

The Persistent Problem

BY MICHAEL O. EMERSON

While whites tend to focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, people of color tend to focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But the focus must be on working together to undo the racialized society, and that is by definition not just about individuals.

For every racial group in the United States there exists at least one highly offensive, derogatory word meant to belittle them. We all know such words. But what about for white Americans, does there exist such an emotion-charged word? When I ask my students this question – no matter their hue – they are befuddled. “Honky” or “cracker” seem nothing more than funny-sounding words to them. Any words they can think of simply do not feel offensive or highly derogatory. Such words are all bark, and no bite.

Then I point out to my students that indeed there is such a word, one that will get whites’ blood boiling in a heartbeat. That word? “Racist.” Call a white American a racist and that person will be angered, the pulse will increase, and the skin will redden. Almost as if by instinct, the accused will lash out at the accuser, either with strong denial or with name calling of his or her own.

Why is this word so upsetting to so many white Americans? To answer this question, we must first understand a few central concepts within the study of race and race relations.

COMPETING DEFINITIONS OF RACISM

Racism is one of the most overused words in the American lexicon. Definitions vary widely, and the term is applied in a dizzying array of

situations, actions, and thoughts. It is a killer word—once uttered (“That’s racism”; “You’re racist”; “That’s a racist thing to say”; “America is racist”), it kills true, open social interaction.

Research consistently finds significant differences in the way that racial groups tend to define racism.¹ Whites tend to view racism as intended individual acts of overt prejudice and discrimination. Let us unpack the components of this view. First, insofar as racism exists, it is individual people who carry such views and act upon them. Groups, nations, and organizations are not racist; people are. Second, to be considered racist, the person must classify a group of people as inferior to others, and then whatever they say or do must result directly from that view. That is, they must mean for their actions to be racist for them to actually be racist. Third, racism is equated with prejudice (wrong thinking and talking about others) and individual discrimination (wrong actions against others). Finally, because of the other components of racism’s definition, if a person is a racist it is a master status, a core identity of who the person is, not just some passing act. In short, it defines the person’s essence.

To be called “racist” by others then is so very offensive to so many whites because it communicates an amazing charge. It says, “You, white person, walk around holding crazy stereotypes in your head, and intentionally and directly parading your racial prejudice and discrimination against me and others. Whatever else you may be, white person, this racist label is your master status.” Ouch. No wonder the word makes the blood boil.

Interestingly, though it is the dominant definition among whites, the individualist definition of racism is even more strongly held by white evangelicals than other whites. My colleague Christian Smith and I argue that this is due to the religio-cultural tools of the evangelical version of Christianity. Three tools in particular matter here: (1) individuals are personally accountable for their decisions (and the outcome of their decisions), (2) social life consists of individuals interacting with other individuals and change comes one heart at a time (what we call “relationalism”), and (3) anti-structuralism, that is, the rejection of the idea that relationships and individual actions might be subject to larger social forces, such as laws, institutional operating practices, and employment patterns. These religio-cultural tools direct white evangelicals either not to consider alternative definitions of racism, or if presented with alternative definitions, to view them as simply wrong.²

Most people of color define racism quite differently. Racism is, at a minimum, prejudice plus power, and that power comes not from being a prejudiced individual, but from being part of a group that controls the nation’s systems. So while anyone can be prejudiced, only whites can perpetrate racism in the United States, for they hold and have always held most of the power in American institutions. Even in a nation that currently has a president defined as black, nearly all senators, representatives, governors, and CEOs,

to name a few, are white. This view of racism is called the structuralist definition, and stands in stark contrast to the individualist definition.

We can already begin to see difficulties emerging. Race relations are fraught with land mines. One of them is that racial groups, on average, simply do not define racism in the same way. Disagreeing on racism's definition means not only the potential for more group conflict, but also reduced potential for overcoming it. Different definitions mean groups and people are working to different ends using different means. We could call this a stalemate, but even here there is disagreement. Whites often feel they live in a time of reverse racism and favoritism for minority groups. Given this view, they at times perceive themselves as the new minority group. In contrast, people of color most commonly view the system as stacked against them, that they will have to be twice as good as a white to get the job, promotion, or recognition, and that because political and organizational power remains in the hands of whites, white Americans will continue to define the terms of life in the United States – and to define it in terms favoring whites. Given these conflicts, different perspectives, and continuing suspicion, can we ever move forward?

DIMENSIONS OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

Within the study of race relations, several scholars have outlined what they call “white privilege.” We cannot understand racism in the United States without understanding the traditional position of white Americans relative to other Americans.

