

LAWRENCE BLUM

RACISM: WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT ISN'T*

ABSTRACT. The words 'racist' and 'racism' have become so overused that they now constitute obstacles to understanding and interracial dialogue about racial matters. Instead of the current practice of referring to virtually anything that goes wrong or amiss with respect to race as 'racism,' we should recognize a much broader moral vocabulary for characterizing racial ills – racial insensitivity, racial ignorance, racial injustice, racial discomfort, racial exclusion. At the same time, we should fix on a definition of 'racism' that is continuous with its historical usage, and avoids conceptual inflation. I suggest two basic, and distinct, forms of racism that meet this condition – antipathy racism and inferiorizing racism. We should also recognize that not all racially objectionable actions are done from a racist motive, and that not all racial stereotypes are racist.

KEY WORDS: racial anxiety, racism, racist, racist jokes, stereotype

We in the United States are notoriously poor at communicating about racial matters. David Shipler, in his informative and insightful book *A Nation of Strangers*, rightly says, "Blacks and whites do not listen well to each other (Shipler, 1997, p. 447). Native Americans, Latinos, Chicanos, and Asian-Americans are not all that much better. We find honest discussion about race across racial lines especially difficult. Ironically, race is the subject of scores of books and articles. And one often hears impatience expressed about race. "Race is talked to death," it is said.

There may be a lot of words written about race. But there is a good deal less honest, open, and productive conversation about it among persons of different races than there needs to be. For the past several years I have taught courses on race and racism to undergraduates, graduate students in education, and high school students. Most of my classes are quite racially and ethnically diverse. In my experience a range of reasons accounts for the lack of productive conversation. People are afraid of giving offense. They are afraid of revealing prejudices they know are not socially acceptable. They are afraid of *appearing* prejudiced, even if they are actually not. They feel ignorant of groups other than their own and are afraid to risk revealing their ignorance and trying to remedy it. The whole idea of "race"

* Much of the material in this lecture is drawn from chapters 1 and 3 of my book, *"I'm Not a Racist, But . . . : The Moral Quandary of Race*.



just carries unpleasant associations with them, and they would rather avoid it. They may think we should all be “color-blind,” that it is somehow wrong even to take notice of or make reference to other people’s racial identity. This idea of color-blindness is both particularly strong, yet also particularly misplaced, among teachers, especially at the pre-college level. Teachers can not serve their students fully unless they are aware of the full range of factors affecting their lives, and race is very likely to be one of those factors (Schofield, 1989).

Some reasons for reluctance to engage in race discussions are more race-specific. Blacks, and to a lesser extent other people of color, may want to avoid what they assume will be offensive or at least annoying remarks from others. Or they might not want to have to be in a position of correcting others’ (especially whites’) ignorance. Latinos, Native Americans, and Asian-Americans may not be certain how to insert themselves into a discourse which seems to them dominated by “black/white” issues, or they may feel resentful of this dominance, and assume their specific concerns will not be adequately attended to. Notwithstanding these obstacles, I have also found a great deal of good will among students, and an anxious desire for their teachers to create contexts that facilitate constructive interracial interchange.

Each of the cited obstacles is deserving of further attention. However, I wish in this lecture to focus on a different obstacle, though one that bears on several of those just mentioned. It is the idea of “racism” itself. There is a great deal of confusion surrounding the meaning of “racism” and “racist.” Yet one thing is clear – few people wish to be, or to be thought of as, “racists.” Fear of being thought racist, together with a good deal of confusion as to, “what” being racist consists in, is a potent formula for inhibition regarding discussing racial matters, most especially for whites who are, understandably, in most danger of being thought to be, and indeed of actually being, racists.

Clarifying meanings is the professional task of the philosopher, and I think that if we become clearer about what “racism” actually consists in, and what lies outside of the scope of racism yet may still be morally problematic, we will be better equipped to engage in productive discussions about race. Of course I have no illusions that merely clarifying meanings will bring about either racial justice or racial harmony, or even the more minimal goal of producing helpful conversations about these matters. But it seems an essential first step.

