

Race is a concept
that is completely
societal essay



Race is not genetic. No one characteristic or gene composition was ever more a part of one race than another. In America, race helped Americans to explain why some Americans could be denied certain rights and freedoms that others never even had to fight for.

Since our economy was largely based on slavery, it seemed easy to qualify people as black or white, depending on arbitrary criteria in order to deny blacks rights. That denial of rights become institutionalized in government policy as well as everyday living and became “ natural” to the lives of many. Some researchers like Barbara Jean Fields believe that the very reason to group people into minority is to help put wealth, power, and privilege right into the willing hands of white people. Even though race is only a social context, racism and discrimination are very real and have existed throughout history for members of minority groups. For blacks in this country, they began as slaves. Even after the slaves were freed and slavery ended, policy against blacks did not end.

There were then some social theorists who believed that genetically blacks and other minorities were inferior to whites. Some of these beliefs have held on as well even though they were proven definitively wrong. Where African Americans are today in terms of wealth, education and other factors is impacted greatly by where they began. This will be explored in this paper along the sociological theories that explain the relationship between dominant and subordinate groups. African Americans began in slavery in order to support an economic system that they played relatively no part in.

Because they were not “naturalized” citizens, they could play no part in voting, owning properties, serving on juries, or holding offices. When the slaves were finally freed, “the federal government never followed through on General Sherman’s Civil War plan to divide up plantations and give each freed slave “40 acres and a mule” as reparations. Only once was monetary compensation made for slavery, in Washington, D. C. There, government officials paid up to \$300 per slave upon emancipation – not to the slaves, but to local slaveholders as compensation for loss of property” (A Long History). In addition to that, “when slavery ended, its legacy lived on not only in the impoverished condition of Black people but in the wealth and prosperity that accrued to white slave-owners and their descendents.

Economists who try to place a dollar value on how much white Americans have profited from 200 years of unpaid slave labor, including interest, begin their estimates at \$1 trillion” (A Long History). Even when slavery ended, Jim Crow laws went into effect meaning that the very best of everything was reserved for whites only—schools, jobs, neighborhoods, hospitals, etc. However, there were also direct government policies that played into the majority-minority or us and them status. “The 1935 Wagner Act helped establish an important new right for white people. By granting unions the power of collective bargaining, it helped millions of white workers gain entry into the middle class over the next 30 years.

But the Wagner Act permitted unions to exclude non-whites and deny them access to better paid jobs and union protections and benefits such as health care, job security, and pensions. Many craft unions remained nearly all-white well into the 1970s. In 1972, for example, every single one of the 3, 000

members of Los Angeles Steam Fitters Local #250 was still white” (A Long History). The FHA further upheld the privileges of whites with their programming when they allowed thousands of men to get low interest loans, but this did not include blacks. Mortgage eligibility was tied to race implicitly.

Integrated communities were made ineligible for loans in a process called redlining. As stated on the PBS web site, “ Between 1934 and 1962, the federal government backed \$120 billion of home loans. More than 98% went to whites. Of the 350, 000 new homes built with federal support in northern California between 1946 and 1960, fewer than 100 went to African Americans” (A Long History).

Because of this blacks tended to stay in urban areas while whites were able to move to the white suburbs that seemed to spring up around every corner. To make matters worse, eventually the federal highway system was instituted to make it easier for those whites in the suburbs to commute to the city. This act broke up minority communities even more, and made the value of homes even less. Nobody wants to own homes or rent apartments right next to the freeway. Communities that were successfully functioning were broken up.

Commercial and retail land was taken up to build the highway systems, and in some cases, low income high rise buildings were built to replace all the single family homes that blacks owned or rented. These housing projects, like the Robert Taylor or the Ida B. Wells in Chicago, turned out to be breeding grounds for criminalities of all sorts. Residents were far removed from places they could get gainful employment, etc.

The freeway system cut through central communities and destroyed their vitality. Now, central cities like Chicago and Detroit have much greater needs and less of a tax base to support those needs. Journalist Larry Alderman illustrates this principle perfectly in the following true story. Thirteen years ago, my parents sold the house I grew up in. It was one of those suburban tract homes that sprouted across the nation after World War II.

