

On Matters of Race, Power, and Privilege

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There are few conversations that stir the souls of virtually everyone in the U.S. like the question of race. “Here’s a riddle: why is our most important issue the one no one really wants to talk about?” remarked Anne Quindlen, Pulitzer Prize columnist for *Newsweek*.

While there is no scientific evidence to support our notion of “race,” it has stood the test of time as a moniker that defines visual and/or cultural difference between Caucasians (white) and people of African, Asian, Aboriginal, or Latin (Spanish) descent or natives of the continental Americas (so-called “people of color” as a more appropriate term for non-whites). The Human Genome Project has shown that there is few, if any, genetic difference between the peoples we have come to identify as of a particular race. All genetic differences are individual.

No matter what your position, there are counterbalancing forces that must be understood and valued if progress is to be made on this important social issue. Our nation is undergoing dramatic changes in the ethnic make-up of our people. These changes are also reflected in the worldwide shift towards a free-market economy as talent and opportunity search for each other in the global market-spaces.

The Demography of Change in the U.S

According to the most recent U.S. Census Bureau figures, the nation is changing—and more quickly than most people imagine. Immigration has contributed greatly to this transformation. These demographic changes have coincided with the inevitable aging and dying of the once predominant white population. Looking closely at the data we find that among Americans age 70 and up, there are 5.3 white people for every person of color, a ratio of roughly 5 to 1. For Americans below age 40, however, the ratio is 2 to 1. And among children under 10 years old, the ratio is 1.5 to 1. In contrast to the world we knew in the 1960s, the demographics of our nation are changing dramatically.

Of particular interest is the dramatic demographic transformation that has occurred in the Latino population, which grew 58 percent over the past decade. This growth spurt has propelled the Latino population numbers to a level surpassing that of African Americans for the first time in U.S. history. In 2001, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 12.9 percent of the total U.S. population identified themselves as Black or African American, a total of 34.7 million people. Latinos were 13.2 percent of the population, representing 35.3 million people. Combined with the population growth of Asians and other groups, it becomes clear that the term “minority” is an increasingly less appropriate way to characterize the population count of people of color in the U.S. In many American cities, their combined population may exceed that of whites within our lifetime.

Historical Perspectives On the Issue

These changes in population have outpaced the necessary change in cultural norms and perspectives to accommodate this level of diversity. Historically, America has struggled to deal with its treatment of race in the larger society. The pain and horror of slavery have had an enormous impact on our society as a whole. The historical mistreatment and painful discrimination perpetrated against Asians in the U.S. has only begun to receive serious examination by thoughtful observers of our culture.

The legacy of war (some would say genocide) and mistreatment of our native peoples and their ancestry has left deep wounds in the collective psyche of America. Newcomers of various ethnic backgrounds from Europe have compelling stories to tell about their mistreatment and struggle to overcome the dark side of our collective consciousness, as it plays out in discrimination and abuse. Even today, people of Latino origins suffer a wide range of discrimination worthy of our ethical critique of the meaning of America.

Dominant and Subordinated Groups and the Question of Race

In the U.S., it is clear that white people are the dominant group and people of color are the subordinated group(s) in the context of race. White people set the cultural norms for what is accepted, and the group defines the values of the mainstream culture. In relation to this norm setting power, all other views are seen as counter cultural and are inherently less valuable to society. Wielding their dominant group power, white people define the standard by which all others are measured. Consequently, subordinated groups are pressured to conform with these values in order to gain access to the power, privilege, and influence of the dominant group. More fully, this pressure to conform is more easily met by those people whose outward appearance is more closely identified with being white. These privileges include:

- Access to the full range of educational resources generally available
- Access to a full range of credit and wealth-building resources generally available
- Favorable terms for large purchases (homes, cars, boats, etc.) from other dominant group members
- The expectation of preferential treatment in public spaces as compared to subordinated group members
- Access to the full range of career and professional choices
- Access to the full range of professional advancement
- Access to the full range of regional and national leadership opportunities
- A positive accounting and reinforcement of dominant group achievement in the literature, movies, television, and other media
- Recognition that ultimately all of the rules that govern our society are made and enforced by the dominant group

For highly visible people of color (African-American, Latinos and others), their distinctive dark skin and features leave them vulnerable to being more adversely affected by culturally oppressive forces than other groups. Even those people of color whose physical (even interpersonal) characteristics are more “white-like” still have to cope with these oppressions in real and tangible ways.

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Historically, this has played out in these ways;

- Reduced access to educational resources
- Reduced access to career and occupational opportunities
- Reduced mobility in professional careers
- Glass ceilings on professional advancement
- Glass ceilings on regional and national (and sometimes community-level) leadership opportunities
- Few positive role models and positive reinforcements in the literature, movies, television shows, and social conventions
- Public mocking and stereotyping at the expense of the subordinated group’s dignity
- Increased suspicion of social malevolence and mischief
- Negative impact from culturally installed notions of poor work ethic and limited bottom-line capability
- Negative impact of internalizing culturally oppressive forces
- Reduced access to credit and other wealth-building resources
- Unfair treatment by dominant group members of the legal system or law enforcement
- Unwillingness on the part of the legal system to seek the repeal of normative legislation granting subordinated group members a legal right of access to the power, privilege, and influence that is culturally afforded to the dominant group members

Dominant group members (in this case, white people) can fully extend their culturally installed power, privilege, and influence with subordinated group members in ways that do not disadvantage anyone.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Ultimately, the quality of our future rests upon the proposition that:

1. Dominant group members (in this case, white people) can fully extend their culturally installed power, privilege, and influence with subordinated group members in ways that do not disadvantage anyone. To make further progress, dominant group members can:
 - a. Learn to recognize that you, too, are members of a group that has distinct patterns of behavior
 - b. Learn to track those behaviors and to better understand the impact on others groups
 - c. Become more aware of the group patterns identified by subordinated group members that negatively impede their access to generally available resources and opportunities
 - d. Adjust your own behavior to reduce the negative impact of your group membership on all others
 - e. Work to influence other members of your group to become more aware and to reduce the overall negative impact of your dominant group membership on all others
 - f. Learn to partner and collaborate with people of color
2. Subordinated group members can engage dominant group allies (any white person who is actively working to change the racism in themselves and in their spheres of influence) to alleviate the negative impact of culturally-oppressive forces. To make further progress, subordinated groups can:
 - a. Develop unique strengths or “signature capabilities” to the maximum degree possible without regard for culturally installed barriers or obstacles
 - b. Contribute signature capabilities to family, work, and community without regard for culturally-installed barriers and obstacles
 - c. Learn to partner with dominant group allies to alleviate the negative impact of culturally-installed oppression on all groups

While there is no scientific evidence to support our notion of “race,” culturally there are races because we have deemed them so. Racism is deeply imbedded in our society, and it will take all of our collective strength to rout it out. Like a diseased tree, even though we cut the visible organism down, we must still dig deeply to remove the stump and the roots that have spread far and wide, threatening to infect the entire forest. When we are faced with racism within our selves or in others, it is not enough to remove the visible manifestations of our prejudice, but we must always go further to rid ourselves of our deepest fears and learned hatred.

Suggested Readings and Resources

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