The words “racism” and “racist” have become deeply entrenched in the moral vocabulary of the United States and Western Europe. “Is television a racist institution?” asks an article concerning the NAACP’s criticizing

the fall 1999 prime-time network shows for having no “minority” actors in lead roles in twenty-seven new series (Weinraub, 1999, pp. A1, A14). Blacks who criticized other blacks for supporting a white over a black candidate in a mayoral race were called racist. A white girl in Virginia said that it was racist for an African-American teacher in her school to wear African attire (Shipler, p. 92). The Milton, Wisconsin, school board voted to retire its “Redmen” name and logo depicting a Native American wearing a headdress, because they have been criticized as racist. “Racist” has become the standard way to condemn and deplore people, actions, policies, symbols, and institutions for malfeasance in the racial domain.

In serving as a term of moral reproach, “racism” has joined more time-honored vices such as “dishonesty,” “cruelty,” “cowardice,” and “hypocrisy.” Apart from a small number of avowed white supremacists, most Americans wish very much to avoid being called “racist.” In this regard, “racist” operates similarly to “cruel.” Few admit to being cruel. Persons who are cruel might say the target of their cruelty deserved it, or they might simply fail to recognize the harm caused by their actions. Similarly, no one admits to being racist. Those who are, or are thought to be, might say their remarks were just a joke; they did not intend any harm; people are just being oversensitive; it was a personal, not a racial, thing; and the like. One expects people who are accused of being racist to deny it and newspapers should stop regarding this as newsworthy.

OVERUSING “RACISM”

Yet the widely-shared reproach carried by “racist” is threatened by a current tendency to overuse the term. Some feel that the word is thrown around so much that anything involving “race” that someone does not like is liable to castigation as “racist” – for example, merely mentioning someone’s race (or racial designation),¹ using the word “Oriental” for Asians without recognizing its origins and its capacity for insult, or socializing only with members of one’s own racial group. Many people would not agree, or would not be sure, that any of the four examples in the paragraph before the previous one constitute “racism.” A few observers go even further and suspect that the word has lost all significant meaning. “Racism is . . . what black activists define it to be. . . . When words lose

¹ I do not believe that there are races in the sense in which “races” is generally understood in popular discourse, so I regard it as misleading to say that someone “is of a certain race.” It is more accurate to say that someone has, or has been assigned, a racial designation, or that she is a member of a racial group; I will generally use the latter expression.

coherent meaning, they also lose the power to shame. ‘Racism,’ ‘sexism,’ and ‘homophobia’ have become such words. Labels that should horrify are simply shrugged off” (Nuechterlein, 1996, p. B9). *Time* columnist Lance Morrow sees social damage in this same development: “The words ‘racism’ and ‘racist’ are a feckless indulgence, corrosive to blacks and whites alike and to relations between them” (Morrow, 1996, p. 18).

A major reason for what Robert Miles calls the “conceptual inflation” (Miles, 1989, pp. 41–68), to which the idea of “racism” has been subject is its having become the central or even only notion used to mark morally suspect behavior, attitude, and social practice regarding race. The result – either something is racist, or it is morally in the clear. In Boston a white police officer, as a bizarre joke and apparently with no malice intended, placed a hangman’s noose on the motorcycle of a black police officer. “Police probe sees no racism in noose prank,” says the headline of an article reporting the findings of an investigation into the incident. Perhaps the white officer was not “a racist,” nor operating from racist motives; but, as the victim in the incident said, “You cannot hang a noose like that near any black man who knows his history and say it does not have tremendous significance” (Boston Globe, p. B1).² If our only choices are to label an act “racist” or “nothing to get too upset about,” those who seek to garner moral attention to some racial malfeasance will be tempted to call it “racist.” That overuse in turn feeds a diminishing of “racism’s” moral force, and thus contributes to weakened concern about racism and other racial ills.

