

PART ONE

Article 1

Race and Ethnicity: The Elephant in the Room

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Several years ago I began offering my students the opportunity to take an ancestry test that measures what percentage of their DNA has been contributed by indigenous populations from four different geographic regions of the world: West Africa, Western Europe, East Asia, and the Americas. There have been a number of surprising results from this exercise, and the majority of these stem from the fact that most of us are misguided and confused about race and culture.

One student spent the first twenty years of his life thinking that he was Mexican and black—incorrectly believing that Hispanics constitute a “racial group.” He mostly identified with his black ancestry, but nonetheless grew up in a swirl of questions about his light skin and freckled face because he clearly did not closely resemble his parents and other relatives who identified as African American. He did not even recall how or why he concluded that he was “half Mexican,” but it made more sense than anything else he could imagine, aside from being white, which he did not want to be. And since nobody in the family spent much time discussing their ancestral roots, it was a story that was able to give shape to his biography. After high school he went off to college and was immediately drawn to all things “black,” including friends, classes, and extracurricular activities. This was not surprising because he grew up in a predominantly black community was also not surprising because so many lighter skinned black Americans find themselves constantly “proving” their blackness to both themselves and other, darker-skinned black people who give them a hard time about the perceived privilege that comes with their lighter skin.

But his world was about to be rocked because his DNA ancestry profile indicated that his DNA admixture reflected 47 percent “white ancestry” and 53 percent “black ancestry.”¹ As it

1. Theoretically his story could still stand up, however, since a person could be Mexican and 100 percent white if his or her Mexican ancestors came directly from Western Europe and only mixed with white and black people south of the border—but it would be very unlikely.

turns out there was no Mexican heritage in my student’s family, which he accessed rather quickly upon revealing the test results to his parents. Like millions of people around the world, he had merely been living in the middle of a twisted story rooted in denial, missing information, and no doubt a few lies that had surfaced to hide the truth of an innocent indiscretion or a tragic sexual conquest. Fate took a comic bow in the direction of my student, however, because during the same semester that he took the DNA test he was also pledging a black fraternity. And because his “brothers” had a sense of humor, the test led to a creative nickname—“53.”

There was another student with Italian roots who never gave any thought to his ancestry. He grew up with the Pope, pasta, and red wine as staples in his home. And because he certainly looked Italian and spoke with that classic east coast Italian accent that is common to Philadelphia natives, nobody had any reason to question his family’s roots. But everybody who has studied continental geography knows that the links between Africa and southern Europe are strong. And the reason people’s skin darkens as one travels south through Italy and Spain is because of the long history of African influence in all things cultural *and* biological—and not because people spend more time in their olive orchards getting tanned. As it turns out, this student’s DNA profile mapped his ancestry as 17 percent West African and 83 percent West European. If he had relatives who were not particularly fond of black people, I can only surmise that his next family meal of lasagna, anti-pasta, and spaghetti was anything but boring.

These are just two of the many thousands of people who have uncovered some hidden branch on their family tree by taking a biogeographical DNA ancestry test. Sometimes the real story was known but deliberately avoided, as in the first example, and other times it is rooted in a complex history of human migration and the exchange of genetic material that just is simply not reflected upon, as with the second. But what stands out from

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most of the stories is how little we know about an aspect of our lives that seems to matter so much to so many of us.

Think about what would happen (or might have happened) if you fell in love with someone of “that group” that people around you do not like. If you’re like many of my students who think they live in a 21st century bubble, you might say “Well, actually, my family would accept anyone; they just want me to be happy.” Really? How about an Arab from Palestine or a member of the Ibo tribe in Nigeria? My guess is that at the very least it wouldn’t be difficult to find a life partner for you who would generate hushed whispers of concern behind closed doors. I cannot even count the number of people I know who confront fear and bigotry in loved ones when they endure a real test to their professed open-mindedness. And here’s the catch. If we took a DNA sample from you and ran it through a wide range of tests along with a detailed family tree—a tree that by now is often impossible to trace for many Americans—it is quite possible that you are biologically connected to one of these groups and you don’t even know it. Sure, maybe not the Ibo but it might be some other West African group; and perhaps not the people we call “Palestinians,” but maybe the Nahua tribes of Mexico. In all likelihood you’re saying to yourself “That’s impossible in my family because we know our history.” Trust me, unless you can trace your family back three or four generations to an area of the world with an historically weak migration flow (e.g., Japan, Mozambique, the southern edge of the Andes in South America), you probably know a lot less than you think about who you are.

Let me give you an example. On average, the African Americans whom we have tested “hope” to be 17 percent Native American and “expect” to be 11 percent. But in fact, they are on average only 4 percent. This is an average, mind you, which means that a significant number of African Americans who claim to be part Native American (and this is a common claim) only have traces of that population’s blood flowing through their admixture—and for many it’s no more than what we call “statistical noise.” So here they are living with a story about the American Indian side of their family background and all the while, for most of them, it’s completely unfounded. Most of them do have blood that does not reflect West African ancestry—but it came from white people. What this means is that there is a story a few branches down on the family tree that got changed when someone likely decided that a voluntary decision and not a forced conquest should explain the lighter skin and straighter hair and so they started to claim a crossover to the Native American and not European side of the fence.

Of course, the deception runs in many different directions. Light skinned blacks have always sought a path across the color line, and even before 1865 families conspired to help tens of thousands of their lightest skinned relatives slip into white society. This wasn’t difficult given the burgeoning numbers of newly arriving whites from somewhat darker skinned regions of Southern Europe, and it meant that African blood found its way deep into the families of white European America. And it means that there are more than a few “white people” living

in the United States who have no knowledge of their African ancestry.²

Would it matter if you were white and found out that you were part “black” or “Asian,” or if you were black and found that you were part “Asian” or “white?” It is probably not all that much—at least that is what our research on DNA ancestry testing leads us to conclude. And the reason is because in the end, few of us are actually focused on our physical differences. Instead, the vast majority of our struggles revolve around culture. The problem is, however, that most of us do not know any more about our own cultures than we do our race. In fact, from my experience listening to people discuss cultures that bump up against the one(s) with which they identify, I am left to conclude that few of us are prepared to go beyond cursory generalizations about *any* culture.

