

Report from the Institute for

Volume 12

Number 1

PHILOSOPHY & PUBLIC POLICY

Special Issue

Spring/Summer

1992

School of Public Affairs • University of Maryland
College Park, Maryland 20742 • 301-405-4753

Race, Discrimination and Group Identity

As this issue of *The Report* goes to press, over 50 people have died in rioting following the acquittal of four white Los Angeles police officers charged with assaulting a black motorist. The Rodney King case confronts us with graphic images of racial violence: white policemen clubbing and kicking a black man lying on his side; black youths beating up a white truck driver; Korean merchants shooting at Black and Hispanic looters. Yet the jurors who acquitted the policemen insisted with apparent sincerity that race had nothing to do with their verdict or the police beating; President Bush made virtually no mention of race in his first public comments on the worst urban riots since 1967; radio talk show hosts and their callers proclaimed the need for color-blind standards of justice.

It is now taboo in most Western societies to discriminate against individuals because of their race, ethnicity, gender or involuntary group affiliation. Like many taboos, this one expresses deep revulsion at powerful impulses. Bias and prejudice are easy to trigger and hard to suppress. Social psychologists have shown that strangers assigned by arbitrary criteria to nominal groups develop strong, abiding hostility toward out-group members. The antagonisms are far greater, of course, for groups divided by history, language and culture. The renewal of ancient ethnic conflicts in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, the Indian subcontinent, and southern Africa reveals how tenacious those antagonisms can be.

To make its research readily available to a broad audience, the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy publishes this quarterly newsletter. Articles are intended to advance philosophically informed debate on current policy choices; the views presented are not necessarily those of the Institute or its sponsors.

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In this special issue of *The Report from the Institute for Philosophy & Public Policy*, five authors explore several aspects of discrimination by and against groups: Judith Lichtenberg, a philosopher, examines a variety of attitudes and practices that are called racist, and argues that their comparative importance is among the issues most sharply dividing blacks and whites. Alaka Wali brings an anthropologist's perspective to bear on the controversies surrounding race, ethnicity, and multiculturalism in a metropolitan area now confronting unprecedented diversity. Kenneth Taylor, a philosopher, observes striking differences in the way blacks and whites perceived the clash between Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas, and explains the resonances of that conflict for the black middle class to which he belongs. Writing as legal scholars and social scientists, James Jacobs and Marc Galanter examine, respectively, the new wave of "hate crime" legislation, and the movement to redress old wrongs inflicted on a variety of groups.

Despite significant differences in orientation and emphasis, three common themes emerge from these essays. One concerns the extent to which believing makes it so. Although race may have become a suspect category in biology, and ethnic identity may more often be constituted by loose "family resemblances" than a unique culture or language, the experience of stigmatization and persecution forges bonds and confers a common history.

On the one hand, we must recognize the extent to which our definitions of groups are conventional and arbitrary; on the other hand, we must recognize how much we are constrained by the boundaries that have been drawn.

Second, there is a recalcitrant tension between treating people as individuals and treating them as members of racial, ethnic, and gender groups. To fail to recognize group-identity is often to perpetuate historic injustice or ignore social reality, but to acknowledge it too emphatically may be to forsake the values of impartiality and individuality. This tension is experienced in a wide range of public and private settings: by legislators deciding whether to increase penalties for crimes motivated by racial and ethnic prejudice, by a white pedestrian deciding whether to cross the street to avoid a group of approaching black male teenagers, by a black middle-class professional evaluating accusations of sexual harassment or drug-abuse against a black politician or judge.

Third, the ties that bind and divide groups are diverse, overlapping, and conflicting. Gender is a very different source of identity and conflict than race; it is hard to adjudicate the competing claims of racial and sexual solidarity, or to assess the comparative evil of racism and sexism. Discrimination does not raise a single issue about how we treat "minority" groups, but a cluster of basic questions about how we define and value ourselves and others.

—David Wasserman



"You and your brother portray a great many wicked giants in these tales of yours, Herr Grimm. Do you think you could balance them by depicting a couple of good ones?"

Racism in the Head, Racism in the World

We're inclined to think that disputes about words are unimportant. We give up arguing with people when we see that our disagreements turn ("merely," we say) on terminology. It's hard to maintain this view, though, when the word in question is "racism."

Different perceptions among blacks and whites in our society about what racism is, and where it is, constitute an important source of racial tension. For many white Americans today, the word "racism" is a red flag. They don't see themselves as harboring animosity toward black people as such; they believe they hold to an ideal of equality, and of equal opportunity. So they feel insulted to be called racists, baffled by charges that we live in a racist society. A white supremacist would not be so wounded.

