

Racial and Ethnic Dynamics among Contemporary Young Adults

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Whether watching the news or talking with neighbors, I find the United States to be a “race conscious” nation. All of us are constantly confronted with the reality of racial and ethnic dynamics, and all of us hold different forms of “knowledge” on the issues. Yet over many years teaching college-level courses, I see how most of our perceptions fail to align neatly with what’s really happening with racial and ethnic dynamics, especially when it comes to understanding the younger generation. In this essay, I will talk about some of the more common misperceptions about race and ethnicity among young adults, accentuate the persistence of racial discrimination continuing to affect them in America, and present some of the gradually shifting patterns of beliefs and social interactions related to race and ethnicity as America continues to diversify.

Challenging Commonsense Assumptions

Every year I teach a race and ethnic relations course, and every year it’s my greatest challenge. Today’s college students come to class convinced that they understand issues of “race,” that they don’t see “color” when they interact with others, and that they have far surpassed the “stupid stereotypes” that held their grandparents in the grip of prejudice. Over the years, the class has gotten even harder to teach, with the ever-present popularity of Oprah Winfrey and the dramatic election of Barack Obama as our first Black president. Students register for class based on their interest in racial and ethnic issues, but they consider the course a supplement to what they already know. I spend 15 weeks carefully peeling away layers of ignorance, showing that despite all the progressive changes in the past century, the core dynamics that have governed the

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relations between racial and ethnic groups in America remain surprisingly consistent. In particular, I demonstrate that categories of “race” or “ethnicity” still matter and that persistent racial divides—especially between Blacks and Whites—continue to separate ethnic and racial groups in the United States, even among racially sensitive young adults.

So, I’ll say this up front: We are not living in a “postracist” America.

At the same time, I tell students that there are things that have changed in the United States and that their generation is contributing to realigning the relationships between racial and ethnic groups in the current century. Young adults have more frequent and more continuous cross-ethnic interactions in racially diverse settings compared to their parents and grandparents. More importantly, they are more aware about race and ethnicity in ways that radically differ from their parents, which affects both their social interactions and their own self-identities. It’s ironic. Whether they have centuries-old ancestral ties to the Mayflower or arrived recently as new immigrants, the same young adults who are so often clueless about racial/ethnic/multiracial dynamics are the ones changing the terms of these interactions as they live out their day-to-day lives.

Yes, America Is More Diverse

Let’s look at basic demographics. Although the categories used for classifying racial and ethnic groups have changed over the past few decades, information from the U.S. Census Bureau shows significant growth in racial and ethnic diversity. All the traditionally defined “minority” groups—Hispanics, non-Hispanic Blacks, Asian and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians and Alaska Natives—now make up about 30% of the American population. Hispanics are the largest of these groups at 14%, followed by African Americans (12%), Asians (4%), and Native Americans (1%). Immigration contributes greatly to this diversity. Over one third of the total population growth in the past 30 years is due to immigration, and a steady flow of Hispanic and Asian migrants will surely continue. Adding to minority growth is the fact that the birthrate of all these groups is higher than that of Whites (those who are not Hispanic). There is also a sizeable increase in the “mixed-heritage” or “multiracial” portion of the population.

While only 2.4% of individuals identified as multiracial in the 2000 census, projections from the National Research Council indicate that as many as 21% of individuals will identify as multiracial by the year 2050. Overall, the census estimates that the United States will consist of 50% minority groups by 2042; among young adults, the 50% mark will be reached much earlier—by the year 2027.

Thus, the diversity of the United States population is increasing remarkably. But these large demographic shifts from steady migration and higher birthrates do not automatically lead young adults to actually experience diversity in their own lives. Accompanying these shifts are important legal judgments that occurred shortly before these young adults were born. Cities across the United States in the past century had apartheid laws that enforced separate White and Black housing districts. New Deal policies like the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act, and the Federal Housing Act of 1934 also favored White communities and excluded lower-class, primarily Black, individuals. While many of these laws and policies were eventually declared unconstitutional, it is civil rights legislation that most profoundly affected young adult interracial dynamics.

Beginning with the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, civil rights legislation applied to American schools created local, continuous places where adolescents of different ethnic and racial groups would regularly interact. The legislation had a cascade effect on other laws that regularized cross-racial interactions. Another important ruling allowed marriage between members of different racial groups, because interracial marriage was still illegal in 16 states until the *Loving v. Virginia* ruling in 1967 declared such legislation unconstitutional. Even further, the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 removed strict migration restrictions on people from other countries. The resulting changes in the flow of foreign migrants brought a large influx of non-European immigrants from Latin America and Southeast Asia. The removal of these and other cross-ethnic barriers paved the way for making interethnic/interracial relationships normal.