When I offered the possibility that you might have some “Arab” ancestry from Palestine, you likely thought Muslim. This is what most people think. But in fact less than a quarter of all Arabs living in the United States are Muslim—the vast majority are Christian who come from Lebanon and Syria. While this doesn’t make it any more likely that you have blood ties, it should illuminate how little we know about something that seems to matter so much to us. Tell a Christian friend that you would like to take them to worship with the Arabs across town and see what kind of reaction you receive. Unless they are ecumenically inclined, and chances are they’re not, it is likely that they will look at you like you just informed them that you are Jesus in his returned earthly form.

Our “race” is reflected in that image we see in the mirror each morning and our “ethnicity” surfaces in the sum total of most every cultural practice in which we engage day in and day out. As hard as we try, we cannot escape either and together they speak volumes about us to the world when they create a reflection of us in the actions of every other member of our groups. I would think that most of us would want to learn about how we got to have the features we have and why we choose the foods we eat, the clothing we wear, and the gods we worship. But it doesn’t and, as a result, whatever we think about race and claim to know to be true, however we want to measure who we are and why we came to be this way, there is always something surprising to discover if we tilt the prism through which we are looking and ask some questions that we have never before considered. That so few of us do this—perhaps because we want to avoid that nervous apprehension—means that we must rely on randomly tossed together ideas from unreliable sources, arbitrary myths, perplexing beliefs, and by our gut-level inclinations that are surely influenced by the stereotypes of those who taught us. And then we go about our lives expecting this random assortment of “facts” and theories to make sense. They rarely do, of

2. Several years ago a TV producer approached me and my colleagues about giving a DNA ancestry test to avowed racists (black, brown, and white) and then filming the reactions of those who we discover share DNA population markers with members of the groups they hate. Finding people with mixed ancestry would not have been difficult, to be sure, but we nevertheless declined the opportunity to participate in yet another reality television spectacle. I would love to do this, of course, but without the cameras.

course, but we still hold onto them because they are what we know and, unwittingly, over time, they have come to make sense to us. And for those of us who refuse to learn anything else, they are *all* we will ever know.

This is troubling to me, and not because I'm an idealist and a humanist who thinks that we should accept everyone and every culture and that we should live peacefully together. I do believe that we all *could* accept more people and their cultural practices than we currently do, that there is always room for more open-mindedness. But I am writing from what I see as a sociologist and what I recognize to be conflicts born of unnecessary miscommunication and a lack of understanding of what is often times tragically simple connections.

I was in Israel recently and went round and round with Orthodox Jewish acquaintances who considered me naïve because I thought that their conflict with Palestinians could be diminished. Even to imagine making inroads was naïve in their assessment of things. For whatever reason—perhaps it was their need to steel themselves against the potential for violence at any moment—they could not see the ways in which their view of the world was not the only view and that by replacing a few key ideas with others, an entirely different perspective would unfold.

Why should they want this, you might be asking? Because, as I tell my students with an unwavering conviction that has kept me in the classroom for over twenty years, not doing so is tantamount to accepting an irritating itch as something to endure—forever. Sure, we can get used to it, but even in the most unlikely of situations it still holds us back from fully exploring the interesting dimensions of our own personal lives. Why on earth if not to grow, I ask.

The Endemic Problem of Myths and Stereotypes

The problem with most of our myths and stereotypes is that they grow out of a long history of people's limited understanding of groups they've never personally encountered but only "met" through the mostly slanted vision provided by others. This is something larger than bigoted parents imposing their biases onto their progeny, mind you, although that certainly plays a role. I recently asked a gentile what he knew about Jews. He offered up a handful of thoughts that were neither detailed nor provocative. So I asked if he had ever been to a synagogue or a temple. No. Had he even eaten a Kosher meal? No. Had he ever had a conversation about eating Kosher with a Jewish person? No. Did he know what it meant? Don't eat pork. Well, I thought, that's a start. What did he know about Israel? Lots of conflict. OK, another start. What did he know about Jewish history? He supplied a few random names (Abraham, Moses), events (the parting of the Red Sea—although I'm not sure if he believed that it actually happened), and places that he remembered from the Old Testament (Jerusalem, Temple Mount).

But when I asked where he had first heard anything about Jews he stated that his father used to work with a Jewish guy. One

obvious conclusion is that his father evidently didn't learn much about Jewish culture from the interactions, or at least didn't pass what he did learn on to his son. But there is something else. I asked if he liked Jews and his response was "not particularly." He didn't overtly dislike Jewish people, but he thought it might be better if he did neither worked with nor lived among them. He saw no reason to learn anything about them and he could not say that he "liked" them. It turns out that his father didn't get on especially well with his Jewish co-worker and so something about Jews may have rubbed off on the son, but the son himself did not think it caused any underlying negative feelings. But again, and this is key, he did not think that he disliked Jewish people because, in his words, he "did not really know any."

Why should this man have any negative thoughts about Jewish people? Why not in the very least be curious and open to a new exploration? If he is like so many of us, it is because he unwittingly closed down his options when, probably at an early age, he began making distinctions between "us" and "them" and then later needed to fit his framework to the "other," in this case the "Jewish other."

When we encounter otherness we have three courses of action—adapt, ignore, fight. Adapting may be the most difficult, unless it is temporary. Ignoring is the easiest, unless we perceive that otherness to be a threat to our own livelihoods. And when this occurs, and we are not prepared to change or give anything up, then conflict is almost certain to occur. Driving such conflict is always a mix of intertwined, convoluted myths and stereotypes that are designed to help us manage our place in the world by way of strengthening our ideologies (i.e., our explanation for how the world is organized) and ensuring our ability to control the resources at our disposal.