Not all racial incidents are racist incidents. Not every instance of racial conflict, insensitivity, discomfort, miscommunication, exclusion, injustice, or ignorance should be called “racist.” This more varied and nuanced moral vocabulary needs to be more fully utilized, complementing “racist” and “racism.” All forms of racial ills should elicit concern from responsible citizens. If someone displays racial insensitivity, but not racism, people should be able to see that straightforwardly as a matter of moral concern. In a soccer game, a nine-year-old white boy said “Boy, pass the ball over here” to one of his back teammates, and “was virtually accused of being a racist by the father of one of his teammates,” says an article on the incident. (That description may itself reflect the loss of an evaluative vocabulary other than “racist” and “racism,” rather than what the black boy’s father actually said.) In any case, the white boy was almost surely not “a racist” and the article itself goes on to express more accurately the racial ill involved in his remark: “The word ‘boy’ is a tripwire attached to so much charged racial baggage that it is no longer safely used as a term for a prepubescent male.”

² The black officer seemed clearly to be referring to lynching.

If a policy has a racially unjust effect, or unequally affects already unequally placed racial groups, this too should be reason for concern, even if there is no suggestion that it arises from racist motives, or is part of the sort of entrenched pattern strongly rooted in historical racism. For example, school lunch programs have been criticized for relying too strongly on milk, in light of the African-Americans' substantial propensity toward lactose intolerance; but no untoward motives, or failures of sensitivity, need have prompted the original policies favoring milk for them to be of concern. Similarly, it is troubling if prime-time TV fails adequately to reflect its viewers', and the society's, ethnoracial diversity; but it is not necessarily "racist."³ Someone who exhibits a culpable ignorance about racial matters bearing on an interaction with an acquaintance or co-worker should feel a degree of shame about this, and be motivated to correct that ignorance – without her having to think she has been "racist." We should not be faced with the choice of "racism or nothing."

"Racism's" conceptual inflation and moral overload can arise from a another source as well – designating as "racism" any prejudice, injustice, domination, inferiorizing, bigotry, and the like, against human groups defined in any manner, for example, by gender, disability, nationality. In *The Decent Society*, Avishai Margalit, an Israeli philosopher, defines racism as the denying of dignity to *any human group*, and uses as a particular test case "retarded" persons (Margalit, 1996, pp. 80–83). This inflated use of racism pays indirect tribute to the centrality of racism as a form of oppression and denial of dignity in contemporary Western consciousness. That centrality is reflected also in later coinages, such as "sexism," "ableism" (discrimination against the disabled). "racism," and "heterosexism" – all consciously modeled on "racism," and attempting to draw on racism's moral opprobrium to condemn other phenomena seen as in important ways analogous to racism.⁴ This "racism"-influenced proliferation of other "isms" at least avoids the confusion wrought by Margalit's conflating all of them with "racism" itself. At least it encourages us to explore the similarities between discrimination, exploitation, and denials of dignity based on race, and those based on other human attributes, such as gender, sexual orientation, disability, national membership, and the like, thereby allowing the possibility of significant *disanalogies*. Margalit's

³ It is noteworthy that it was the newspaper article, rather than the NAACP itself, that called the networks "racist," or framed the issue as one of racism. Kweisi Mfume, the president of the NAACP, said only that the programming was "a virtual whitewash." *New York Times*, Sept 20, 1999, A1.

⁴ Of those listed, only "sexism" has fully succeeded in attaching moral condemnation to its referent – discrimination against, or the denial of dignity to, women, or discrimination on the basis of sex in general – in popular thought and speech.

subsuming all these moral ills under “racism” cuts off that inquiry at the starting line, and, in so doing, contribute to a counterproductive inflation of the term “racism.”

RACIST JOKES AND RACIST PERSONS

A different source of confusion and moral overload regarding racism concerns what one might call racism’s location. Many different kinds of entity can be racist – actions, institutions, practices, symbols, statements, jokes, persons, to name a few. The moral significance of an attribution of racism differs depending on its location. Take racist jokes for instance. A person who tells a racist joke is not necessarily “a racist,” in the sense of a person who harbors pervasive racial animosity or inferiorizing attitudes toward a racially defined group. He may tell the joke without sharing the racist sentiments the joke expresses. People often tell jokes as a way of trying to win acceptance; they might tell whatever they think will bring a laugh. Imagine, for example, someone telling a joke that makes fun of Asian-Americans in a particularly demeaning manner, in order to gain acceptance in a group. (The group could consist of any ethnoracial group, except Asian-Americans. I am not assuming that only whites tell racist jokes [or are racists, for that matter].)⁵ This individual does not necessarily hold racist views of Asians or Asian-Americans. The joke is racist, but the teller of the joke is not.

