognitive and intellectual level and more on an affective level.

Affective responses of anxiety and defensiveness were described by Johnson (2006) as having "done more than perhaps anything else to keep us stuck in our current paralysis by preventing each of us from taking the steps required to become part of the solution" (p. vii). The ROAParadox identifies a cultural framework that validates individual feelings of anxiety, defensiveness, and guilt surrounding race relations. The understanding of one's own racial anxiety as the result of a culturally-generated and maintained system, versus a result of personal failing or defect, may be experienced as validating and less shame-based. Thus, barriers to engage in racial dialogue may be reduced and mobilization toward dialogue and healing may be encouraged.

The model could be utilized in any course where the sociocultural context of race relations and racism is discussed. The model has primarily been used to facilitate classroom dialogue. However, it could also be used as a supervisory tool to assist counselors-in-training in understanding and navigating racially-charged field experience environments. Estrada, et al., (2004) emphasized that race is not adequately addressed in counselor supervision. The lack of attention to race in supervision is echoed by other researchers (Duan & Roehlke, 2001; Estrada, et al., 2004; Lappin & Hardy, 1997). Teaching scenario #1 in this article is an illustrative example. In this case, the ROAParadox model could have been used as a facilitative tool to initiate

discussion about the role of race among staff and residents and provide challenge and support for the counselor to broach the subject of race and racism with her clients.

There are several limitations to consider regarding the use of the ROAParadox model. First, the model has had limited exposure and use. Second, data regarding its use has been limited to qualitative, self-report, and evaluative feedback. The model has not yet been empirically tested as a strategy for increasing multicultural counseling skills. Further research in the applicability and use of the ROAParadox model is warranted and necessary to ascertain its generalizability to other counselor educators who are interested in facilitating race-related discussions. Further research in the form of a summative, qualitative evaluation is recommended.

Use of the ROAParadox model is predicated on instructor skill in facilitation of race-related dialogues. As with all models used for educational purposes, instructors need to possess adequate competency in the subject area. The ROAParadox model offers an alternative paradigm and teaching strategy for educators who are prepared to engage students in the challenging work of race-related discussion.

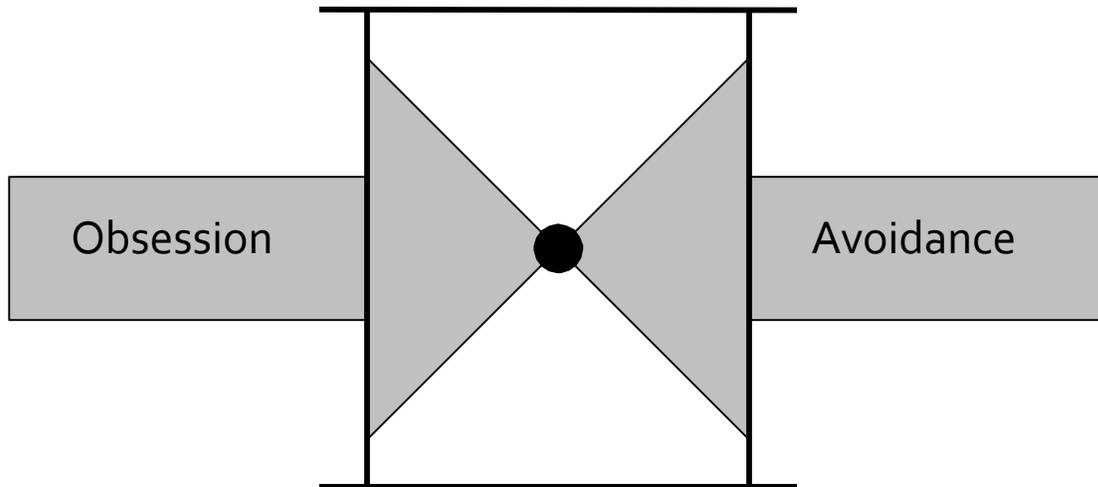
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Figure 1  
The Race Obsession-Avoidance Paradox (ROAParadox) Model



In this visual conceptualization of the race obsession-avoidance paradox (ROAParadox), meaningful symbols are incorporated. The ideogram means “avoid” in the hobo or gypsy sign system and II is the alchemist sign for “fixation”. That they both exist simultaneously in the same figure expresses the paradox. The center dot represents the individual or group that becomes immobilized by the pressures, symbolized by the arrows, of obsession and avoidance.

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