

NEWS & OPINIONS

Systemic Racism and the Continuing Struggle for Social Justice in the United States

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As the world now knows, on May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African American, died in Minneapolis while being constrained by three police officers as a fourth stood by watching and keeping the growing crowd of onlookers and concerned citizens away. The senior officer on the scene, who is white, had his knee on Floyd's neck while the other two held his back and legs. Although, based on videos taken at the time, onlookers were concerned about Floyd's safety as he kept telling the police that he couldn't breathe, and calling for the policeman to get off his neck, the officer remained in that position for over 8 minutes, well after Floyd had stopped moving. This is, as we've come to see, not an isolated incident, but unfortunately a too common occurrence in the United States, brought to public attention in recent years primarily through cellphone videos.

In an article I published in this journal in January 2019, I discussed teaching a course in 2015, "Ethnicity, Race, and the Church," in which I had to stop beginning class sessions with a "What's in the News" section due to the fact that there were so many examples of mainly unarmed black men being killed by police, and in some cases vigilantes, that it took up too much class time. It is disheartening that five years later we are still witnessing so many of these incidences. A Washington

Post study of fatal shootings by police during a five-year period beginning in 2015 found that African Americans were disproportionately killed by police. "They account for under 13% of the U. S. population, but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of white Americans".¹ Likewise, Department of Justice investigations of the police departments in Ferguson, Missouri (where Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teenager, had been killed by a police officer in 2014) and Chicago found that they had routinely violated the constitutional and civil rights of African Americans and Latinos/as.²

The outrage over the murder of George Floyd, which has come to symbolize the continued abuse and denigration of African Americans and other minority populations in the United States, has led to a renewed movement for social justice largely under the umbrella of Black Lives Matter, with estimates of the number of protesters since the death of Floyd ranging between 15 and 26 million, which would make it the largest such movement in U.S. history.³ A key argument in this recent movement, as with those in the past, has been the systemic nature of racism/racism in the United States. Anthropologists, as well as other social scientists, have long studied the issues of race and racism,⁴ and

¹ Tate, Julie, Jennifer Jenkins, and Steven Rich. "Fatal Force." *The Washington Post*, July 1, 2020. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>.

² U.S. Department of Justice. "Justice Department Announces Findings of Two Civil Rights Investigations in Ferguson, Missouri." March 4, 2015. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/ferguson_police_department_report.pdf; United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and United States Attorney's Office Northern District of Illinois. "Investigation of the Chicago Police Department." January 13, 2017. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/925846/download>.

³ Buchanan, Larry, Quoctrung Bui, and Jugal K. Patel. "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History." *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/2ZqRyOU>.

⁴ I use the term racialism instead of racism, following common scholarly usage, to connote the wider societal impact of the meanings given to race. It also conveys the idea that our understanding of race and racial attitudes change over time, though, as we see in American society today, they don't necessarily diminish in their potency or effect.

have pointed out its systemic nature, particularly, though not exclusively, in the United States.

The development of the social imaginary (Taylor 2003) of race in the United States began well before the founding of the country, but it became more deeply embedded in the 19th century with the rise of “scientific racialism,” which purported to have scientifically confirmed that racial categories were, in fact, real, distinct, and that key intrinsic differences existed among the “races” (Lieberman and Scupin 2012; Meneses 2006). These differences were seen to be so important that some of the leading scientists of the day argued, based largely on the study of skulls (phrenology/craniology), that there had actually been separate “geneses” (polygeny) for the different races (see Stocking 1991, and Gould 1996). Anthropology moved away from such a clearly delineated model of “race,” especially after the development of genetics which revealed that humans are incredibly genetically homogeneous, regardless of how we may appear physically. Instead, anthropologists and other social scientists came to understand race to be a sociocultural construct, one where those in the dominant group (in this case, white) were able to determine which physical attributes would be used to categorize people into what were argued to be clearly demarcated groups. However, though the social sciences have moved beyond the categorical concept of “race” due to the scientific evidence, it still informs how most US-Americans understand race, and more importantly, how our institutions continue to perpetuate a racialized society.

One example of the systemic nature of racialism is the one cited above—policing. An argument that has been made in recent weeks in the wake of the killing of George Floyd and others at the hands of law enforcement is that we shouldn’t impugn all police officers because of a few “bad apples.” However, the philosophers Todd May and George Yancey argue that this is a fundamental misunderstanding of the real problem. They state,

We think that making this distinction [between policing and a few “bad apples”] is a mistake. It is a mistake not because it underestimates the number of police officers who are racist and violent, but because the problem of racist policing is not one of individual

actors. It is a mistake because the role of the police in society must be understood, not individually but structurally.⁵

One of the police officers involved in the killing of George Floyd self-identified as African American (like president Obama, his mother is white and his father is African, in this case, Nigerian). He entered the police force in Minneapolis with a desire to bring about change in how the police dealt with African Americans and other minorities, but became an agent of the ongoing oppression of black people. Ironically, he became a symbol of such oppression, and helped spark a movement for the change he was ostensibly seeking.⁶