We can summarize what is meant by white privilege by discussing its three main dimensions.³

White Structural Advantage. As alluded to earlier, white Americans occupy the location of dominance – politically, economically, culturally, and numerically – within the racial hierarchy. They have disproportionate influence of political

parties, legal system, government-controlled institutions, industry, and business. These structural advantages provide whites with privileges – defined here as benefits accrued by virtue of having a white identity. This advantage is in everyday situations and at institutional levels.

Here are some examples, with varying degrees of significance for life outcomes. Whites easily purchase movies, literature, or greeting cards with whites in them. White Americans can ignore the experiences, writings, and

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ideas of racial/ethnic minorities without penalty. Whites are assumed to be middle-class, law-abiding, and well-meaning, unless they prove otherwise (and they will have to work at proving it) whereas for other groups it is typically the opposite. Whites have the ability to set laws and policies – in part because elected officials are overwhelmingly white – that define who is white and who is not, give them power to interpret what is a racial problem and what is not, determine who gets into the country and who does not, determine housing policies that favor their racial group, shape the development of educational curriculums that emphasize Western history and social experiences, and much more.

White Normativity. Structural advantage facilitates white normativity – the normalization of whites’ cultural practices, ideologies, and location within the racial hierarchy such that how whites do things, their understandings about life, society, and the world, and their dominant social location over other racial groups are accepted as *just how things are*. Anything that diverges from this norm is deviant. Whites are privileged because, unlike nonwhites, they do not need to justify their way of doing or being. Instead, the burden for change is placed on the perceived deviants. Although white culture has many variations (compare for example a rural, Republican, NASCAR-loving, catfish-eat’n southern white and a wealthy, Democrat, opera-loving, quiche-eating Bostonian white), there remains an overarching normativity, a “configuration of [racial] practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of [whiteness]...that secures the dominant position of whites.”⁴ That is, whites uphold practices and beliefs that sustain their dominant position in the racial hierarchy. Thus the practices and understandings of whites are normalized, and their interests affirmed.

White Transparency is “the tendency of whites not to think...about norms, behaviors, experiences, or perspectives that are white-specific.”⁵ Whites typically lack a racial consciousness. Most whites are unaware that they are “raced,” and that their race has real consequences for their lives. Rather, they believe that they earn what they get, and their achievements are nearly all based on individual effort, talent, and creativity. Whites often believe they are cultureless; it does not mean anything to be white they may think. They often think that only other groups have distinctive cultures and ways of being. Thus whites find it difficult to explain what it means to be white. In fact, they typically find it uncomfortable, even offensive to be asked. This is white transparency.

I see the impact of white transparency in a very real way when I give the students in my race and ethnic relations course the following assignment: “For the next twenty-four hours, any time you refer to someone who is white, preface it with the word ‘white.’ So if you are telling someone about your professor, say ‘my white professor.’ If you are talking about your friend, say ‘my white friend.’ After the twenty-four hours are com-

pleted, write a paper about your experience. How did you feel? What were other people's reactions?"

Their papers follow a fairly clear racial pattern. The students of color either say they did not find it that unusual to do this, as they typically do so – referring to people by their racial group. Or they say they find it funny, and so too do the people of color they talk to. But they also find it difficult to refer to someone as white to a white person, fearing retribution or expressions of shock.

My white students typically find this assignment a most difficult, often excruciating experience. They tell me they never refer to people by their race, so to be asked to do so feels not only unnatural, but also wrong, perhaps even racist. Some tell me they could not do the assignment at all (I tell them in the assignment that they do not have to do the assignment, but in such a case should write about why they did not wish to do it). Many do not finish the twenty-four hours, as they are simply too uncomfortable. Of those who attempt the assignment, they often report feeling dread, great nervousness, having sweaty palms, or racing hearts as they began. They report absolute shock from their white friends or family when they refer to someone as white. Sometimes they get lectures, reactions of horror, or reactions of "What is wrong with you?" Also common is to get reactions like, "What do you mean your white professor? What color are your other professors?"

This assignment is meant to demonstrate white privilege, especially white normativity and white transparency. It should not be a big deal, for an assignment, to refer to white people as white people for a few hours. It is not for most non-whites, unless they are talking to whites. It almost always is for whites, no matter who they are talking to, for the assignment violates the boundaries of white normativity and white transparency.

Given the white transparency so dominant in the United States, a white person is simply seen as an American, or perhaps as someone who has an ethnicity and eats some special foods on holidays. White transparency is a powerful tool for maintaining privilege because of its elusive nature. How can one challenge white privilege if there is no such thing as white culture/white practices? White transparency is also why whites can feel like they are under attack for little reason, and why they may feel that society is set up against them. To be white means in part that one does not see the

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advantages garnered from being white, so any threats to taken-for-granted ways of life are indeed threatening and feel unjustified.

