

FLIPPING THE SCRIPT

BEING PROACTIVE ABOUT RACE EQUITY

For 20 years, Dr. Lisa Gunderson, RCC, has focused on multicultural issues for racialized populations. She received her Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the University of Southern California and, prior to immigrating to Canada seven years ago, she was a tenured professor of psychology and licensed psychologist. Currently, she lives in Victoria, where she works as a counsellor and intern supervisor at ÉAU, WELNEW Elementary School, an associate program director in the Master of Counselling program at CityU Seattle in Victoria, and an equity consultant in private practice, with a focus on implicit bias and racial education.

When she did her clinical work, she was the only clinician for clients who wanted an “ethnic” counsellor. “Thankfully my university allowed me to work in different communities as opposed to just staying on campus,” she says. Her Los Angeles location gave her considerable experience with Latino and African American people; to round out her experience to include Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, she did a year’s residency in Hawaii. Her continued work with minoritized communities led to teaching the psychology of minorities.

“The transracial adoption piece was somewhat accidental,” says Gunderson. “When we came to Victoria, I happened to have a friend who was part of an organization that hosted a camp called Harambee in Sorrento for people raising children of African descent — the teens call it ‘Black Camp.’ A large majority of the parents were transracial adoptive parents.”

A LOT OF PARENTS WORRY ABOUT THE ENVIRONMENT THEY ARE RAISING THEIR CHILDREN IN.

An adoption agency contacted her, which led to a two-part Dear Abby-type series on racial identity, followed by a webinar and workshops for parents, youth, and children — and it kept going from there. So while it has all led to involvement in the transracial adoption community, her focus within it is retaining and supporting racial and ethnic identity.

What led you to counselling and, specifically, to minoritized populations?

I was always curious why people acted a certain way towards other



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people based on race. When I went into graduate school, I actually wrote that my specialty area was going to be childhood sexual abuse. But in my first year of grad school, I would ask questions like, “What’s the information on people of African descent?” and “What about Latinos?” There was just this dearth of literature on people who looked like me.

I joke with my friends who are of minoritized groupings: No matter what program we were in at the time, we all went in with certain ideas of what we wanted to do, but we realized very quickly that nobody’s talking about people like us. As the only ones in our program, we realized if we don’t do that work, nobody will. My qualifying exam looked at creating a healthy African-American identity, and it was based on this idea of how resilient of a group we were in the United States: considering all the things that had happened to us, we’re still around and thriving. My dissertation looked at the validity of the MMPI* and MMPI-A in African-American adolescents.

* *Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory*



What do you focus on in your workshops?

Basically, I facilitate this idea of “You’re not alone.” That’s where their strength comes from — realizing they’re not alone. There are other people like them. For many of the parents, as soon as they adopted their child, they became a minoritized family and for many of them, they don’t know what that means. They get shocked, usually around school age, because before that, they have an infant and they’re just loving that infant. It’s not until usually school where it kicks in that, “Oh, there is a meaningful racial difference” or “There is an ethnic difference.” I’m all about trying to make sure I answer what people are interested in as opposed to what I think they’re interested in.

What do the kids want to know?

“If I’m growing up in White space does that mean I’m not really Black? What does it mean to be Black?” My goal is to make sure they feel comfortable looking in the mirror and know when they’re 20, 25, if they want to walk into a Sista group — typically, a group of other Black or racialized women — they absolutely should, and they have every right to be there. It’s really important for them to feel that connection.

A lot of focus is on how to respond to negative racial incidences and biases in their regular lives. Part of that is a skill set they need to learn. But another piece is, sometimes, they may feel they can’t share that with their parents because their parents won’t “get it.” For example, if they’re with a group of friends who are rapping and using

the “N” word: how do they deal with that? Kids getting pulled over by cops or followed in stores: how do they deal with that? Part of the answer is there are times when they have to bring in their parents: how do they engage in that conversation?

Then there are the unconscious messages in the media and the bias. Understanding micro-aggressions. We also focus a bit on history and on racial ethnic identity models. Just trying to make sense of what this identity thing means for them and having a safe space for that conversation.

What do the parents want to know?

For parents, school is a big focus. For example, if their kid is dealing with something and they’re getting pushback from the principal or teacher.

When do they intervene with their child and when do they leave it alone? When should they try hard not to exercise certain privileges? Part of it for parents is trying to separate their own feelings of upset and anger at systems versus what's happening with their child. Sometimes parents kind of go overboard where they have such a focus on trying to retain the child's ethnic space that they forget their own; especially if they have White siblings in the home, that becomes a really important component. Some parents adopted their children without a really good lens on what that meant. A lot of parents feel they don't have resources, and depending on their circle of friends, their friends may not be helpful. Some parents are trying to build a network and face challenges stepping into a minoritized community. And a lot of parents worry about the environment they are raising their children in.

What's a key message for parents, teachers, counsellors — everyone?

One of the points I really slam home to the parents, and I do this with teachers as well, is getting rid of this idea of being "colour blind" — this idea that, "We're all just humans and I just see students." You can't do that. It is not psychologically sound. That's just a dangerous thing. But this idea of colour equity is more important. It's really important for people to understand what that means. Colour equity is acknowledging our differences, not pathologizing them or asking us to pretend they don't matter, and still treating us fairly and equitably.

What needs to change in how people think and behave?

When people find out I'm from the States, they ask, "Aren't we better here in Canada? Don't you feel better here?" If I don't get that question once a week.... You can't define being



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Canadian as not being American. You can't compare yourself to a country with such a vastly different history. What you have to ask yourself is what are you doing about the racism here? Because it's here. It's more passive aggressive. And so if it is a little less racist here, does that make the person who's experiencing the racism feel it's little less racist here? When it happens to them, do they say, "Wow, so glad I'm not in the States!?" No.

We have to not be afraid to have conversations around racism, bias, and equity now. We need to reverse that ideology that the only time we need to be proactive is when a crisis occurs.

We don't want to wait until a crisis. We have to flip the script.

Final thoughts?

You know, at the end of the day, I can't help but feel positive about everything and optimistic, despite all these issues that are daunting and maybe sad. It gets exhausting, yes. But when we know and understand our history — especially those of us from a minoritized community, whether it's sexual orientation or persons with disabilities or race or ethnicity — we recognize that all of us have points in time where people tried to destroy us and made up all sorts of stories about us. And yet we're still here. Think about, in my case, the history of being enslaved. There were people who fought for my right to be here, knowing they'd never see that. Even as a woman, to vote — there were women who died for us to do that, knowing they'd never see it. They just had the idea of it. We forget that the seeds were sown for hundreds of years before. We're doing the same thing. We may not see the outcome of it, but you have to know you're doing the right thing. Equity and honouring our differences can never be wrong. ■