Our home was pleasant if undistinguished. It wasn't one of Malvina Reynolds' "little boxes made of ticky tacky" - based on a drive the singer took past Daly City, CA in the '50s. It was a ranch house on a curving, leafy street in Merrick, Long Island, 25 miles east of Manhattan, about five miles from its more famous suburban neighbor, Levittown. After turning 65, my father wasted no time retiring. He'd purchased our house back in 1952 for \$20,000 thanks to a 4 percent mortgage made possible by the Veterans Administration.

Now he was considering an offer of \$300,000. With the money they'd get a place in the Berkshires and winter in Florida. Ten years later, my colleague here at California Newsreel, Cornelius, sold the house he grew up in. Cornelius' folks had also purchased a place in the early '50s in Chester, just outside Philadelphia.

A few years ago, after Cornelius' father passed away, his mother wanted to move back to Virginia. Cornelius sold the home in 2000 - for \$29,500. That \$270,500 gap reveals a microcosm of race in America. My family is white and Cornelius' is black" (Alderman). Racism is still seen clearly in the distribution of wealth and power in this country. These inequalities are

passed on from generation to generation, so that it is very naive to believe that blacks can even have close to equal opportunity in this country.

The housing discrimination practices still in place today means that this unfair practice and result still continues. Some people might question how these kinds of practices have affected the black minority today. It is a good question, and the answer is always that the past does affect the future. “ Today. Black and Latino mortgage applicants are still 60% more likely than whites to be turned down for a loan, even after controlling for employment, financial, and neighborhood factors.

According to the Census, whites are more likely to be segregated than any other group. As recently as 1993, 86% of suburban whites still lived in neighborhoods with a black population of less than 1%” (A Long History). There are a wealth of other facts that prove this very point. “ In 1992, The Federal Reserve Bank of Boston released a study showing that Black and Latino mortgage applicants are 60 percent more likely to be turned down for loans than whites, even when they share similar employment and financial backgrounds” (A History). And for those who think housing discrimination has simply gone away, there are statistics that are even more recent.

According to a 1998 report by the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), African-American mortgage applicants were rejected 217 percent as often as whites - up from 206 percent in 1995” (A Long History). In fact, “ according to a Department of Housing and Urban Development study, high-cost loans are offered five times more often in Black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods. Furthermore,

homeowners in upper-income Black neighborhoods were twice as likely to receive these sort of loans than homeowners in low-income white neighborhoods. In 1998, 9 percent of home loans in white neighborhoods were high cost compared to 51 percent of loans in Black neighborhoods” (A Long History).

Another example of how this has affected the present is that that a typical white family today has on average eight times the assets, or net worth, of a typical African American family, according to New York University economist Edward Wolff (A Long History). Even when they make the same income, the white family has double the net worth. This is because the white families were able to own homes, and homes provide equity. Equity is also determined by what one is able to inherit from ones parents. That means if your parents were able to own their homes too, it makes sense that your net worth would then be increased.

Furthermore, those with wealth pass their assets on to their children - by financing a college education, lending a hand during hard times, or assisting with the down payment for a home. Some economists estimate that up to 80 percent of lifetime wealth accumulation depends on these intergenerational transfers. White advantage is passed down, from parent to child to grandchild. As a result, the racial wealth gap - and the head start enjoyed by whites - appears to have grown since the civil rights days” (A Long History).

The following statistic is not surprising and yet it is. “ In 1865, just after Emancipation, it is not surprising that African Americans owned only 0. 5 percent of the total worth of the United States. But by 1990, a full 135 years

after the abolition of slavery, Black Americans still possessed only a meager 1 percent of national wealth. As legal scholar John Powell (sic) says in the documentary series *Race - The Power of an Illusion*, "The slick thing about whiteness is that whites are getting the spoils of a racist system even if they are not personally racist" (A Long History). This is because whites and blacks did not start out at the same place and there have not been enough social programs to compensate for the lack of opportunity as well as the persistent presence of discrimination.