These three dimensions of whiteness – white structural advantage, white normativity, and white transparency – work together to sustain whites' position at the top of society. Importantly, these dimensions can produce dominance without whites feeling like it is true (though most

anyone who is not white believes it to be true).

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We have identified the very different definitions, perspectives, and social locations of Americans based in good part on the racial group of which they are perceived to be a part. White privilege is often invisible to whites, but as clear as a sunny day to people of color; contrasting and conflicting definitions of racism cause all sorts

of problems, and serve only to heighten divisions between racial groups. So can we move beyond such impasses?

THE RACIALIZED SOCIETY

We can start by acknowledging that racism is not an accurate focus for understanding race in the United States. Rather, we should acknowledge that the United States, as a nation, is racialized. By this I mean that it is a society where racial categories matter profoundly, creating differences in life experiences (including the topics explored thus far in this essay), life opportunities, and social relationships. A racialized society allocates what society values – income, wealth, fine neighborhoods, quality schools, social status, respect, psychological well-being, health, life expectancy – unequally along racial lines. Society (its institutions and its people) create racial categories which change over time, as well as the form of racialization – such as slavery, Jim Crow segregation, de facto segregation and inequality. So while its form changes, what does not change is that race matters considerably for people's identities, whom they know, where they live, whom they marry, and their life chances.

Consider for example the current case that white Americans have on average ten times the wealth of black and Hispanic Americans.⁶ That superior wealth allows white Americans to obtain the finest of neighborhoods, the best of educations, and access to many other social goods that help them pass on their advantages to their children. It allows them to help one another

out in ways impossible for other groups. We can summarize it this way: What does it cost to be black, Hispanic, or American Indian in the racialized society? On average, about 40% of your income, 90% of your wealth, and five to ten years of your life.⁷

From this racialization perspective, racism is not individual overt prejudice, nor prejudice plus power. Rather, it is the *collective misuse of power that leads to inequality in the distribution of society's valued resources*. It is a *changing ideology with the constant purpose of justifying the racialized society*. Racism, then, is a concept that helps us understand how racialized systems are maintained, but it is not itself the central issue in race relations and racial inequality.

We need to focus our attention on undoing our racialized society, on making our organizations fairer places for people of all racial backgrounds, on making our congregations places that do not reinforce racial division, but which instead bring people of all backgrounds together for the common purpose of glorifying God. We would do well to acknowledge that for all the reasons discussed earlier, whites' tendency will be to focus on creating good-intentioned, right thinking people, whereas people of color's tendency will be to focus on group equality and justice. Both are important, so they need not be at war. But the focus must be on working together to undo the racialized society, and that is by definition not just about individuals.

How can we work together without simply ending up devolving into disagreement and conflict, as has happened so often in the past? My colleague George Yancey and I have developed what we call the Mutual Obligations Approach.⁸ Although I cannot go into details of this approach here, its key steps include interracial contact under controlled conditions, listening to each other, acknowledging and defining racial problems, searching for a critical core that is agreed upon by all, giving voice to cultural uniqueness, recognizing and incorporating self- and group-interest, and devising ways that allow for negotiation of these self- and group-interests to produce an agreed upon solution. This approach is something like what is done in marital counseling, but on a much larger scale. This larger scale makes solutions more complicated, and requires using more steps and relying on more principles. But it can be done. It should be done. And with our undying hope in God's power and kingdom of heaven on earth, it will be done.

NOTES

1 For example, see George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock: Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 19-28.

2 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 76-91.

3 For an excellent review of whiteness studies and their sources, see Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

4 Amanda E. Lewis, "'What Group?' Studying Whites and Whiteness in the Era of 'Color-Blindness,'" *Sociological Theory* 22:4 (December, 2004), 623-646, here citing 634.

5 Barbara Flagg, "'Was Blind, but Now I See': White Race Consciousness and the Requirement of Discriminatory Intent," *Michigan Law Review* 91 (March, 1993), 953-1017, here citing 957.

6 Melvin L. Oliver and Thomas M. Shapiro, *Black Wealth/White Wealth: A New Perspective on Racial Inequality*, tenth anniversary edition (New York: Routledge, 2006), especially chapter 5, "A Story of Two Nations: Race and Wealth."

7 See the articles in Charles A. Gallagher, ed., *Rethinking the Color Line: Readings in Race and Ethnicity*, second edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2009).

8 Michael O. Emerson and George Yancey, *Transcending Racial Barriers: Toward a Mutual Obligations Approach* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).



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