



## SHIFTING THE MINDSET OF RACISM THROUGH COGNITIVE LEARNING STYLES IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND DISORDERS

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The recent uprising of racism and systemic bias towards Black lives across the U.S. has been catapulted to the forefront of discussions on disproportionate representation and biased admission practices in communication sciences and disorders (CSD) programs. In particular, Black students in CSD programs nationwide have unified to demand equity in admissions, cultural awareness in courses, and statements of commitments from programs to become intentional in addressing antiracism practices.

Racism includes the mindset of groups of people believing that certain traits of intelligence are 'typical' of only specific people (Morgan, 2017). As such, it is important to discuss racism in CSD programs when considering how Black students are perceived by educators and how those perceptions lead to negative academic experiences. Over the years, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) has published position statements on cultural competence and its importance; however, this position has come with minimal accountability efforts. It is not evident that ASHA's materials have been successful in shifting the mindset and practice of racism that exists within the field of CSD.

Cognitive learning styles, as a method to combatting systemic racism and implicit bias in academic settings for students who have been marginalized, have been discussed sparingly in CSD while other professions have recognized its importance in contributing to student success (Mosley, 2014; Sobleva, 2014; Son et al., 2020). A search for literature on cognitive learning styles on ASHA's website yielded a result of over 2,300 articles. Of those, four were related to learning styles with only one (a non-empirical opinion piece) discussing cognitive learning styles and culture. Terrell and Hale's (1992) article addressed the importance of utilizing cognitive learning styles with multicultural populations to enhance learning.

The authors described how cultural language and language use influences learning style. For example, within the Black community, "charismatic" language (intuitive) is rewarded without significant value on the microstructure of language which is rewarded on standardized tests (systematic). Identifying and employing the cognitive learning styles of ourselves as educators and of the students can serve as a starting point in eliminating racism in CSD.

In this belief, there are many layers of racism that should be unpacked (Sandles, 2020). This article will begin the discussion of shifting the mindset of individuals who practice negative stereotypes about Black students which hinders the latter's ability to succeed academically and learn freely in an environment that does not question or limit their academic potential secondary to the color of their skin.

### **Cognitive Learning Styles**

Racism encompasses the belief that certain traits of character or intelligence pertain to particular people and is demonstrated when a group of people deny or refuse the rights, needs, dignity, or value of persons of a particular race or ethnicity (Ogedegbe, 2020). Racism is often spread through actions of stereotypical behaviors and beliefs, and biased opinions related to specific characteristics commonly attributed to specific groups of people. Nonetheless, a position of racism begins with a mindset of negative stereotypes perpetuating an idea that one group is superior to another. More specifically, within the field of CSD, Black students have reported to be perceived as less intelligent and having poor communication and writing skills. This is a racist and biased stereotype that springs from the belief that Black students are incapable of rising to the expectations of rigor in a CSD program and mostly based on the assertion that Black students are incapable of learning and retain-

ing information similar to their peers of other races (Sandles, 2020).

The practice of shifting the mindset and behaviors of racism begins with recognizing that there is an active position to the way in which one perceives the world around them. As professors and clinical instructors in the field of CSD, we often provide instruction based on our own cognitive learning style. As a result, we assume that everyone learns and solves problems in the way we have become accustomed to, without consideration of individual learning styles. Consequently, when Black students are taught by educators from other races, their view and perception of the world is negatively challenged and sometimes penalized because it is not similar or accepted. This creates a communication breakdown between the educator and the student which breeds stereotypes. Previous findings have shown that cognitive style influences one's perceptions of another culture and impacts the effectiveness of communication between cultures (Obdalova et al., 2013; Soboleva & Obdalova, 2014).

Cognitive learning styles are the preferred methods of problem solving one utilizes that is based on the culture in which we are raised (Witkin et al., 1977). There are two primary types of cognitive styles: systematic and intuitive. A systematic learning style is analytical, less expressive, more dependent on self, and is intrinsically motivated. Systematic learners will solve problems in an orderly, step-by-step manner. In contrast, an intuitive learning style refers to the ability to perceive details only in the whole or holistic view. These individuals will operate more through social interaction rather than working alone (Hale-Benson, 1982). Both styles exist on a spectrum in which one may employ one primary style or shift between styles. In general, persons who identify as Black tend to prefer and perform better with an intuitive style (Hale-Benson, 1982; Shade, 1982). Consequently, Black students who utilize a more intuitive style may be perceived by educators as having difficulty in the classroom when the problem is that the curriculum is based on a systematic learning style. Issues of racism arise when the educator develops a mindset that Black students "just don't perform well" and treats them differently or grades them harsher than their White counterparts. For example, Payne & Johnson (2015) analyzed the performance gap and cultural bias against Black CSD graduate students and concluded that culturally based reasoning, or an intuitive cognitive style can lead to poor performance on tasks developed with only consideration of a systematic style. In essence, Black CSD students may provide responses through culturally based reasoning which would be considered as culturally ap-

propriate, but incorrect assignments that employ a systematic style (Payne & Johnson, 2015).

### Cognitive Style in CSD

Most often, challenges arise when cognitive styles differ leading to biases, negative connotations, and misunderstandings in the academic setting (Soboleva & Obdalova, 2014). Consequently, this is most often evident in the stereotypes projected onto Black students regarding their learning potential. In the face of discussing racism and biased academic practices, educators must recognize when their own cognitive rigidity directs their view of inferiority with Black students. The confined biases that educators may present can demonstrate an unwillingness to recognize the cultural differences of the Black student (Obdalova et al., 2013; Soboleva & Obdalova, 2014). However, embracing cognitive learning styles in CSD programs can lead to increased academic success, support, and a justifiable sense of worth for Black students. When two people can recognize cognitive style differences, cohesion occurs.

Therefore, when discussing combatting racism in CSD, educators should be intentional in becoming flexible in their cognitive learning style and develop skills in shifting from one style to another (Soboleva, 2014). While it is beneficial for students to increase their cognitive flexibility, educators should also become flexible in their cognitive styles during teaching and learning. As such, recognizing and supporting cognitive learning styles and their differences in the academic setting can serve as a starting point towards eliminating racial biases, stereotypes, and prejudice in CSD. To do this, CSD educators must take responsibility for their own cognitive rigidity in relation to cultural differences and become flexible in their understanding and teaching of different cognitive learning styles and thus, ensuring cultural acceptance, educational equity, and academic success for Black students in CSD programs.

CSD educators can begin the trajectory of shifting from cognitive rigidity to cognitive flexibility by first, examining their own bias and becoming aware of their own rigidity. Second, identify their own cognitive learning style. Third, identify the cognitive learning styles of their students. Fourth, review the characteristics of their cognitive learning style and compare to the styles of their students to identify if their teaching methods only support their specific style. Fifth, acknowledge the differences between styles and determine where bias and breakdowns occur between teaching and learning. Finally, adjust the curriculum and teaching styles to eliminate breakdowns between the educator and the Black student.

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