So think about this: What do you know about Iraqis? How about Iranians? How about Japanese or Sudanese or French or Chinese people? I mean what do you really know that you could have ascertained only by sitting down and sharing a meal with some people from each of these groups? If you're like most people and have a busy life, you've probably not done this and you likely do not know much. Granted not many of us do have time to become acquainted with people the world over, and so perhaps you know a great deal about Swedes and Russians and Egyptians because you have friends of these other groups. But go back to the first list. Do you have thoughts about these populations? What's your gut reaction when you hear "Iranians"? How about if I tell you that in a couple of years you'll be living sandwiched between three Iranian families—one on each side and another across the street (if you're Iranian, think Moroccans)? Does it matter? What if it turned out that you were going to be sandwiched between families from Ohio (and if you're from Ohio, think Vermont)? I suspect that aside from the fact that they might hang Cleveland Browns flags from their garages on NFL Sundays and you're a Pittsburgh Steelers fan, it would not matter to you. You might even wonder why I would waste your time with such a meaningless query. But Iranians? Even if you know next to nothing about the culture and the people you likely still have some sort of visceral reaction to the idea because

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somewhere along your life span you have already “met” Iranians and, if you’re like most Americans, you’re not entirely comfortable with what you know—even though you don’t actually know much of anything at all, and especially when compared to your comfort level with Ohioans.

I’m not writing this to convince you to let go of your stereotypes or to show you how silly it is to be prejudiced. Rather, I want you to see how little you likely know about things that you probably think matter so much. So let me go at this in a different way.

If half of your neighborhood suddenly became Iranian, I’m going to assume that it would matter to you and most other readers (including those who are Iranian). Why? Because it just would, you might say. If you’re like most of the rest of us (and are not Iranian), you’ve learned that it’s not acceptable to be a public bigot but you haven’t learned how to fully rid yourself of those fear feelings. And so I would press you for another answer. Because of their culture, you might eventually say, because they’re just different. But if I could magically wave a wand so that the physical appearance of all of these families looked largely like the people they displaced so that you would not even know of their Iranian roots, would you still feel inclined to flee the neighborhood before you drowned in a pot of Persian khorosht? In all likelihood you would—and even without ever having a single conversation with a single Iranian. In other words, we all have lots of ideas about race and culture that matter to our lives because they shape our day-to-day actions—and they are ideas that we adopted as our own without ever having the opportunity to test them out.

Perhaps you’re thinking that you don’t know anything about Iranians but you still want to live with your own people. Why? Who are your own people? Assuming that you very possibly have traces of other populations in your DNA admixture and that your life is a blending of cultural practices borrowed from populations the world over, this really is a fair question. Most Iranians would wear blue jeans and baseball caps, drive Hondas and Chevys, own gas grills and water-resistant lawn furniture, and use TruGreen chemicals on their lawns. And yet there is this sense of unease that accompanies their moving in. You might say, “But they would probably be Muslim.” Fair enough, but your current neighbors are probably some sect of Christian—and does that matter? A Jehovah’s Witness friend of mine—you know, one of those people who knocks on doors asking people to discuss their faith and God—is amazed at the number of people who are unwilling to discuss their beliefs. “That’s private,” they say, “I don’t discuss that with people.” I’ll use this to conclude that you probably do not bring God into your neighborhood discussions and so some of them might already be Muslim. But they’re not Iranians.³

It is remarkable how these myths about the other take root in our lives. One would think that with so many cross-cultural interactions we would have enough opportunities to peer over

3. As a side note I want to add here that, contrary to the thinking of most Americans, Iranians are not Arabs—they are Persians. The name Iran comes from the Aryan people who migrated to the region some 3,500 years ago. One might suspect they are not the same “Aryans” who Adolph Hitler thought were the most divinely advanced master race on the planet. But then, perhaps they are.

the fences of our neighbors’ back yards and observe how they actually do live their lives instead of relying on distorted or (largely) invented stories. But we don’t because we’re busy with lives that do not allow for time to do much more than construct random generalizations about things that are unknown to us. And why do we make generalizations at all? Probably because our minds are naturally inclined to search for the “causes” behind “effects.” Drive down a country road and notice one farmer setting rolls of hay in a row while another puts it in a circle. If you’re even mildly curious, you’ll ask why. And if nobody is with you who can answer the question, you will possibly hypothesize one yourself. Sure, you’ll likely be wrong, but the endeavor is entirely excusable—especially when you fully intend to get the answer as soon as you have access to the internet—and if you’re like most people, you cannot quiet your curiosity even when you try.

Now reflect on the ongoing mysterious behaviors and customs that you encounter in your human interactions. That same curiosity is likely no less active and so you find yourself formulating theories and hypotheses in your mind with each observation. As with the rolls of hay, you might gladly abandon your imagined answer for the correct one, but objective answers to most of these sociological queries cannot so easily be ascertained, not even on the internet. Moreover, you’re also not likely to even be aware that your mind has formulated a question, let alone created an answer, because you make observations so regularly and non-consciously. If you’re like most of us, you resort to juggling fine distinctions in between your own limited understanding and the truth that you are sure is out there somewhere. This is not easy to do, of course, especially when wedged in between your initial observation and your ultimate conclusion is a nagging desire to preserve the integrity of your own life choices and the fact that you think and act in particular ways because, in the end, at some level, and even if it is only the faintest whisper, you think that yours is the best way to think and act.

Essentially what I am describing is the struggle with how to maintain our awareness of differences without stratifying them on the basis of our mostly whimsical notions of good and bad, right and wrong. Differences are ever present throughout the natural and inorganic world but when we lay out those differences on the good-bad axis it often circumvents the path to clarity of thought. For example, I line up all of my pants and I naturally like some more than others. On a day when I want my pants to keep me warm, let’s say, I am more drawn to those with heavier fabric. Or I like the extra pockets in some of them and thus on days when I have to carry an accoutrement of objects it is not unthinkable for me to say “those pants with pockets are the best pants for me today.” But there seems to be some inclination in all of us to at times go beyond practical concerns and attach deficits and benefits randomly in a way that has no bearing on some useful consideration in our lives. And so before I realize it I find myself saying that “thin fabric is the best” or “dark pants are better than light colored pants,” as opposed to “under condition x, thin fabric is best” or “when y occurs, dark pants are preferable to light colored pants.”