Of course, this does not mean that, as long as one does not share the racist views a joke expresses, it is perfectly fine to tell such a joke. To think that it is all right is to reason in precisely the all-or-nothing manner I have been criticizing. It is a very bad thing to tell a racist joke. One often hears public figures who have been caught out telling a racist joke or making a racist remark defending themselves by saying that they did not intend any offense to the group in question, that they are not racist. Often this defense is quite disingenuous, and the individual in fact does hold the racist attitudes implied in the joke. But even when it is not, this is a feeble defense from a moral point of view. It is bad to tell a racist joke, whether one means to offend, or holds racist attitudes, or not.

Jokes, and humor more generally, raise a common locational issue about racism – the difference between intention and effect – illustrated in two examples of racist humor that came to public attention in the late

⁵ In “*I’m Not a Racist, But . . .*” I argue that members of any group can be racist. For instance, I counter the view that only whites can be racist because only whites hold power as a racial group.

1990's. One was a fraternity party, in which the fraternity members dressed up in Native American warrior attire and wielded tomahawks. A second, again a fraternity, involved staging a mock slave auction. In both cases, members of the fraternities in question defended themselves by saying that they did not mean to offend anyone. But the moral shortcoming in both cases did not lie in setting out to deliberately demean native Americans and African-Americans. It lay in their failing to realize that what they were doing *was* demeaning to Native Americans and African-Americans, whether they *intended* this or not. It is not even clear that ignorance of the affront would be morally more acceptable than an intention to affront.

Still, engaging in racist humor does not make one a racist. More generally, clarity and racial understanding would be advanced if people attempted to take greater care in locating the racism they allege in a situation. Is it a practice that is racist, whether the persons who participate in the practice are racist or not? Is it the motive of an act that is racist? Is it an attitude taken to be expressed in a remark, or the remark itself? Is it a person about whom one knows enough to say that he or she is "a racist?"

To help us avoid the first form of confusion about racism – conceptual inflation – I will suggest a core meaning rooted in the history of its use, that confines "racism" to phenomena deserving of the severest moral condemnation (within the appropriately located type, that is, act, statement, joke, person, and so on). Fixing on such a definition should encourage us to make use of the considerable other resources our language affords us for describing and evaluating race-related ills that do not characteristically rise to the level of racism – racial insensitivity, racial conflict, racial injustice, racial ignorance, racial discomfort, and others. Such an agreed-upon meaning for "racism" should facilitate interracial communication, at least in diminishing a free-floating and pervasive fear of the dreaded charge of "racism" – by making clearer what is and what is not to be counted as racism – while at the same time encouraging a wider scope of moral concern to race-related phenomena. In doing so, my suggested definition of racism should stanch the creeping loss of moral cachet of the term "racism" itself, with its attendant undermining of moral concern toward racism and other race-related ills.

DEFINING "RACISM"

In proffering a definition of racism, it would be folly to claim that one was doing no more than articulating "our concept" of racism. Even apart from inflationary usages, it is not likely that all employments of that concept cohere in an overall, self-consistent whole. Nevertheless, especially in light

of the history of this concept, I hope my proposal can reasonably be viewed as a plausible candidate for a core meaning.

“Racism” was first used by German social scientists in the 1930s to refer to the ideology of race superiority central to Nazism, and its core historical meaning broadened out to other systems of racial domination and oppression, such as segregation, South African apartheid, and European colonialism. In this light, I want to suggest that all forms of racism can be related to either of two general “themes” – *inferiorization*, and *antipathy*. Inferiorizing is treating the racial other as inferior or of lesser value and, secondarily, viewing the racial other as inferior. Racial antipathy is simply a strong dislike, often tinged with hostility, toward individuals or groups because of their race. Of the two modes, inferiorization is more obviously linked to historical racist doctrines and social systems. Slavery, segregation, imperialism, apartheid, and Nazism all involved certain groups being regarded as and treated as inferior to other groups.