On the other hand, those who say our society is racist are not speaking rhetorically or hyperbolically. The claim that racism is dead or insignificant, in the face of overwhelming asymmetries between blacks and whites, in the face of the crisis of our inner cities and of the young black male, must produce anger or humiliation or incomprehension.

In general, white people today use the word "racism" to refer to the explicit conscious belief in racial superiority (typically white over black, but also sometimes black over white). For the most part, black people mean something different by racism: they mean a set of practices and institutions that result in the oppression of black people. Racism, on this view, is not a matter of what's in people's heads but of what happens in the world.

The white picture of the racist is the old-time Southern white supremacist, who proclaimed his beliefs proudly. Your typical late twentieth-century American is, at some important level, an egalitarian who rejects the supremacist creed. In her mind, then, she is not a racist.

That a person is not a racist in this sense makes a difference. Contrary to the pronouncements of some, things are worse when people explicitly believe and proclaim supremacist doctrines, and a special moral culpability attaches to holding such beliefs. But not to be a racist "in the head" is insufficient to prevent injustice and suffering that divides along racial lines.

The alternative view is that the evil we call racism is not fundamentally a matter of what's in people's heads, not a matter of their private, individual intentions, but rather a function of *public* institutions and practices that

create or perpetuate racial division and inequality. Who cares if your intentions are good if they reinforce or permit racial discrimination and deprivation?

Racism as overt or out-and-out racism reflects a powerful strain in our attitudes toward moral responsibility. On this view, you are responsible only for what you intend; thus, if consciously you harbor no ill-will toward people of another race or background you are in that respect innocent. For those who would be deemed the oppressors, such a view is abetted by what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance" — essentially, the desire to reduce psychological discomfort. It is comfortable for white people to believe racism is dead just as long as they harbor no conscious feelings of antipathy or superiority to blacks. And, conversely, it is less painful for blacks, seeing what they see, to think otherwise.

In what follows I sketch five kinds of attitudes and practices short of out-and-out racism to which critics are calling attention when they use the word "racism" in the broad way that so irritates many white Americans.

Less-Than-Conscious Racism

Over the last thirty or forty years it has become publicly unacceptable, in most circles, to express racist views openly. (Even this assertion requires careful qualification. In a recent pair of focus groups conducted for People for the American Way, young whites talked openly about their negative views of blacks. The explicit avowal of racist views is more common than one might suppose, and may be on the rise.) When a view becomes publicly unexpressible, it often becomes privately unexpressible as well: what we won't say to others we may cease to think to ourselves. It doesn't follow, however, that such beliefs vanish altogether.

How do they manifest themselves? It's common for people to find — even without any awareness on their part — the behavior of a person of another race more threatening or obnoxious or stupid (or whatever) than they would the behavior of a member of their own group. And just as their threshold of intolerance may be lower for negative behavior, they may have higher standards for members of other groups than for their own when it comes to positive traits: thus the claim that women and minorities have to be "twice as good" as white males to get the same credit. A related phenomenon is what psychologists call "aversive racism." In an experiment by

Samuel Gaertner, subjects received a phone call, seemingly a wrong number, from a person who said that his car had broken down, that he had just used his last dime and that he needed someone to call a tow truck for him. Young white liberals who presumably saw themselves as racially well-intentioned, were almost six times more likely to hang up on callers when the voice on the phone sounded black than when the person sounded white.

There's considerable evidence that murderers who kill white people are more likely to get the death penalty than those who kill black people, a disparity that implies the belief on the part of juries that white life is more valuable than black life. In general, you don't have to listen very carefully to hear the prejudices to which people give expression, often quite unawares, in talking about people who belong to other ethnic, racial, and religious groups.

Stereotyping

One way such views spill out is in ethnic or racial stereotypes. The stereotyper doesn't believe (or wouldn't say, anyway) that all blacks are less intelligent... more violent... lazier (choose one or more), or that all Jews are pushy or greedy, only that some, or most of those with whom she comes in contact, are. Or perhaps, to use an example of Adrian Piper's, she believes not that most black teenagers in running shoes are muggers but that most muggers are black teenagers in running shoes. In either case, she makes an inference about the person coming down the street toward her from a generalization she accepts about members of the group to which the person belongs. And that involves picking out some feature or features of the individual (in this case his blackness and youth) as most significant or noteworthy.

Two things can be said in defense of the white woman who crosses the street when she sees a group of black teenagers coming toward her. First, she might well do the same if the teenagers were white. In that case, her behavior does not constitute racial discrimination (though it might still be objectionable "ageism" or some other bias). Second, we need to analyze her thinking and her actions more carefully. She need not be thinking "These guys are black teenagers, therefore they are probably muggers." More likely she reasons "These guys are black teenagers, therefore the probability that they are muggers is greater than if they were _____ (fill in the blank: men in three-piece suits; gray-haired ladies; school-children)" — and great enough to warrant taking the small and relatively inoffensive precaution of crossing the street.