Some people eat dogs and guinea pigs while other people eat cows and lambs. Have you ever eaten a dog or a guinea

pig? Do you find the thought repulsive? If I asked you to put your lips up to the teat on the udder of a cow and suck out milk, would you do it? Probably not. You'll drink the milk but not at its source. How about the milk of another mammal, let's say a whale? You'd probably think that was disgusting and decline. Don't you think that it's odd that we drink the liquid that is produced for baby cows? And it is odd, of course, unless you have grown up pouring it out of plastic cartons that somehow magically appear in the grocery stores. But if you had grown up drinking whale milk and then one day you were asked to sample bovine milk, you would probably be repulsed. And this is my point. Most of the ways in which we line up human behavior and physical traits is random and not rooted in criteria that have consequences for anything other than our ability to maintain our own mostly haphazardly acquired and whimsically assigned judgments.

I say "mostly" because it makes sense that we would farm cow milk and not whale milk given our ability to easily collect it and create the conditions under which mass quantities can be produced. But why the repulsion? Why not say "Well, I've never tried whale milk and it certainly sounds interesting?" This response, I suggest, grows out of a deep disconnect between differences and judgmental preferences that as often as not have no basis in our survival or the survival of the people who taught those preferences to us.

I recently watched a video of the finalists get chosen at the 2007 Miss Universe pageant and remarkably all of the young women looked the same. By the same I don't mean they all had the same bikinis or styles of evening dress; I mean they looked *exactly* like one another. In fact, three of them from different continents of the world looked like they could be identical triplets. Naturally I tried to calculate the chances of finding 10 contestants who look exactly alike out of the 200 million or so women of that age who are alive in the world. Surely that was a remarkable feat for the organizers. And I also ruminated on how those same organizers took natural differences across dozens of variables and stratified them so that all of the women who were short and squat with wide noses, narrow eyes, and small breasts never made it to the contest, let alone the finals. If such features ensured higher survival rates for women because of non sociological factors (e.g., thin bodies and large breasts predict longevity and disease resistance and not an ability to attract rich men and better jobs), then emphasis on their unique features would have very different meaning. But as it is, if these young women had to face the average climatic conditions in certain parts of the world, they would not survive—which means that their physical features are neither beautiful nor good apart from the lens through which we define them as such.

Why was this "truth" established in the first place, you might be asking? It's a worthy question, of course, and the possible reasons are nearly as limitless as the social behavior we could explain. In a sense it does not matter for what I am trying to get across in this chapter. What does matter, however, is that once a pattern and a truth takes root it always justifies power and position in a stratified society. We can easily get lost in *why* the Irish were deemed to be so inferior throughout much of this

country's history. It's an interesting question that many dozens of books have explored. But it is also a question that will distract us from the task of freeing ourselves from our selective and biased perceptions. Deficits were assigned to Irish physical features and cultural customs and these were rooted in coordinated efforts to control resources that bolstered the expanding power, and ultimately the survival, of other groups. When it is in their advantage to do so, individuals and groups will always establish the boundaries of "good" and "bad" such that it strengthens the position of their own people—and then they act as though these are immutable without giving much thought to how they were put in place. Returning to beauty, if you were taught that a beautiful woman was as wide as she is tall, flat-chested and without a noticeable cleavage, and had legs with as much cellulite as her body could produce, then that's what you would have expected to see in that beauty pageant. It's humbling to be so manipulated when we think we are free. This brings me to my next point about the detailed contours of our long history of myths and stereotypes.

Race and Ethnic Relations

All aspects of race and ethnic relations should be viewed through the prism of managing people's responses to these sociological phenomena that are embedded in a history that too few of us find the time or the inclination to explore. Think about it. How difficult would it be to read some critical analyses of the racial and ethnic history of your country or state or community? No doubt you could peruse a few books here, a number of articles there, and you could develop a perspective on all of this that would weaken most of the lingering negative thoughts you harbor about other groups. It really would not take much. Of course, someone would always come up with a fact or an example with which you were not familiar. Perhaps they would distort what they know because maybe they are not as balanced in the ways of freedom and determinism as you are. And suddenly you are left questioning truth once again because something doesn't sit right with what they're saying, but you would still not be back at square one because slowly you would be laying the foundation for a coherent understanding of race and ethnicity.

But now let's ramp up the challenge. Imagine if that someone was from the community on the other side of the tracks and that they try to convince you that your family only has what they have because they successfully discriminated against an entire group of people. You know that's not true because you also know that your clan got ahead because they worked hard and didn't squander their chances. Sure they were helped by the severely limited competition, but they were also assisted by their determination and willingness to wake with the sun and set off to work day in and day out. And it is at this point that you fight back. You state your case just as vehemently as they state theirs and before you know it you're sounding like you don't see anything of value in what they are saying because in arguing against the extremism you, too, have lost sight of the middle path. And you shake your head and walk away. Enough of that.

This is the way these conversations are most likely to unfold as I have witnessed over and over. Even more common, in fact,

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is that people do not take the time to read a couple of books or a few articles. And when the opportunity arises to listen to someone with a perspective that might challenge our more or less biased view of everyone around us, we often let it pass us by. And so once again a limited understanding carries the day. Ignorance, coupled with the potential for these conflicts rising to the surface, leads us to refrain from discussing race and ethnicity in open forums so as to avoid discomfort and awkward moments. How could it be otherwise? In truth, why *should* it be otherwise?

It all makes sense, of course, which means that we're not going to heal this wound of race anytime soon. Every time we turn away from the opportunity to better understand how we and our group became who we are for reasons not of our choosing we compound the problem of building bridges that could bring our seemingly warring tribes together, each time missing opportunities to address prejudice and racism and, in the final instance, dismantle discriminatory systems. This is odd given that what we are *not* discussing is what appears to us each time we glance into a mirror. It would take me three minutes to explain to someone why it is that we have different shades of skin and how this is genetically disconnected to human motivation, intelligence, and character. Imagine the level of collective confusion that could be eradicated if everyone took 180 seconds to acquire such knowledge; imagine how our history might have been different. But few of us take three minutes to understand this or myriad other related issues because the entire subject matter is anxiety producing.

And still the subject of race will continue entering the room. And when it does, most of us will still feel an underlying apprehension, as though something bad is going to happen. This often leads us to change the focus of the conversation before we say something that we should not have said or hear something from another person that makes us cringe. In fact, it is a rare treat when I meet someone living in the United States of any race or culture who feels comfortable enough with the topic that they regularly open themselves to discussing it with family, friends, or strangers.

