

Growing up Black in a White, liberal world, I believed that America was close to being rid of racism. Not to say that I believed racism had ended, but instead that I never questioned what racism looks like today. In school, Black children are taught a white-washed version of our history. We are taught that since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, all Americans are racially equal. Schools are no longer legally segregated, so everything is ok, right? We grow up and let racist jokes happen because they're the norm and we aren't educated about how to respond. As I got older, I began to question more and more the way society works as direct result of questioning who I am and how the world views me. I am thinking of what it means to be a woman and to be Black today. More specifically, I am thinking about what it means to be of South African and Black-American decent.

Part of thinking about what it means to be Black is to experience a certain level of worry. I worry about my younger brothers being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I worry that I may not get a job because of my race. I worry that my sister will grow up to hate her appearance because it does not live up to society's Eurocentric standards of beauty. I even worry about raising children in a society that does not view them as human beings full of potential. I think about race a lot, and the social implications of not being White.

Being a person of color in this country that is founded on imperialism and white-dominant behavior is extremely difficult. Although arguably, Black people may no longer be subject to blatant and outspoken racism on a national level, we still experience discrimination based on our skin color. The face of racism has changed from firehouse attacks and lynching to institutionalized discrimination and micro-aggressions.¹ So while Black people may have more opportunities, systems in our society, such as education, are becoming increasingly more segregated due to economic and race factors.

The 2008 election was, without a doubt, a landmark in America's history. For the first time, a woman and an African-American man were in the running for President of the United States. President Obama winning the election was the beginning of a new era: Post-Racial America. On the night of his election, American news anchors were praising the country for entering the new age of post-racialism, claiming that the United States could no longer be criticized for being racist now that the President was Black. The truth is that the reality of racism in America today is very different from its perception. Unlike what many would like to believe, a person's race has a deep effect on every aspect of her life. A person's race determines many of her privileges, or in the case of Black Americans, disadvantages. A person's race has an effect on her education, where she gets housing, the types of jobs she gets, and a host of other aspects of her life. A person's race affects how she views herself and how she is viewed by the world. So how can the American society re-evaluate its understanding of and relationship to race? We first need to re-examine how it operates by understanding the current state of racism in this country, especially the effects of institutionalized racism in education, economics, and racism. Second, we need to get rid of the notion that a post-racial society not only exists, but is a good thing. And third, we need to change the conversations society is having about it.

¹ When I say institutionalized racism, I am referring to the more subtle policies and practices of racism. These policies and practices affect Black people's access to opportunities and services. (Academic.udayton.edu)

Race, Racism, & Post-Racialism

Race does not exist as a biological category, but instead refers to a person's physical characteristics. The American Association of Physical Anthropologists says that, "biological differences between human beings reflect both hereditary factors and the influence of natural and social environments." When we talk about race, we are referring to a person's skin color, eye color, hair color, bone/jaw structure, etc. To be very clear, race and ethnicity, though interconnected, are two separate characteristics. Ethnicity is about cultural factors such as nationality, culture, ancestry, language and beliefs. A person's race directly impacts how they see themselves as well as how the world sees them.

Racism is "a system of advantage based on race. There are personal, cultural, and institutional manifestations of racism" (Tantum 1). Racism occurs when there is prejudice in combination with power. Despite the fact that any differences between races are purely physical, racism says that these differences are the reasons why a certain group of people succeeds, while others don't. Racism, at its core, denies Black Americans full civic membership. It says that as a Black person, you are less than; you are without value.

Post-Racial refers to the idea that today, race no longer matters - that anybody can accomplish anything and that your race will no longer be held against you. The truth is that the post-racial society America would like to believe we are in does not exist. The ability of President Obama to overcome bigotry does not mean that individual, institutionalized, and systematic racism has been abolished.² President Obama is a Black man, who should be noted, had the privilege of being raised by White Americans and had a Harvard education. In the words of Jacquetta Szathmari, "post-racial is kind of like a unicorn." So not only does a post-racial society not exist, but it is the product of fantasy, never to exist.

Racism in America creates physical barriers and insecurity. It also limits the rights of a person to earn a living on equal terms as well as creates cultural restrictions. All of these characteristics are present in today's society. Society is not post-racial because race is involved in education, politics, economics, healthcare, etc. While the effects of racism on these institutions of society run much deeper than can be discussed in this paper, it is still important to shed light on them.

In an essay titled "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies," a White author, Peggy McIntosh discusses White privilege, an embedded form of oppression that those who benefit from it cannot see. In the paper, McIntosh writes, "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious." In the essay, Peggy McIntosh, uses first person statements to list some of the privileges she has as a White person in America.