Now the probability of black teenagers being muggers surely *is* greater than the probability of gray-haired ladies being muggers. The crucial question is: how much more probable does it have to be to justify the evasive behavior?

Obviously, questions of this kind have no simple answers. To evaluate behavior based on a racial or other group generalization, several matters are relevant. Among them are: (1) The particular behavior in question, and

its costs to those stereotyped. Crossing the street is a minimal slight — if it's even noticed — and may be mitigated by a display of ulterior motivation, like inspecting the rosebushes on the other side. (2) This point is connected with another: is the behavior in question a merely private action, like the individual crossing the street, or is it the activity of a public official or institution? In that case, the threshold will be much higher, if indeed the behavior is permitted at all. A very damaging action done in an official capacity, like preventive detention, will be hardest of all to justify. (3) The costs or risks of not acting in the manner in question. Although the probability that the teenagers are muggers may be low, the risk if they are is great. (4) The available alternatives to the action or policy in question.

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Stereotyping is morally problematic because in some forms it seems inevitable, yet at the same time faulty. We can't make our way in the world without relying on rules of thumb, generalizations that enable us to size up people and situations by correlating their characteristics with predictions about what we can expect to happen. But such generalizations are always flawed, because they attribute particular qualities to some people who don't possess them. To generalize is to overgeneralize.

Yet whatever its complexities, it is clear that the most common forms of racial and ethnic stereotyping are indefensible. It's not, after all, that most Jews are greedy or most blacks are violent, so that stereotyping merely goes a little too far by failing to recognize exceptions. Such broad, vulgar stereotyping offends by its "reckless willingness to believe" — the willingness to believe, for example, that (as a white college student in the People for the American Way study put it) THEY "have a chip on their shoulders," are "rowdy," "bring it [discrimination] on themselves."

Accommodating Other People's Racism

People sometimes justify discrimination not in terms of their own beliefs but in terms of other people's. A shopkeeper refuses to hire a black sales clerk not because he himself is prejudiced, but because his customers are, and he fears a decline in sales. A corporation refuses to sponsor a program featuring an interracial love affair, not, its representatives say, because they disapprove, but because their viewers do. Suppose for the sake of

argument that the shopkeeper and the corporate executives speak the truth: they are not prejudiced, but their clients are. Whether or not we call the shopkeeper himself a racist there can be no doubt that he is perpetuating racism in the most direct way: by reinforcing the harmful beliefs of his customers, and by discriminating against black people in his hiring practices. And were he to refuse to accommodate these beliefs, he might help to change other people's attitudes, and so the world.

"Secondary" Racism

Borrowing a term from Mary Anne Warren, we can define "secondary racism" as discrimination based not on race itself but according to race-correlated factors that unfairly affect racial minorities. (The term is misleading if it suggests that such practices are of secondary importance.) Accommodating other people's racism is one kind of secondary racism, but there are many other subtler and apparently more innocent forms as well. So, for example, the practices of hiring through personal connections, or of "last hired, first fired," need not be based on racist beliefs, but they nevertheless affect women and minorities disproportionately and irrespective of merit. The quite natural tendency to favor "one's own kind," which need not involve hostility toward "other kinds," is a form of secondary discrimination.

Similarly, entrance examinations and other tests may contain biases against some groups that are unintended by and opaque to their creators. Tests purporting to measure native intelligence may presume familiarity with objects known only by those coming from more privileged backgrounds. Crucial to this form of discrimination, which is at least part of what is meant by "institutional racism," is that the requirements are on their face race- (or gender-) neutral; that they nevertheless have a "disparate impact" on members of certain groups; and that the elements in question are by hypothesis irrelevant to the performance of the task at hand.

The Disadvantages of Being Disadvantaged

This last category has no common name, although it is perhaps the broadest and most intractable form by which racial inequalities are perpetuated. Whereas secondary racism involves discriminating (however inadvertently) on the basis of factors irrelevant to merit, this form employs criteria that are appropriate and relevant.

Most people would agree that we ought to admit people to jobs or schools on the basis of ability and talent, past or potential performance. Yet even if we could purge our screening devices of irrelevant biases, fewer blacks would gain entry than their numbers in the general population would suggest. They will on the whole be less competitive, given past deprivation, than their more privileged white counterparts. Our metaphors here are the vicious cycle, the downward spiral, the chicken and the egg.

Even if "racism-in-the-head" disappeared, then, "racism-in-the-world" would not. One reason is the continued existence of facially race-neutral practices, like seniority systems and the old-boy network, that discriminate unfairly against minorities and women. The other reason is that people who as a historical consequence of overt racism have had substandard prenatal care, nutrition, housing, health services, and education, people who live in drug- and crime-infested neighborhoods, will on the whole fare less well than those more privileged.