I suppose one could argue that few of us ask these types of questions about race and culture because we do not really “see” differences or at least do not want to take notice of them—and that not dwelling on our petty differences is a positive thing. Yes, possibly, but my experience tells me that most of us do have questions and that all too often we bury them either out of fear of being misunderstood or because we are intolerant of other people's opinions. And if I am correct, then most of us walk through life with a list of questions that involve the tangle of race and culture and inequality—questions for which the lack of answers leads to many awkward moments in our lives. Think of all the times that you have left an interaction that somehow involved race and wished that you had known what to say or had been able to say more clearly what you thought. If you are like most people, your memory of those interactions just caused your belly to tighten. Mine just did as I wrote that sentence because I have a litany of memories of times when my words didn't quite come out the way I wanted them to. And because

I speak to rooms full of hundreds of people and am forced to think on my feet in response to creative and sometimes challenging questions, I have plenty of opportunities for convoluted and ambiguous statements to be misinterpreted, or merely to give the wrong answer.

But why the intense fear? Unlike a conversation about the precursors of global warming and more like a discussion about the causes of obesity, talking about race and ethnicity inevitably touches on seemingly immutable qualities of individuals. For example, when searching for an explanation as to why blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics have average group IQ scores that are lower than whites and Asians, we naturally sort through a long list of sociological (i.e., cultural) and biological (i.e., genetic) explanatory variables. This isn't problematic when discussing individuals, but when the unit of analysis is an entire group we inevitably entertain questions about the intrinsic social or biological superiority or inferiority of those groups in question. And for most of us, doing this is like preparing a big holiday feast—if you don't know what you're doing, you're bound to make a mess of things. And yes, popular culture is loaded with individuals who have been tossed onto the trash heap of “people who are suddenly revealed to be racists” because they didn't know what they were doing.

Imagine finding a correlation between lower IQ and violent behavior by members of some minority racial or ethnic group. (It's always more acceptable if the subject of one's unflattering analysis is the majority group because such information can and is easily be overlooked as irrelevant silliness.) Because history is littered with dominant groups using spurious correlations or manufactured “truths” to exploit, enslave, and discriminate against groups they deemed to be inferior or substandard, a lot of people are going to be extremely sensitive about how you discuss this connection that you think you have uncovered or, indeed, that you have made it in the first place. And well they should. With abiding certainty, you are likely to be immediately identified as “racist” and begin the discussion of your discovery from that dark corner—which is not to even to mention anything about the fact that someone who probably has a better mind than your own has likely already fully and deftly explored the issue to the satisfaction of critics on both sides of the equation. I think it is safe to conclude that a full and honest conversation is unlikely to occur, which means that the entire system of race and ethnic relationships is resting on a sort of manufactured and dishonest set of “truths” that many people do not accept at face value. They might one day accept at least some of them, of course, if only they had an open forum where they could discuss their concerns, but that does not exist.

And just to ensure that ages old questions about the inherent inferiority of some racial and ethnic groups never again rise to the surface of present day thought systems so they can later be used as pseudo intellectual fodder to oppress minority groups, modern society has created a series of talking points for helping us walk through the miasma of our racial and ethnic reality. Critics call it “political correctness”; supporters call it a long overdue correction to the racist and ethnocentric past that we have never rectified.

Political Correctness

Given this uncertain state of affairs, it is not difficult to imagine how belief systems and laws emerge that together compel people to “get along” by way of some peaceful, egalitarian path. But in this proverbial attempt to teach people to live as though all racial and ethnic groups are inherently equal, we must also believe that the many issues and stereotypes we have been raised with are suddenly irrelevant.

These questions and concerns become like the “elephant in the room” where we have to concentrate in order to keep them from entering into our waking consciousness—and when they do enter we must pretend these questions are not there. So for example, a person is supposed to somehow forget that the town where they grew up was clean and crime free, with vibrant markets and schools that required no security guards and dress codes—*until those people moved in*. And the anti-racism activists have few options. For one, they can search for ways to carefully educate people in the methods of sociology and history so as to discover explanations for why that community transitioned as it did and why the race and culture of the new residents is not the primary cause of the unraveling of the state of affairs. This is my life’s work, of course, and it is slow going; it takes me an entire semester to begin to put the pieces in place for a critical explanation that could unlock such a mystery. Moreover, it would, ultimately, require us to more or less agree on some particular way of seeing the world and this is not likely to happen. Drawing from the accounts of my students, for example, I am exceptionally balanced in my discussion of these issues such that I am appreciated by people from the far right and the far left in equal measure. Even still, I find it hard to imagine that I could convince anyone to adopt the entirety of my perspective for why our race and ethnic reality has unfolded to become what we see today—not that I even want to.

Another approach might be to simply let it be known that saying anything negative about a racial (and in some cases ethnic) minority group is probably racist and could lead to sanctions of one sort or another. In fact, the ways in which such comments are interpreted are constantly changing, along with the sanctions, and because one never knows where or why the gauntlet might fall it’s best to stay out of the fray entirely. This is the path of political correctness and it is, by and large, the one that we have chosen. Because it plays such a pivotal role in how Americans interact with one another across the race divide, it is worth discussing in detail.

To begin, I do not define political correctness in the same way as many of the commentators on cable TV and talk radio, as a phenomenon that silences fair-minded Americans by forcing them to think in the way the liberal elite decided that everyone *should* think. Frankly, I don’t think political correctness has much at all to do with the “liberal thought police,” as is often heard from people on the right end of the political spectrum. After all, liberals do not have the power to get some Fortune 500 corporations to pay livable wages to what any reasonable human being would argue are poverty stricken Third World workers, and so how is it likely that they are capable of getting

those same companies to adopt a hard line diversity policy that would pass as acceptable to a group of leftist black or Hispanic activists as critics argue commonly occurs? Political correctness may have been inspired by some of the actions of so-called liberal commentators, but it quickly grew beyond their power. And while many right-leaning analysts also lay the blame for it on people of color, it is hard for me to imagine that black and brown people had the power to provoke such a widespread shift in our cultural landscape when they still can’t even get a taxi on the streets of New York.