But race-based hatred was also central to the ideological and attitudinal components of Nazism, and, for whatever reason, racial bigotry, hostility, and hatred are now securely linked to the contemporary idea of “racism” in both Europe and the United States. Indeed, the racial bigot is many people’s paradigm image of “a racist,” and few would now deny application of the appellation “racist” to such persons. A disturbing but illuminating example of contemporary antipathy racism occurred in Washington state in 1999. The Makah tribe of the Olympic Peninsula announced its intention to hunt for whales as a way of instilling pride and tradition in the tribe’s youth. The hunt was permitted by the government, and the tribe killed a whale in May of that year. Many non-Native American Washington residents were outraged by this act. Amidst arguably reasonable objections to the whale hunting were expressions of outright antipathy racism toward the Makah, and toward Native Americans more generally. One letter to the Seattle Times, for example, said, “I have a very real hatred for Native Americans now. It’s embarrassing, but I would be lying if I said it wasn’t the truth” (Tizon, 1999).

Inferiorizing and antipathy racism are distinct. Some superiority racists do not hate the target of their beliefs. They may have a paternalistic concern and feelings of kindness for persons they regard as their human inferiors. This form of racism was prevalent among slave owners, and characterized many whites’ views of blacks during the segregation era in the United States. The concern and kindness are misdirected, and demeaning, because the other is not seen as an equal, or even as a full human being; it is a racist form of concern. Nevertheless such attitudes are distinct from antipathy and hatred.

On the other side, not every race hater regards the target of her hatred as inferior. In the U.S. antipathy toward Asians and Jews often accompanies, and is in part driven by, a kind of resentment of those seen as in some ways superior (e.g. more successful). And some whites who hate blacks do not really regard blacks as inferior; they may fear and be hostile to them, but fear and hostility are not the same as contempt and other forms of inferiorizing. (Again, antipathy and contempt may accompany one another). Survey research suggests that pure superiority racism toward blacks has substantially decreased since segregation, more so than hostility-based racism (Schuman et al., pp. 156–157). Nevertheless, the great and persistent racial inequalities in our society provide a standing encouragement to advantaged groups to see disadvantaged groups as somehow deserving their lower status.

However, antipathy and inferiorizing racism are not entirely separate either. The paternalistic inferiorizing racist (e.g. a white segregationist) often hates those members of the racial group who do not accept the inferior social position he regards as appropriate to their inferior natures – for example, blacks who do not engage in the deference behavior the paternalistic racist expects. Emmett Till was lynched in 1955 out of hatred directed toward a young black man who had transgressed the rules of racial deference and constraint defining him as an inferior being. In addition, many racists both hate *and* regard as inferior members of a particular racial group (and not only a particular subcategory of such members, such as those who do not “stay in their place”).

RACIAL AND RACIST STEREOTYPES

If we confine racism to manifestations or representations of racial antipathy or racial inferiorizing, we can see that many things can go wrong in the area of race without being racist. Consider two objectionable stereotypes of blacks, for instance – blacks as intellectually deficient, and blacks as good dancers. The first is a straightforwardly racist stereotype; it portrays blacks as inferior in regard to a fundamental human attribute. The second, however, is not racist, on my account. It attributes a positive rather than a negative quality. It is a far less objectionable stereotype than the inferiority stereotype.

Nevertheless, the stereotype of blacks as good dancers is still an objectionable one. Like any stereotype, it wildly overgeneralizes about a group; it blinds us to the internal diversity of the group – some blacks are bad dancers, some are good, some are so-so (and this is so of every racial

group). Also, all stereotyping discourages recognizing the individuality of members of the group.