According to the web site *Race: The Power of Illusion*, "In 1995, the median white family had over 8 times the net worth of the median Black family" (A Long History). Equally important in terms of housing is the process of gentrification. Many homes, such as the beautiful brownstones of Harlem are in that process. When crime and drugs ran rampant in Harlem, white people left.

Now with the New York City housing market and many others exploding, people are starting to look at Harlem again. They are buying up brownstones and converting them to luxury condos and single family homes. While this is wonderful for those people who were priced out of other areas, it is not great for the working poor and poor who currently reside in Harlem. They cannot afford to rent these re-developed houses or apartments, and landlords are evicting more and more people because they know they can get people to rent for more money. Where do the people who currently live there go? There aren't many places left around New York City where they can afford the rent.

So, once again, minorities are left with little opportunity and fewer choices. Even the people who own their own homes are unable to pay property taxes or mortgage payments due to the rising values of these homes. Many of these people happen to be black. “ Those whose incomes do not keep pace, often low-wage earners and retirees, can be priced out of their neighborhoods. The displaced, says DeMott, “ used to go to the Bronx, Brooklyn or Queens. Now, that’s not happening because the same thing is going on there.

They end up either doubling or tripling up with relatives, or leaving the city altogether” (Webber). In addition to all of this, blacks in this country may be doubly disadvantaged because they are black and many of them are poor as well. Julius Wilson was the first sociologist who studied this phenomenon. “ He argued that whatever disadvantages African Americans might experience by virtue of growing up and living in poor families, they incurred additional penalties for growing up and living in poor neighborhoods. Thus ecological context mattered in fundamental ways that went well beyond individual characteristics or family circumstances. Wilson was the first American sociologist to realize that the world had changed and that poverty had become much more geographically concentrated since 1970.

He coined the term concentration effects to describe the additional disadvantage—above and beyond individual and family problems—that poor people incurred by virtue of growing up and living in areas of concentrated poverty” (Anderson). In other words, blacks who grow up in poor families are doubly disadvantaged, both by their race and their lifestyle. As the Structural-Functionist theory of states, every group functions and increases the stability

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of all. And so, as stated earlier the inequality of black allowed southern whites to function better.

Southern whites even went so far as to say that slavery was absolutely necessary because slaves depended on their slave-owners for survival (Mooney 173). The conflict theory examines the way in which the race for wealth, power, and prestige serve to escalate racial tensions. Also included in this theory is the fact that if members of the less dominant group are largely unemployed, they create a labor surplus. This means that the cost of labor will be low and therefore, the cost of products will be low.

The upper class whites may in fact perpetuate problems dealing with ethnicity so that these workers will not be able to see the exploitation of their skills that is taking place. Another sociological theory that could also explain race relations according to dominant and subordinate groups like whites and blacks in America is the Symbolic Interactionist theory. This theory focuses on how we “ learn conceptions and meanings of racial and ethnic distinctions through interactions with others and how meanings, labels, and definitions affect racial and ethnic groups” (Mooney 176). One example the author uses is simply the difference in terms that use the word white and black and the difference in the connotations of these terms.

For example, typically words that contain the word black are negative, such as blacklist, blackball, and black sheep. Studies clearly still demonstrate that whites are seen as more intelligent, harder working and more self-supporting than blacks. This labeling helps lead to the very thoughts we have about minorities, which in turn helps perpetuate their subordinate place in society.

No matter what sociological theory one uses to approach the problems of the blacks community, it is clear that they are “ disproportionately poor, receive inferior education and health care, and with continued discrimination in the workplace, have difficulty improving their standard of living” (Mooney 197). Deviant behaviors are caused by lack of economic opportunity, not by racial groups particularly.

Blacks are less healthy than whites, which are determined by the places they live and their income level as well as their access to good health care. In fact, living in more urban areas contributes to all kinds of health problems, such as allergies and asthma that come from pollution. In terms of education, “ The achievement gap between black and white children, which narrowed for three decades up until the late years of the 1980s—the period in which school segregation steadily decreased—started to widen once more in the early 1990s when the federal courts began the process of resegregation by dismantling the mandates of the Brown decision. From that point on, the gap continued to widen or remained essentially unchanged; and while recently there has been a modest narrowing of the gap in reading scores for fourth-grade children, the gap in secondary school remains as wide as ever” (Kozol). It is no wonder that black students who are congregated typically in an urban environment do not receive the same kind of education as white students do. Teachers are paid considerably less.