To understand the origins of political correctness we must go to the nexus of the Civil Rights Movement, white people wanting to see themselves as treating minorities with fairness (even if they did not always do so), and people of color having varied and often contradictory answers to a spectrum of questions regarding race and culture. It is at this crossroads that there grew a natural inclination by white people to “do and say the right thing.” Certainly it used to be more culturally acceptable to offend racial and ethnic minorities, even when it meant people of color offending other minorities. But the Civil Rights Movement was a moral challenge to such behavior and with time more and more people “jumped on the equality bus,” as a friend of mine likes to say. The problem for white people is knowing when they’re on the authentic bus and not one that is driving down a path toward further turmoil and conflict. It was only natural that they looked to black and brown people for clues to this quandary (i.e., to tell them how to speak and act in relation to people of color). Unfortunately, what they got in return were wildly differing responses. A simple question about what some group would “like to be called,” for example, could elicit an angry response from one person (“Why are you asking me? Why don’t you already know this?”) and a very sober, friendly response from another (“Just call us whatever feels comfortable. Just be yourself.”). This makes sense, of course, because as hard as it seems to be for many white people to grasp, people of color all have different opinions about everything—just like white people.

But it was only a matter of time before the loudest and often most persistent voices got the attention of the mass media, and soon there was a perception that white people *should* think or say one thing or another, or that they *should* act in a particular way simply because some haphazardly selected spokesperson said so. But since many of these race rules were defined by people of color who were seeking ways to attack white power and institutional racism, white people were not going to get off easy; they were going to be forced to feel discomfort and unease. And what might we expect? If women had the power to create new moral codes for male conduct, nobody would expect them to come up with a list that men would accept without a fight. I’m sure even more conservative, so-called anti-feminist women could come up with a provocative set of “thou shalt” for the men in their lives. For example, “Thou shalt do your own cooking when I’m in the middle of my monthly bleeding,” or “Thou shalt allow me to adjust the thermostat during

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menopause,” or “Thou shalt meet all of my dietary requests during pregnancy.”

So here we have white people asking people of color to tell them how to think and act in their expanding multicultural world and discovering that what appear to be rules are actually opinions and exist in a state of constant flux. That has meant that no white person can find a guaranteed path to avoiding rebuke and being labeled a “racist.” And as more and more individuals and groups (i.e., governmental bodies, corporations, etc.) have boarded that civil rights bus, this has gradually become a label that people cannot afford to receive. Certainly this can be detrimental but, contrary to the thinking of most politically right-leaning commentators, it is hardly a conspiracy.

Now imagine how in the middle of this confusion white people start hearing stories about white people getting reprimanded for telling a racist joke that they didn’t think was racist because someone of color told them that it was not an offensive comment. As such stories proliferate white people respond like any reasonable human being would do—they learn to remain silent or, if they are forced to speak, they learn how to move their lips and make noises that sound like words but when strung together translate into absolutely nothing of substance. I see this in my work every day. I watch tapes of white people who have received “diversity training” for as long as they can remember and know exactly how to respond to potentially volatile questions (e.g., Why do *you* think mixed race people have such high addiction rates? Would you let *your* child marry a Mexican? Would *you* feel uncomfortable sitting next an Arab Muslim man on an airplane? How about if he started to pray?). When they are challenged to think outside of their well-rehearsed scripts, it can be painful to watch them sweat and stutter and frantically grasp for assistance. And because we continue to live in a largely segregated world when it comes to our personal relationships, few of us of any race have truly had the opportunity to share our intimate thoughts with other members of the race palette—and so we have almost no experience testing the validity of our own “race ideologies.”

The result is that white people learn to say the things they assume they are supposed to say in order not to offend anyone. This is not entirely problematic given the centuries of offensive language used toward second class groups. But it’s not exactly the ideal way to build bridges and create a harmonious, multicultural society. In any case, as white people learn how to speak, they adopt a belief system about race issues but have no idea where it came from, nor can they articulate the reasons why they believe in it. It’s a perfect response to a complicated world, of course, but it’s also a source of consternation, self doubt, and buried anger—and it undermines authentic multicultural friendships and the possibility of bridging the racial divide by building a base of knowledge related to race and ethnicity. It’s a lot like being a six-year old who is somehow supposed to like school while being judged at every turn and being forced to follow a litany of rules over which they and all other six-year olds have no control.

And by keeping the focus on white people, political correctness also keeps people of color stuck in a narrow vision of the causes of our racial conflagrations. In my experience, black and

brown people have lots of opinions and generally feel more free than their white compatriots to share them, but those opinions are very often drenched in bias and rarely grounded in knowledge and facts. After participating in hundreds of multiracial conversations, I can say that it is rare that people of color are challenged for any of their contradictory views—certainly not by the vast majority of white people who seldom gain a solid foothold into understanding what is going on and so rarely feel comfortable responding to any of the unreasonable accusations and statements that black and brown people might make. Not only does this undermine people of color’s intellectual growth, since they are not being challenged to think outside their own boxes, but it also allows them to remain hidden behind a shroud of moral superiority. I find this to be a problem whenever people of color are asked to discuss the dealings of groups other than their own. Unless checked by someone else—and this rarely happens, especially when that “someone else” is white—a disconcertingly large number of black and brown people will happily exhibit the same bigotry as the white people they often condemn, especially if the target of their bigotry is not present in the room. And if they never get called out on it, why wouldn’t they take that opportunity to vent their frustration?

Moreover, people of color very often play off of white guilt, sometimes without even realizing it. As discussions center around historical instances of sometimes gut wrenching brutality at the hands of white people, it is understandable that current generations of those same white people would feel ashamed and think that they share some semblance of responsibility for the lives of others. Having to manage those feelings can be rather debilitating, as you might imagine, and in the middle of such a morass of emotions it is not likely that white people will think that it’s acceptable to stand up to some slight meted out by a black or brown person. Hence, white guilt can be a powerful silencing tool that can give people of color the upper hand in critical situations, even though they rarely know or admit that they are wielding it and, when asked, will almost always say they don’t want white people’s guilt. Sometimes I just shake my head and roll my eyes at these disjointed and bizarre conversations.