The stereotype of blacks as good dancers is also objectionable in a more specific, historically contextual sense, which can be recognized in the more variegated moral vocabulary revealed by loosening our fixation on “racism” and “racist.” This stereotype harkens back to the slave era, when viewing blacks as good dancers was bound up with their being seen as mentally inferior. While this direct implication is no longer clearly attached to the “good dancer” stereotype, stereotypes must be viewed historically as well as contemporarily, and a given stereotype’s resonance with a much more distinctly racist stereotype renders it objectionable in a way that stereotypes without such historical resonance would not be. Other stereotypes lacking such historical resonance are, for example, Asians as poor drivers, blacks as poor swimmers, and whites as not being able to jump. All are objectionable, racial (race-based) stereotypes. But it is moral overload to call them *racist* stereotypes, and to do so contributes to a cheapening of the moral force of the idea of “racism.”

RACIAL DISCOMFORT OR ANXIETY

Another application of the definition of racism is the difference between racial antipathy and what I will call “racial discomfort” or “racial anxiety.” Consider the following example.

Ms. Verano is a white fourth grade teacher. She feels comfortable with all the children in her very racially-mixed class. She holds all students to equally high standards of performance. But, though she has never admitted this to herself, she is not really comfortable with most of the black parents. She does not dislike blacks, nor does she think they are inferior. However, she is not particularly familiar with African-American culture, knows very few blacks other than her students, and is not confident about her ability to communicate with black other than her students, and is not confident about her ability to communicate with black adults. As a result Ms. Verano is somewhat defensive when speaking with black parents in parent conferences, and is not able to listen to their concerns and viewpoints about their children as well as she does with parents in other racial groups. Because she does not glean as much information from the black parents about their children as she does from the other parents, she is not able to serve these children as well as the other children in her class. Ms. Verano does not have antipathy or inferiorizing attitudes toward blacks. To call her a “racist” would be conceptual inflation. She bears no antipathy toward blacks; I have built this feature into the example. Nor does she regard blacks as inferior.

Ms. Verano's situation is best described by saying that she is uncomfortable with black adults (not children). She has "racial discomfort" or "racial anxiety."

Racial anxiety is quite common in the United States, especially, I believe, among whites, although it can be found in any racial group. Racial anxiety can stem from different sources, and one of them can be anxiety that one's racist prejudices be revealed. In this case racial anxiety would be a manifestation of racism. However, racial anxiety is not always racist in its genesis. We can realize that a group of persons is different from us in some socially important way, and we can feel that we are just not knowledgeable enough about this group to feel comfortable in the presence of its members. We can be anxious that we will embarrass ourselves by saying or doing the "wrong thing." We may worry that the group will dislike or reject us if we attempt to approach it. This social anxiety is perfectly familiar regarding cultural differences; the individual is anxious approaching a culture about which she lacks knowledge. Members of different racial groups are also often quite ignorant of one another's modes of life (sometimes but not always because cultural and racial differences correspond), even if they interact in schools and workplaces. In a sense racial anxiety is even *more* likely than mere cultural anxiety, since differences in "race" are more socially charged than are cultural differences. If one is equally ignorant of the other group, there is more reason to be anxious that one will violate some unforeseen norm with regard to a racially different group than a culturally different one.

In itself, racial anxiety or discomfort is not racism. Nor is racial discomfort the sort of thing for which its possessor is subject to moral criticism. It is not morally bad to be racially anxious, as it is morally bad to be racially prejudiced. However, racial discomfort is still a bad thing, and an individual who recognizes her racial anxiety should not rest content with it just because it is not a moral blot on her character. This is so, in part, because, as in Ms. Verano's case, it can lead to acts of a discriminatory character, Ms. Verano is unlikely to be able to educate her black pupils to the same degree as she does her other students, since she will lack information pertinent to them.

In addition racial anxiety reinforces a sense of separateness and "otherness" concerning those of other racial groups. It makes it difficult to recognize internal diversity in such groups, and to appreciate the individuality of members of the group. It feeds into (in addition to drawing on) the homogenizing of racial groups that is a typical pitfall in the racial arena.