Supplies and materials are more limited. Buildings themselves are outmoded and outdated. Politically, minority parents simply do not have the power to make sure that their students are served well by public education. As Elizabeth Burke states, “ There seems to be three major factors in the quality

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of a child's schooling - where they live, how much their parents make, and their race.

These children are being forced into getting an inadequate education because of factors they have no control over. And rich children are being given state of the art education for what their parents gave. Is it fair to take privileges away from a child for something their parents could not give them? Don't we all start out the same innocent beings with the same potential to learn? " (Burke). And the clear answer to this question is no.

They never have, and unfortunately, it is doubtful that they ever will. In addition to all of this, the difference can come from inside. For example, the longer the discrimination and prejudice goes on, the more likely the member of the minority group member is to begin to see themselves the way that they are seen by the dominant group. This negative self image can manifest in myriad ways from denying one's own ethnic group to becoming exactly what the dominant group expects them to be.

Until the 1960s, a combination of structural discrimination, racial stratification, powerlessness, and a sense of futility to trying to change things caused many to acquiesce in the situation imposed on them" (Parnillo 107). This powerlessness can create all kinds of problems, such as taking matters into their own hands to create a sense of power. For example, when someone cannot support his family in a profession that is legal, one may turn to illegal activities in order to support his family. A sense of futility may lead to joining a gang because the gang in a strange way provides hope. Acquiescence can be a terrible thing, and yet who wants to struggle

everyday through life? Overall, the condition of blacks in America (a minority group) is still almost as subordinate as they ever were.

The forms of discrimination and prejudice are just different, but the reasons are the same. Whites maintain the upper hand by reaping the benefits of things like the FHA loan system that allowed their ancestors to own homes and pass along their wealth. Blacks were unable to do that. But still today, redlining occurs, and the property values of homes in ethnic neighborhoods or even mixed neighborhoods are completely undervalued.

Discrimination takes much more subtle forms. Schools understand that “separate is inherently unequal” according to Brown vs. the Board of Education, and yet schools are still segregated. They are not segregated because blacks aren’t allowed in schools but because housing discrimination has not provided minorities the opportunities to move to the suburbs, where the good schools are. Because of the geographical places they live (spatial segregation); they do not have the same access to quality health care and many times, live in urban areas where pollution and other environmental problems are high.

They do not have the opportunities to be mobile and escape this. The discrimination is more covert, but it is definitely still there. And it really doesn’t matter what sociological theory you subscribe to as to why this is all still happening, the key is to level the playing field so that it does not continue to occur. There are many ways to begin to try to level the playing field. Reforms like affirmative action seem to be a start in the right direction but are not strong enough, particularly since white women more than

anyone else benefit from affirmative action. It seems that a more realistic approach might be in the areas of housing and living wage.

To really help the situation, people need to be able to live. They need places to live that they can afford, that aren't in already crime-ridden neighborhoods. People need to be able to make enough money to live comfortably, so providing a living wage as well as health insurance to all workers would be a start. Great reforms also need to be made in the field of education.

No Child Left Behind is nowhere near enough. Accountability is great, but schools need the resources to teach kids and be held accountable for their learning. It may be that the whole aspect of school funding needs to be completely overhauled, so that no matter what a person's property tax base is, their children receive a quality education. People need to really take a look at institutionalized discrimination, such as those still in existence in the housing market and things like racial profiling. There are no easy answers to these problems, but they are not simply the problems of black people; they are societal problems. Progress has certainly been made, but in outlawing practices like Jim Crow laws, discrimination has become more covert than ever before.

Outlawing discriminatory practices did not end those practices. Outlawing them did tell people eventually that those practices were socially unacceptable. However, people simply became smarter about hiding their prejudices under other guises. We need to dig deeper to rid society of their

underlying ideas about race. We need to educate people about the truths of white privilege and make efforts to undo the long-lasting effects.