The other day I was in conversation with an academic friend of mine and he mentioned that a friend of his had started exploring a new subject matter in his academic research—race and crime. In response, a very sober and balanced mutual friend of ours said, “Why would he risk doing that without having more of a foundation for the topic. That’s really foolish.” I thought about the main reason that university study exists at all, which is to explore intellectual questions, and how the nexus of race and crime is certainly one that is worth exploring from many different angles, especially by people who might bring a fresh perspective to the existing body of research. But the assumption in the room was that this guy could risk his career if he published or said the wrong thing in print or at a presentation. Aside from discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. foreign policy, it is quite possible that there is no other topic in all of academia that has the power to instill such fear in people as does race and, as a result, to silence them.

The vast majority of the disagreements on the topic stem from how we perceive the “causes” of human behavior which,

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in the world of race and ethnicity means how we explain why people of identified groups think and act differently than people of other groups. This is not a problem if we limit our conversation to benign factors like why we eat different foods or listen to different music. But once we get into more politicized issues such as why we have different group IQ levels and standardized test scores or rates of unemployment and incarceration or patterns of wealth and income, we enter into a minefield that few people can traverse with skill and dexterity. That black Americans are disproportionately represented in the group of people that the criminal justice system labels “violent” is undeniable, but how we explain this says more about who we are than the reality itself. For example, does our racist society find and lock up black people because they’re mostly looking for people in that group to do something wrong—and so lots of violent white and brown people are both violent and free? Are black people more violent because they are more likely to be poor and poverty and violence are intimately connected? Are black people genetically disposed toward violence? Are the numbers fabricated and, in fact, untrue? Are black people socialized to be violent? I’m sure you have an opinion on the matter and I’m equally certain that your opinion is ill-informed because you undoubtedly haven’t read even one of the hundreds of thousands of pages of research on the matter. In fact what does it say about you that you could weigh in on this critical question without knowing the research? And what if you do weigh in on it *and* you are someone who is responsible for making decision in our society that affect the lives of people in your community?

I’m certain that if you are like most people I have observed in conversations about race and ethnicity issues and you find yourself in a room full of people of your own racial and ethnic group, you would articulate an answer to the question about blacks and violent behavior differently than if you were in a mixed group—and certainly if you are not black and find yourself in a group of black people. Okay, so perhaps you really are different and you really would respond the same way regardless of the group. But trust me, while lots of people claim that they would do that, aside from a small number of sociopaths few actually have the backbone to do so.

On one hand, this is a shame because it closes off an opportunity to have important conversations about issues that affect all of us. On the other, of course, since the issues are rather complex, perhaps it’s probably for the best that most people just keep their thoughts to themselves. Imagine what would happen if your relationship with your mother or father was subject to national interpretation but nobody knew the intricacies of the interactions between you three and refused to learn all about how and why you and your mother or father interact in the way that you do. My wife once had a student who often showered with her sister and parents—all four of them together. It was “normal” to them and they enjoyed the experience. But as you might imagine, she never came close to convincing the rest of the class that it was a positive experience for everyone, they simply could not see things her way. It is unnerving to have one’s life experience thrown into one’s face day after day, subject to judgment on a regular basis. And so while it might be best if people just didn’t think about you and your family, we

really don’t have this luxury with race and ethnicity because it is a public issue about which most people seem to have opinions. And since our opinions can get put us on the wrong side of power we largely remain silenced.

My Experience of Race and Ethnic Relations

As someone who spends every day of his life in the middle of the race dialogue and debate it is quite clear to me that not only does political correctness embedded in a layer of white guilt exist, but also that over the years I had been the unwitting victim of it. I was not always as comfortable in my white skin as I am now. I grew up with a fairly diverse number of experiences involving people from other race and ethnic groups. I had friends and acquaintances from a wide range of backgrounds and my immediate family members were not afraid to step across those seemingly impenetrable lines that separate one group from another—although mine was a mostly white world. And this does not mean that they always said or did the “right” thing, but it meant that I had plenty of opportunities for varied experiences. For example, I had a brother two years my senior who attended a high school that was only half white. I didn’t discover that he took a black girl to his junior prom until I saw his prom photos weeks later because it just wasn’t notable information in our home. My mother regularly took me to ethnic restaurants as a child and she always tried to find the “authentic” places—this meant restaurants where English was rarely spoken. We never discussed or thought about the dynamics of those cultures or racial and ethnic (in)equality or any other issues that I now talk about most every day of my life. We were there for the food and our comfort level did not compel us to engage in any sort of extended dialogue about or with the people around us. While we did ask how to prepare certain dishes, we would never have thought to ask questions that might propel us past the invisible walls of cultural differences such as “Why is it that in your culture you...?”

After I entered college I joined the Big Brothers, Big Sisters Program and was matched with a twelve-year old African American boy. We connected easily and established a relationship that would last until I moved away seven years later. We hung out together weekly and established a friendship that was deep and trusting and one in which we talked (and often playfully joked) about a wide range of racial and cultural differences. And yet as I think back to the many hundreds of hours of conversation I can only recall two instances where we had a serious discussion about race. Both were ignited by his being called a name in my presence and neither conversation lasted for more than ten minutes. I did not know what to say and he did not know how to explain his undoubtedly complicated feelings to me. The topic of race and culture remained safely beneath the surface.

Nevertheless, I always assumed that I was comfortable with the issues whenever they surfaced. And yet it was not until I started teaching that I first noticed that I, too, had a long list of questions for which I had no answers. While in graduate school

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I mostly taught classes about social problems and social inequality and I always spent a couple of weeks each term covering race and culture. The culture part was easy because by that time I had travelled extensively in Europe and Latin America and was intimately connected to many Hispanics and West Indians through friendship networks and colleagues. However, when I had to discuss race I realized that I was nervous. In fact, it was the only time I lost my grounding in a classroom—and I was proud of myself for being one of those instructors who could talk openly about anything. But while I was always somewhat unnerved by my own lack of knowledge about seemingly basic ideas, facts, and knowledge in relation to race, it did not affect my life or my career.

