

The fog of race in American discourse

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The concept of race headlines many discussions in America. If you are talking about education, then you must address the achievement gap between white and black students. If you are talking about poverty, then you must talk about the disproportionate number of people of color who consume social services. If the conversation is about crime, you are pressed to mention the high number of African American male inmates.

It's the fog of race: prejudice and discrimination applied to pigmentation-neutral topics. There is no biological correlation between any skin-related cell in the body and, for instance, intelligence and educational achievement. When a low-performing student is being described, their racial profile will probably provide the least useful data. It will not point to different teaching interventions or course offerings. Leading with race can distort the appropriate process in identifying this student's needs.

The tendency to see all things through racial lenses has sometimes led to inaccurate conclusions. In 1870, journalist John Swinton said in response to Chinese immigration that "liberty is a conception of the White race, not of the Yellow or Red or Black." Americans, said Swinton, should worry about the "tainted hordes vast and dense" that were inhabiting their cities. *Liberty* is a racially neutral term, but it gets foggier when its meaning is infused with race. By attaching negative prejudices to the term, Swinton posited an enclosed white social grouping, with a corresponding isolated out-group of nonwhite people.

The mistake Swinton made—assigning inaccurate values to social groups—is consistently repeated today by various subgroups in America. This is accomplished through social categorization, one of the most basic processes of a society. Social categories make it possible for the mind to think. They are also the basis for prejudgment, or prejudice.

Social membership (rich or poor, male or female, black or white, etc.) is a byproduct of social categories. Social memberships make group-based distinctions that guide

perceptions, beliefs, and reactions. If you identify with a group, then that becomes your in-group, and everyone else is the out-group.

In-groups are psychologically of the highest priority. You live in them and for them. Hostility toward out-groups helps strengthen your sense of belonging. And in-group identification is fundamental to intergroup bias—defending a membership trait of your own group may come at others' expense. Therefore, hostility towards out-group members starts with love for your in-group association.

The roots of prejudice lie in categorization—and the categories of race have become the dominant loyalty among Americans. Americans find it difficult to imagine a future cultural norm where race is not the leading variable. So race creates a social fog around issues of education, criminal justice, law, economics, and religion.

It is possible to adjust the way people view social category memberships. What if the focus shifted from social memberships (such as racial groups) to a more inclusive category, such as national or human identity? What if race acted as a third- or fourth-tier lens rather than the primary one? Will race remain as significant when social media communities surpass physical engagement as the main place to build category membership relationships?

Each question speaks to possibilities that may not be too far in the future. Progress requires overcoming the psychological blocks—cynicism, pessimism, and all those other crutches of contemporary thinking—that keep many Americans from believing in the possibility of a less racially dominated culture. Moving beyond the fog of race is an important step.