² Individual racism is refers to acts committed by an individual that cause death, injury, destruction of property, or denial of services or opportunity. Systemic racism refers to the value system embedded in society that supports and allows discrimination. (Academic.udayton.edu)

Racism in Education

I can easily find academic courses and institution, which give attention only to people of my race.

I can be pretty sure my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes towards their race

-White Privilege and Male Privilege, Peggy McIntosh

Institutionalized racism in America has had deep and harsh effects on the education of Black children. As a Black student in America, your history is not taught in the classroom. The suffering as well as the power of your people is taught in one month out of the year. But the information is recycled year after year, and eventually you begin to separate Black history from American history, as though Black people did not play a huge role in American history.

The oversimplification of Black history is not the only result of racism in America's education system. An article published on americaswire.org titled, "Educators Alarmed: Black, Latino High School Students Perform at Levels of 30 Years Ago," lays out why Black students, in general, are performing on lower academic levels. Educators provide a list of reasons why this academic performance gap between White students and Black students is continuing to widen. The first reason is that the education system has lowered expectations for students of color. There is growing income inequality and lack of resources in low-income school districts as well as unequal access to experienced teachers. In addition, "out of field" teachers are teaching subjects outside of their expertise to minority students. Lastly, educators say that there is an unconscious bias by teachers and administrators. Teresa Wiltz, the author of the article, explains that, "Teachers may think that students from poor families are so traumatized that they can't learn, experts say, and so they don't push those children to excel." She also explains that teachers often talk about being afraid of the size of Black male students and over punish them, which leads to large number of Black male student suspensions. This unconscious bias results in many Black students falling behind and not receiving acceptable education.

The article "US Schools Are More Segregated Today than in the 1950s," published on projectcensored.org, reported that the majority of high-school dropouts occur in non-white public schools, and it is these schools that suffer from unequal funding, fewer qualified teachers, and an unequal curriculum. "Middle-class black youngsters aren't doing as well as their white peers" (Americaswire.org). It's not just in schools stricken with poverty that Black students suffer academically. So Black students are given low-quality educations and are underperforming not because they are incapable, but instead because of a host of reasons often times out of their control.

Black students receiving lower quality education is unfair and detrimental. The way the education system treats Black students reflects racism's belief that Black people are not worthy of a basic human right. Which at the root means that America still views Black people as less than, as inferior. So when Black students aren't encouraged in school, or are treated as though they are not worth the time or the effort, what I think about is the huge impact on self-worth and

self-esteem it has on Black students. This mistreatment of Black students in the education system matters so much because an education leads to a number of opportunities, especially in the types of jobs a person is qualified for. An education often decides the type of job, housing, as well as other financial aspects of a person's life.

Racism in Economics

If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I should want to live.

I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be pleasant or neutral to me.

-White Privilege and Male Privilege, Peggy McIntosh

When I was in elementary school, I lived on the predominantly Black and Hispanic side of Austin, but the neighborhood schools were failing and my parents didn't want to put me in those schools. As I progressed through school, we began to move further and further outside of town until we ended up in the suburbs. So now I live in a predominantly White neighborhood, and I haven't always felt safe.

The 2008 recession was a deep blow to many American's, but the Black community was hit especially hard. An article titled "NAACP: Banks Steered Blacks to Bad Loans" states that Black homeowners were 3.5 times likelier to receive subprime loans than white homebuyers were, and that Black homebuyers were also six times likelier to get a subprime rate when refinancing.³ Even when their credit scores, income, and down payments were the same as those of white homebuyers, Black homebuyers were disproportionately pushed into getting subprime loans.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, the median net worth of White households was \$134,280 in 2004, while the net worth for Black households was \$13,450. In 2009, the median net worth for white households had fallen 24 percent to \$97,860. The median black net worth had fallen 83 percent to \$2,170.

The Economic Policy Institute also stated that in 2009, 33% of Black people, age 45 and older, experienced difficulty paying their rent or mortgage. In addition, 44% of this demographic had problems paying for items such as food and utilities. While 10% of the general population lost their jobs, 18% of this demographic lost their jobs. These statistics are evidence of the interconnectedness of race and poverty. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that minorities are disproportionately homeless and experience significantly poorer housing situations.

Merissa Perry Harris got straight to the point on her talk show when she stated that there is nothing riskier than being poor in America and that "We have to create a safety net for poor people. And when we won't, because they happen to look different from us, it is the pervasive ugliness." The disproportionate numbers of blacks in low paying jobs as well as the unemployment rate are markers of race's legacy in America. Poverty not only affects a person's education, but it also affects a person's health.