Racial discomfort is also inimical to the development of interracial community and other forms of productive interracial relationship. It

inhibits a sense of identification across racial lines, and reinforces a sense (particularly found among high school and some college students) that it is somehow more “natural” to socialize with members of one’s own racial group than of other groups. We should strive for a society in which people feel as comfortable as possible interacting in all public and private venues with members of ethnic and racial groups other than their own. Such comfort would not only make social existence more pleasant, varied, and interesting for members of all groups, but would serve the purposes of civic attachment and civic engagement as well. Teachers in a position to do so would do well to make an effort to decrease racial discomfort and anxiety in their classes, for example by forming interracial groups for various tasks, encouraging interracial communication, explicitly discussing its importance and pitfalls, and the like.⁶ Individuals are well advised to look for signs of racial discomfort in themselves and, if they discover them, do what they can to relieve this discomfort, for example by reaching out to persons of other racial groups or by becoming more familiar with and knowledgeable about the modes of life of those groups.

Furthermore, the fact that it is generally difficult to tell whether reluctance to engage with racial others is a product of antipathy or mere discomfort itself takes a toll on racial minorities who have to worry and wonder about the source of some troubling racial interaction. “‘In waiting rooms or lobbies . . . I’ve tried to initiate a conversation [with whites], and I could tell they don’t want to talk,’ says Sharon Walter, an African-American. ‘But when a white person walks in, conversation begins. I don’t want to think it’s racism . . . The better part of me wants to think otherwise’” (Shipler, p. 448). Merely having such thoughts is itself a psychic cost.

In summary, then, racial anxiety or discomfort is not, in itself, racist (although it *can* be a manifestation of underlying racism). Yet it is still a bad thing, destructive to interracial relationships.

RACE, IDENTITY, AND RECOGNITION

Another race-related ill distinct from racism is illustrated in the following example. A Haitian-American girl is one of two black students in her class. When a race-related issue arises in discussion, the teacher turns to her and asks her what “the black point of view” is on the question at hand.

⁶ Stephan 1999 provides a wealth of information about how to improve intergroup relations in schools.

There seem several distinct though related wrongs this teacher has committed. He has failed to recognize Haitian-Americans as a distinct ethnic group within the larger "black" umbrella. He has treated a racial group in an overly homogeneous manner, implying that there could be something that could coherently be called "the black point of view" on an issue. Finally, he has failed to recognize the student as an individual, with her own individual views.

These three related forms of misrecognition are directed toward an individual or a group of which the individual is a member. The latter two – racial homogenization, and not acknowledging individuality – are particularly serious failings in a teacher. However, that is not to say that they are "racist." The teacher's behavior need not imply that he harbors animus toward black, or regards them as inferior.

RACIAL MOTIVES AND RACIAL STEREOTYPES

Confusion about both the location and the meaning of racism infected public understanding of a particularly tragic event that took place in Providence, Rhode Island, in January, 2000. Several women were fighting in a late-night diner. The night manager threw the patrons out of the diner, at which point some male friends got involved, one of whom drew a gun. Inside the diner, an off-duty patrolman, Cornel Young, Jr., an African-American, was waiting for a take-out order. Meanwhile, the police had been called to the scene outside. Officer Young, after warning the patrons to get down, rushed outside to help the two officers on the scene, his gun drawn. (Providence police are required to carry their firearms when off duty.)

The two officers had ordered the male friend to drop his gun, which he did, and they then turned to Officer Young and ordered him to do so as well. It is not clear whether Young heard the order, but in any case he did not comply, and the two officers, who were white, shot and killed him. It emerged that, despite the officers' failing to recognize Officer Young, one of the officers had been a police academy classmate of Young's, and both had graduated in the same class three years earlier.

The killing sparked community outrage and anguish. Charges of racism were made. It was said that the killing was "racially motivated." Eventually a federal civil rights investigation took place, and the two officers were cleared of having intended to deprive Officer Young of his civil rights, or of acting out of racial animosity.

It is impossible to know whether the two officers were racially biased against blacks. However, their behavior is perfectly consistent with their

lacking any form of racial prejudice or racial motivation. It is not likely that they shot at Young because they disliked black people. Some people, recognizing this, then felt some relief. The incident turned from one involving racism to a (mere) “tragic accident.”