Conclusion

"Racism" is inescapably a morally loaded term. To call a person a racist is to impugn his character by suggesting deliberate, malign discrimination, and it is therefore natural that those who think their hearts (or perhaps, in keeping with the foregoing metaphor, we should say their heads) are pure should take offense at the accusation.

Even if we were to agree that all racism is "in the head," however, overtly racist attitudes and beliefs do not exhaust its contents. Less-than-conscious attitudes and beliefs still play an important part in our mindsets. And even if individually such attitudes seem insignificant, collectively they add up to pervasive habits of behavior that can wreak injustice on whole groups of people.

At the same time, an individual whose attitudes and beliefs are not overtly racist, are not even covertly racist, can inhabit a racist society or participate in racist institutions. A society or an institution is racist if it discriminates on grounds of race, either "primarily" or "secondarily," or if it perpetuates inequalities produced by primary or secondary racism. Sometimes, the society or the institution is so corrupt that a morally decent person arguably ought not have anything to do with it. More often, however, we hold individuals to less stringent standards. We want to know whether they simply go along with the objectionable practices, or if in the course of their involvement they do something to make the system less discriminatory. What can they do? How much ought they to do? That's another story.

—Judith Lichtenberg

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Multiculturalism: An Anthropological Perspective

During a recent radio talk show on youth and the drug trade, the host's invited guests were young African-Americans. A woman caller suggested that all the black youths who sell drugs might agree to only sell them to white people (with intent to harm the "enemy") and use the profits to finance African-American communities. Her tone was calm, chilling, and she used Malcolm X ("By any means necessary") to justify her strategy. The talk show host, a self-proclaimed radical, was taken aback and strongly disagreed — he went into a long explanation about the difference between revolution and criminal violence. But the invited panel of young people did not hold the caller's idea in such aversion, one saying it bore further thought.

For the caller and that youth, the line between black and white was clearly and starkly drawn, and whites were seen as enemies responsible for the continued oppression of African-Americans. But in many instances, these cultural lines are fuzzier and the definition of who we are (even as opposed to who they are) is fluid and situational. On the same talk show, on another occasion, a heated debate took place about whether or not African-American or African was the best term to use to describe people of African descent living in the United States. In another instance a caller said: "We are the dash in African-American."

In Montgomery County, Maryland, where I live and I conduct fieldwork, issues of group definition are salient foci of controversy. The county, until recently, was largely socially homogenous and its residents among the wealthiest in the country. But rapid economic growth has led to significant demographic and social change. The newest immigrant populations are people from Central and South America, and Asia. They have a range of income levels and settlement patterns within the county. The needs of these growing populations are stressing county services.

The prestigious school system has become one of the major arenas for social and political conflict as different civic and activist groups (some organized along ethnic lines) demand that the school system remedy inequalities in the delivery of education to "minority" students (inequalities evidenced by a persistent gap in performance between "white" students and "black" and "Hispanic" students).

Despite various attempts by the Board of Education to address this issue under an initiative labelled "Priority Two" — the improvement of black and Hispanic student performance — school officials have so far been unable to close the gap. In 1989, a growing coalition of Asian civic groups demanded that Asians be included in the definition of "minority" under Priority Two, and finally Native Americans (a small population in the county) also were added. Meanwhile, the whole notion of designating certain groups as "minority" has come under attack (by people in the minority community and by the newly appointed superintendent, an African-American). Meanwhile, the school system is proceeding with efforts to revise its curriculum to become more "multicultural."

As an anthropologist engaged in the discussion of multiculturalism, I am troubled by the facile identification of groups, and by the perceived lines of division. What troubles me is not the "multi" part of multiculturalism, but the "culture" part. For many people, a culture is a closed system of shared meanings and significant symbols with easily identified boundary markers. Anthropologists have shared in this form of identification, especially when their primary objects of study were people considered peripheral to the industrialized world — the so-called tribal people. Our ethnographies bore definitive titles of definitive groups — the Dinka, the Yuqui, the Mundurucu, the Nuer, and so on.

But with time as our analysis became more sophisticated, as we acquired more evidence and a broader historical perspective, and as we confronted the fact that the people we studied were not isolated populations, we could not cling to clear-cut definitions of cultural entities. Some began to realize that groups previously characterized as homogenous through shared cultural norms were divided (perhaps most fundamentally by gender) and that rather than shared norms, cultural values were oft times contested, and constantly in flux. This complicated our methodological approach because if cultures were not closed systems then how could we study them as "wholes" and how could we compare cultures? There has been no consensus on this, but the debate has spurred new kinds of research questions and new units of analysis.

Yet, despite the awareness that culture and all societies