³ A subprime loan is "a type of loan that is offered at a rate above prime to individuals who do not qualify for prime rate loans." Subprime loans usually have higher interest rates. (Investopedia.com)

A person's economic situation determines their physical quality of life, and a person's economic standing, especially when unstable, can take a huge toll on that person's mental and emotional well-being.

Racism in Healthcare

I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
-White Privilege and Male Privilege, Peggy McIntosh

Minorities are sicker than white Americans; they have more illness and are dying at a significantly higher rate. As target demographics of institutions that promote unhealthy products such as liquor and fast food, minority communities experience a host of chronic health diseases.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reported that the Black population is 1.4 times as likely than White people to have high blood pressure. Breast cancer is diagnosed 10% less frequently in Black women, and they are 40% more likely to die from it than White women. The Black population is twice as likely to get diabetes than the White population. The death rate for Black men and women is 30% higher than White men and women, despite the fact that 6% of African Americans have heart disease. In 2006, the death rates of Black infants were twice the amount of White infants. Black adults aged 18-64 years experience substantially larger percentages of uninsured populations than Asian/Pacific Islander and White Americans. Communities comprised largely of minorities are more likely than White communities to be exposed to environmental toxins such as lead and asbestos.

Institutional racism in health care not only affects access to health care, but it also affects the quality of health care Black Americans receives. An article titled "Institutional Racism in the US Health Care System" lists the ways racism affects the healthcare of Black Americans. Institutionalized racism creates barriers to hospitals and health care institutions, especially when there are a disproportionate number of hospital closures that benefit the minority community. Minority doctors are under-represented in the medical field, and it is minority doctors who are the most likely to work in minority communities. Medicaid policies exclude a large proportion of the elderly minority population from nursing homes⁴ The affirmative action policies that would increase representation are under serious legal attacks in our "post-racial" society. The lower a person's economic stability, the lower their access to health care is, due to unemployment and a lack of health insurance.

The Office of Mental Health reported that Black Americans living below the poverty level are three times more likely to report psychological distress than White Americans that are over twice the poverty level. It also reported that Black Americans are 20% more likely to report experiencing serious psychological distress than White Americans. At the same time White Americans are more than twice as likely to receive antidepressant prescription treatments than Black Americans.

⁴ Medicaid is a government run program that provides low-cost health coverage for lower-income people, families and children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. (Medicaid.gov/)

Institutionalized racism in the American health care ignores the serious health issues of Black Americans that are often a result of poverty. It matters because it puts the health of Black Americans at risk. It matters because Black Americans are human beings whose health and well-being should not be put at risk. It is unacceptable to treat a group of people as less than human.

The True Meaning of Post-Racialism

Because race is intertwined in the education, economic, and health security of Black lives, we shouldn't even think about saying America is a post-racial society. With all of these racial disparities occurring in America, how could we claim that we're in a post-racial society? The desire to be post-racial is really America's desire to stop discussing race and racism. If race no longer matters, then all conversations surrounding it should cease.

Paulette Caldwell gets to the core of post-racialism when she says, that, "one of post-racialism's purposes is to mask continuing racial inequality and transcend it." Post-racialism, especially in today's state, would normalize racial inequality and prepare us to accept them as normal. Post-racialism in itself is a form of racism. It says that the suffering of Black people is not worth examining and trying to fix.

Instead, we should focus on creating a *post-racist* society; a society in which race is discussed and matters because it is deeply rooted in the unfair treatment of Black Americans. We need to create a society in which we can fully examine how racism operates today and what needs to happen to achieve equality. We should be moving towards a society in which differences and cultures are not tolerated or squashed, but accepted and respected.

Changing the Conversations

Before anything else, America needs to stop entertaining the idea that we are in a post-racial society. We need to discuss how deep institutionalized racism runs. We need to discuss the psychological, emotional, and physical affects of racism on Black Americans. We need to have in-depth discussions about how systems such as poverty and education are interwoven with race.

I believe that one of the most powerful actions America can make is to finally view Black Americans as the human beings that they are. Once that is established, mistreatment of basic human rights will no longer be tolerated. All of the facts I presented may seem sort of abstract or distant, but they are the truth. These are facts that deeply affect the quality of life Black people have. It's important to not distance oneself from the information because it affects human beings just like you.

A post-racial society is not possible, but is also not a sign of progress. Racism will still exist in a post-racial society. Yes, the country is no longer segregated, but that does not mean that there is racial equality. America has a lot of work it needs to do before a post-racist country can be achieved.

It is so important to keep conversations about racism alive in order to end it. Ignoring a problem does not make it go away. It is in having conversations about the serious mistreatment of Black Americans that we can begin to come up with solutions. Racism will not go away unless there is an outspoken effort to do so.

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