It is only in retrospect that I can see how afraid I was of delving beneath the surface of the issues back in those early days. I had already refereed my share of arguments between students who disagreed with one another on other topics, but race has the capacity of really getting raucous—or so I thought, as do my current colleagues who so often voice this to me. What I often did back in these early years was make sure that I spoke more than students during those select weeks of my courses so that I only brought up race topics about which we were certain to agree. I ruminated about the treatment of Native Americans and the wickedness of slavery and Jim Crow. Surely we would all agree on that those were bad periods and I would be seen as a white guy who understood and was an ally. And since I always had Hispanic students in class I made certain that I touched on the “theft” of what used to be Mexico or the wages and living conditions of migrant laborers. To display Asian sensitivities I showed a film on the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. I never discussed the complexities of whiteness or the connection between race and class. I never (ever) addressed the hypocrisy of black and brown people who demanded fair treatment for themselves but had any number of excuses for hating gays and lesbians, Arabs or Jews, white people, or members of some other minority group who had done them wrong or who they considered to be lazy, stupid, or just plain bad. Nor did I open up an honest conversation about affirmative action or the many possible hypotheses that frame the correlations between race and crime, poverty, single parenthood, illiteracy, violence, and so on.

To have any of these conversations would have meant running the risk of revealing my discomfort—and I couldn't even admit to myself that I felt that—and thereby exposing myself as someone who was a race fraud, as someone who pretended to be down with the cause but really had no idea what was going on. Worse yet, I might have said the wrong thing and come off as a racist. This is an especially disconcerting identity for any white person in a mixed group, and no less troubling for a teacher who is standing exposed in the front of a room.

So I played everything safe and managed to steer clear of any public challenges that might unravel me. Mind you, throughout this six year period I taught a number of classes in which 80 percent of the enrolled students were black, Hispanic, and Southeast Asian. While in grad school and teaching these courses I was also the faculty advisor for the disabled student organization whose membership was only half white. I had roommates

from El Salvador, Iran, and China, and other who were black and Jewish. I travelled back and forth to Latin America for my research, living there for nearly two of these six years. And yet, with amazing dexterity that I still do not fully understand, I somehow managed to stay clear of engaging in any of those race conversations that scratched beneath the surface and had the potential of unraveling the hidden ideologies and buried contradictions of those involved.

Then at the start of my second full-time year of teaching I was asked to take over a course on race and ethnic relations and another on race and ethnic inequality and everything changed. It seemed as though nobody wanted to teach the classes and as I was standing on the lowest rung of the seniority ladder, the task was put onto me. But what I found was that once I fully dug into the issues and was forced to answer the very questions that I had been avoiding or just never got around to considering because I did not even know they were swirling around in my head. My apprehension quickly dissolved. Imagine, for example, that one day you adopt a disabled child and her wheelchair and suddenly must confront a hundred questions, feelings, and beliefs. All of the uncertainties about what to do and what not to do would quickly dissolve and those every day interactions would be normal before you had time to notice.

Today, after fifteen years talking about race to what is now a class of 725 students twice per year—I have up the inequalities course several years ago—I have come to thrive on the learning that is possible when mountains of questions collide with so much collective unknowing and a little bit of tension in the room. Every question on the floor is one that some people in the room have at least silently posed to themselves. Today there is not a single question or comment that makes me uncomfortable or that I find unworthy of some reflection. In our culture, this is uncommon, as you already know. In my world, hardly a week goes by when I don't hear some white person preface a question with “I'm not sure if I'm allowed to ask this but...” or some black or brown person begin their exclamatory comments with some version of “I'm not really sure how to say this but...” or “I just have to be honest and say...” And each time I ask myself, “How did we get into this mess?”

But this kind of public discourse is what I love to do. In fact I thrive on it because I have yet to find another topic that can so quickly spark an interesting conversation just as suddenly as it can transform a life. And I love it because I am a teacher of the social sciences and I have yet to encounter a subject so chock-full of misinformation that it allows me seemingly endless opportunities to open people's imaginations and see the world in new ways.

Where We're Headed

There is another path, of course, but it would require us to engage in the hard-scrabble work of challenging everything and everyone we know—and of being willing to be transformed just as readily as we'd like to change others with whom we vehemently disagree.

Sometimes people ask me when my class will no longer be necessary. My answer is always the same: As long as people

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divide the world into little boxes based on the physical features and cultural practices of others, they will be inclined to want to discuss their observations. And every discussion marks an opportunity to interpret what they see differently than someone else would do, which is going to lead to either overt conflict or some form of disagreement. And until we all look the same and follow the exact same customs, those boxes are not going away. Let me give you an example.

I was listening to NPR's Morning Edition on the radio a while back and there was a story about Kevin Clash, the puppeteer who is the voice of Elmo on Sesame Street. The issue that almost jumped out of my radio's speaker was the fact that Clash had a low, baritone natural speaking voice, and yet he was able to make unusual high-pitched sounds for the "Elmo" puppet. I kept waiting for the interviewer to address this and he never did. But what that interviewer did ask about, and in his second question, was race: "Are a lot of people surprised to discover that you are African American?" This is an interesting question, I suppose, since undoubtedly most people in middle America probably expect "Elmo" to be white. But why ask it? It is a five

minute interview and there are myriad issues to discuss about Clash spending twenty years as a "furry red monster." How is it that race fits into the short list of interesting interview topics? Consider this. If you met Kevin Clash doing this voice on the Sesame Street set, would you notice that he is black? Would you find it curious? Would you want to ask him a question about it? Would you feel strange bringing up the topic? Would you be concerned that you would be considered racist for noticing it? Could you look past Clash's skin and other salient African features and see him as "just human"? If you are like most of us in the United States, you would answer "Yes" to all of these questions and you would find Clash's race newsworthy too, at least worthy of one question in a five minute radio story.

So when is race going to go away? My response is that it is not going away, at least not for a very long time, and so we had better learn how to make sense of the issues that hound us as a nation and get a foothold into this subject matter to see what is possible. And, for white people in particular, we need to build the bravado to have the conversations that we are going to have, whether we want to or not.