But systemic racialism affects all of our institutions in the United States. As the Christian sociologists Michael Emerson and Christian Smith argue in their book *Divided by Faith*,

racial practices that reproduce racial division in the contemporary United States “(1) are increasingly covert, (2) are embedded in normal operations of institutions, (3) avoid direct racial terminology, and (4) are invisible to most Whites.” It understands that racism is not mere individual, overt prejudice or the free-floating irrational driver of race problems, but the collective misuse of power that results in diminished life opportunities for some racial groups (2000, 9, quoting Bonilla-Silva and Lewis, 1997).⁷

The problem is that since, as Emerson and Smith argue, most white people don’t “see” racialism in the United States as a systemic problem, they can easily place blame for any offense on the victim of the offense. I recall being with family in California at a barbecue with some of their friends (all of us white) when the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the killing of Trayvon Martin was announced. As we discussed the verdict, all of those there, with the exception of my brother, my wife, and me, were making the argument that the killing had nothing to do with race—it was just self-defense against a “thug.” Now, it could be argued that Zimmerman felt his life was threatened once Martin was on top of him, but he would never have gotten into that position had he not been following Martin around the neighborhood (where Martin had

⁵ May, Todd, and George Yancey. “Policing Is Doing What It Was Meant to Do. That’s the Problem.” *The New York Times*, June 21, 2020. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/37Mu2zG>.

⁶ Barker, Kim. “The Black Officer Who Detained George Floyd Had Pledged to Fix the Police.” *The New York Times*, June 27, 2020. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://nyti.ms/383XPEa>.

⁷ For a broader survey of public opinion on race in the U.S., see Menasce Horowitz, Juliana, Anna Brown, and Kiana Cox. “Race in America 2019.” *Pew Research Center*, April 9, 2019. Accessed July 7, 2020. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2019/04/09/race-in-america-2019/>.

family) because he was “suspicious,” and had he not disobeyed the 911 operator when he was told to stop following Martin. This is eerily reminiscent of the recent killing of Ahmaud Arbery as he jogged through a predominantly white neighborhood in South Georgia. The systemic nature of race in the U.S. is such that blacks and other minorities can easily be seen as “out of place” in all sorts of social settings (e.g., department stores, neighborhoods, car dealerships, apartment rental offices, bird watching in a park).

Systemic Racism and White Evangelicals

In their research among white evangelicals, Emerson and Smith found that their “cultural tool kit” did not provide a framework for understanding systemic issues related to race. Instead, there was a strong emphasis on “accountable freewill individualism” (“individuals exist independent of structures and institutions”), “relationalism (attaching central importance to interpersonal relationships), and antistructuralism (inability to perceive or unwillingness to accept social structural influences)” (2000, 76). They go on to state that “Although much in Christian scripture and tradition points to the influence of social structures on individuals, the stress on individualism has been so complete for such a long time in white American evangelical culture that such tools are nearly unavailable” (78-79).

One thing that did make a difference, however, was the degree to which white evangelicals had contact with people from minority populations. Those who had little contact with such populations denied that race was a problem in the U.S., or blamed minorities for the racial problems that do exist, whereas those who were more immersed in non-white society regarded race problems as real, prevalent, and even scary. Towards the end of their chapter dealing with white evangelicals’ perceptions of the “race problem,” they state,

white evangelicals’ cultural tools and racial isolation curtail their ability to fully assess why people of different races do not get along, the lack of equal opportunity, and the extent to which race matters in America. Although honest and well-intentioned, their perspective is a powerful means to reproduce contemporary racialization. Because reality is socially constructed, a highly effective way to ensure the perpetuation of a racialized system is simply to deny its existence (2000, 89, 90).

As I argued in my OKHJ article, because we are brought up in a particular family and community at a particular time and place, we tend to see the world, including the social world, through the meanings that our culture gives to it. And since we are naturally

ethnocentric, we believe the world is as we see it, or at least it ought to be. Therefore, it takes great intention on our part to move beyond our own cultural and social situatedness to try to understand how other people, who come from different families and communities, see and experience the world (Ybarrola 2019). In order to do this, we need to take an incarnational approach: humbling ourselves, taking the attitude of a learner, and seeking how we can serve others rather than expecting them to serve us (see Rynkiewicz 2011, 41, 42). In this way we can expand our “cultural tool kit” and join those who are crying out for social justice!

I was struck by a news story recently that showed an African American girl wearing a tee shirt that read “All Lives Cannot Matter Until Black Lives Matter.” True enough, but we are living in a time when members of our government are claiming that “Black Lives Matter” is “a symbol of hate” and that protesters are all “radical left fascists.” Let us be, as Andrew Walls says that Christians throughout church history have been, those who are “out of step” with our society when it comes to continuing the oppressive systems that keep so many Americans marginalized and impoverished (Walls 1996). Let us follow the mandate given to us by God through the prophet Micah—to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God (Micah 6:8).

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[Editor's Note: The following correction has been made to this manuscript: page 1, right column, Michael Brown was killed in 2014, not 2015, as written in the original manuscript.]