

The challenges of talking about race

It's only by talking openly about race that its ill effects, stereotypes, and assumptions will eventually go away.

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Harvey Young

Harvey Young is an Associate Professor at Northwestern University and a Fellow at the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History at Harvard University. A cultural historian, he is the author of *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory and the Black Body*.



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"The verdict in the trial of George Zimmerman... created a forum in which people could talk about the operation of race and racism in America," Harvey Young writes [Reuters]

Race is a topic that most people would prefer not to address. The widespread reluctance to talk about race frequently stems from the anxieties and stress that occur with the admission (or confession) that we not only perceive differences in complexion as well as cultural and religious practices but also apply meaning to them.

To enter such a *difficult dialogue* would threaten our credentials as twenty-first century thinkers who have advanced beyond last century's logic of the "colour line" and possess the capacity to see beyond the rigidly defined racial categories of the past.

To talk about race feels dangerous. There is the possibility of slippage, a verbal gaffe or, perhaps worse, a sincere and honest opinion that does not jibe with contemporary group think. Will we say something that may evidence that we may not be as enlightened as we imagine ourselves to be? Will a slip of the tongue accidentally give both credence and a sense of materiality to a concept (race) that we know does not really exist and is simply a fiction invented to divide people?

The verdict in the trial of George Zimmerman, the defendant who had admitted to killing an unarmed black teenager and was found not guilty of committing murder and manslaughter, created a forum in which people could talk about the operation of race and racism in America.

Although the conversation centred on the case, expressions of shock, outrage, and dismay over the verdict were not really about the legality of the decision. It's pretty easy to see how a degree of reasonable doubt could creep into a case in which the only eyewitness was a defendant who insists that he acted in self-defence.

The outcry targeted an *immoral* act that went unpunished: a man killed an unarmed teenager - especially after being told by the police not to engage the youth - and was allowed to walk free.

Moral outrage morphs into expressions of racial concern when a person questions whether negative stereotypes that associate black people with violence and criminality played a role in either Zimmerman's actions or the jury's acceptance of the defendant's self-defence assertion. Would Trayvon Martin still be alive *if* he were not black?

The racial concern arrives when a person looks at history and remembers past moments in American history when entire communities would gather to participate as witnesses in the lynching of black men and women and not a single person would be charged for the murder.

Of course, the challenge in talking about race is that the conversation, inevitably, can make people feel defensive - as if they're somehow responsible for the actions and beliefs of their ancestors or even of their neighbours. It almost

demands a person to assert, "I don't see colour" or to name differently complexioned friends and prom dates as evidence of one's race blindness. It certainly can lead to frustration, anger, and exhaustion.

The first step in having a conversation about race is to admit that we - all of us, like it or not - see race and ascribe some meaning to it. This doesn't mean that we're racists. We are simply observant people and, thanks to our exposure to a similar set of media, we apply meaning to what we see.

In my book, *Embodying Black Experience*, I quote Jesse Jackson, talking about how disconcerted he is whenever he finds himself walking along at night, hears footsteps behind him, gets nervous/worried/fearful, and then experiences relief when he discovers that his fellow pedestrian is white.

Four steps toward racial equality

We live in a society in which we unfairly and often uncritically project our imagined ideas on other people. In order to have a conversation about race, we have to be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that we sometimes make assumptions about people based on how they look.

The second step is to acknowledge that racial inequality is not simply a belief held by a few individuals. For a period of time, it was written into foundational American documents. Thomas Jefferson, a slave owner, wasn't thinking about his people-property when he wrote that "all men are created equal" with rights to "Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness".

Obviously, this is not 1700s America. The steady march to racial equality - the elimination of slavery, the granting of voting rights, the dismantling of segregationist policies, and the deliberate creation of acts to affirmatively support the placement of qualified minorities in schools and the workforce - is an ongoing effort that stretches to the present day.

The third step is to note that some groups, typically racial minorities, have been talking about race and racism longer than folks in the majority. This doesn't mean that racial minorities are obsessed with race or have a chip on their shoulders. It's simply that responsible parents and community members want to lessen the odds of their children becoming the targets or victims of discrimination by trying to prepare them for the expectations that people will have of them.

In an effort to create dialogue, the goal is not to critique people for not spending lots of time thinking about race but simply to encourage folks to consider which circumstances or privileges determine their level of awareness of the operations of race in everyday life.

The fourth and final step is to look toward future possibilities in any conversation about present racial realities. There's a reason that most people quote Martin Luther King, Jr's "dream" for the future than his assessment of the present - "America has given the Negro people a bad check" in his speech at the March of Washington.

The future

The future creates space for optimism, possibility, and change. It also connects us, all of us. We can't control what our ancestors thought or did. We have limited agency in what happened yesterday or last month. There's nothing that we can do to change the outcome of past acts. However, we can shape the future. To do so, we have to be willing to have a frank, awkward, and, sometimes uncomfortable conversation about what race means to us and try to remember that our conversation partners often are just as nervous about having this discussion.

It's only by talking openly about race that its ill effects, stereotypes, and assumptions will eventually go away. Otherwise, ungrounded fears and racial anxieties will linger into the future.

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