But this response oversimplifies. Racism may be absent in motivations and attitudes but be present elsewhere. In this situation, it is much more plausible to think that it lay in the stereotypes that the officers carried in their minds about blacks. That is why, or part of why, they reacted to a black man with a gun in plainclothes as if he were a perpetrator, even though they actually knew him as a fellow officer. In another widely-reported case around the same time, four white officers in New York city killed an innocent black man whom they wrongly took to be reaching for a gun. Treating blackness as if it were an indicator of suspiciousness or criminality is referred to as “racial profiling” and has come in for a good deal of public criticism as a result of these and similar incidents, not only ones involving fatalities.

The white officers who killed Officer Young were apparently genuinely remorseful and upset by their having unwittingly killed a fellow officer. But this does not mean they were not prey to racial stereotypes linking blackness to criminality. Officer Young’s mother was surely correct when she said that her son would be unlikely to have been shot had he been white. But it is important to be careful about what we mean if we say that he was killed “because he was black.” It does not necessarily mean “out of hostility or animosity toward black persons.” It could mean “because he was seen in the moment as a dangerous person and this was so in part because he was black.” I believe it is also plausible to refer to this racial stereotype as “racist.” But my point here is not so much to defend that position as to encourage clarity as to the location of what is, or was, racially objectionable in the situation. It was in the stereotype, not in the motives of the white officers. And it shows the tremendous danger that can accompany racist stereotypes even in the absence of racial antipathy; they can be life threatening.

I have given a stripped down version of this complex racial situation, and want to mention only two other points. First, some members of the community placed some of the blame on the Providence police department’s failure to educate its police force about the dangers and wrong of racial stereotyping and racial profiling. That is, they have seen the fault in a kind of institutional irresponsibility regarding race, in the context of a recognition that antiblack stereotypes are particularly troubling in a police force that is meant to be protectors of their community.

The second race-related matter is more speculative on my part. Even though the white officers, and especially the one who graduated from the police academy with Officer Young, knew him, it is possible that a form of racial homogenization was involved in their failure to recognize him. Perhaps the officer in some sense still saw all blacks, or black men, as “looking alike.” Perhaps in the heat of the moment the image of blackness blocked his seeing Officer Young as an individual person. Racial thinking does, in general, inhibit the perception of others as individuals; the case of the teacher asking the black student for “the black point of view” would be another version of this same homogenization. Perhaps – again I am speculating – although the white officer did know Officer Young, whites and blacks did not interact much on or off the job; if so this social segregation might have contributed to the racial homogenization that in turn contributed to his failing to recognize Officer Young.

CONCLUSION

Gaining some clarity about what “racism” means will help us engage in productive conversations about racial matters – conversations that are too infrequent, both inside and outside classroom settings. We have seen three ways by which we might gain that clarity. First, within a given category (actions, jokes, stereotypes, remarks, stereotypes, persons), we should confine “racism” to especially egregious wrongs in that category. Not every stereotype is racist. Not every remark that is racially offensive is racist. Not every racially insensitive action is a racist action. I have suggested that the distinct opprobrium attaching to “racism” and “racist” can be retained and protected if we recognize that racism refers to racial inferiorization or racial antipathy, and that the different categorical forms of racism can all be related to either of those two definitions.

Second, we should not confuse racism in one category with racism in another. A person who is prey to a racist stereotype is not necessarily “a racist;” nor does she necessarily operate from racist motives. A remark can be unquestionably racist without the person making the remark being a racist, or making the remark for a racist reason, or motive.

Finally, in endeavoring to protect the distinct moral opprobrium of the accusation of “racism” from conceptual inflation and moral overload, as well as from categorical drift and confusion, we must at the same time recognize that “racism” by no means captures all of what can go wrong in the domain of race. There is a much larger terrain of moral ills in the racial domain than racism itself, and we should draw on our manifold linguistic resources – racial insensitivity, failure to recognize racial identity, racial

ignorance, racial anxiety, racial injustice, racial homogenization, and so on – to express and describe moral disvalue in this domain. Moral concern is appropriately directed toward this wider domain, and should not be confined to racism appropriately so called.

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149 Prospect St.
Cambridge, MA 02139
USA