In sum, a mixture of demographic shifts, judicial rulings, and legislation changed the racial and ethnic landscape of the United States, affecting today's young adults. As these changes took root, the later 20th century saw larger numbers of non-White

people, more children born from interethnic/interracial unions, greater foreign migration, and more legal judgments (including limitations on outright discriminatory practices in hiring and housing), which fostered more diverse relationships. Together, these changes established the ground for today's young adult experience of diversity in college classrooms, places of work, and public spaces in their day-to-day life.

But Young Adults Remain Segregated

On the surface, it would seem that these important changes in the diversity of the population and the removal of barriers to cross-racial interactions would mean that young adults naturally have more diverse relationships. But this is not true. Not all racial and ethnic groups have equal opportunity for diverse relationships. Whites are by far the most segregated of all racial and ethnic groups, as the average White person lives in a neighborhood that is more than 80% White. In contrast, Asian and Pacific Islanders tend to live in diverse neighborhoods with an equal mix of all groups. The neighborhood experience of diversity among young adults as they grow up is therefore different, and that means that interactions in schools, workplaces, and other public spaces are more important for the ongoing experience of diversity than living in the same neighborhood.

Is being “around diversity” alone enough to foster diverse relationships among young adults? No. Even when there are ample opportunities for cross-racial relationships in different situations, research shows varying levels of preferences for creating diverse friendships. What is known as the “homophily principle” essentially tells us “birds of a feather flock together.” Young adults tend to have friendships with others from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although I often hear stories from White students who had a “best friend in school who was Black,” research shows that only 2% of all friendships occur between Black and White students. A recent study of a diverse high school that included Black, White, Asian, and Latino students reported that all types of interracial friendship are rare. What is most interesting to me is that the effect of racial categories in separating Blacks from Whites is persistent; interracial friendships between White and Black students—including Black Hispanics—is far less common than friendships between Whites, Asians, and non-Black Hispanic students. In short, Black and White friendship networks are mostly segregated, and racial designations are strongly associated with friendship choices. Even when opportunities

for diverse friendships grow as the racial diversity of a school increases, friendships tend to be formed only among one's own racial and ethnic group, especially when the number of racial minority groups at the school is small.

These same adolescents reveal that they are experimenting with diverse relationships more so than previous generations as they mature into adulthood. The most important research on cross-ethnic experimentation centers on dating and marriage. Young adults today have more interracial acquaintances than past generations, and there is a growing acceptance of interracial dating relationships. However, the actual incidence of interracial dating tends to go down as young adults grow older from 18 to 35 years of age. Why do intimate interracial relationships decline as young adults mature? The answer appears to lie in the experiences that adolescents have with interracial dating.

Adolescents in interracial dating relationships tell us they encounter discomfort, intolerance, and other difficulties from peers at school. Adolescents have less control over their social environment (including school, family, neighborhood, etc.), so it is harder to escape negative reactions, and when a wave of reactions happens, they usually choose to end the relationship. Research shows that these earlier negative reactions to interracial dating later affect their understanding of the potential for long-term serious relationships and effectively discourage them from pursuing interracial relationships in the future. For example, Angie, a light-skinned Hispanic woman in her 20s, once shared with me how difficult it was for her to go anywhere publicly with her Black boyfriend. While her family supported the relationship, her experiences at school and at the mall made her uncomfortably self-conscious about being in an interracial relationship. They broke up after several months. With that relationship behind her, Angie said she probably will not date another Black man again.

Angie's and other's experiences accentuate that the general expectation to marry a partner from one's own racial and ethnic background remains strong in the United States. Younger generations are more accepting of the idea of cross-racial relationships, but this does not mean that interracial dating is more acceptable. Today, approximately 13% of marriages in the United States involve people of different races. But intimate interracial relationships most often lead to living together rather than marriage. Still,

many scholars assume that the number of marriages will likely increase as more tolerant attitudes toward interracial relationships continue to be absorbed into the broader mainstream American culture.

Still, Young Adults Are Reconsidering Racial Boundaries

Racial boundaries are changing, but not disappearing, among young adults. These changes are fostering a new racial awareness among contemporary young adults that is neither “color blind” nor “postracial” but that does encourage an increased sophistication about self-identity. The cumulative effects of more diversity in the population, more opportunities for cross-ethnic interaction, and more intimate relationships between members of different ethnic and racial groups stimulates a heightened awareness of young adults’ own selves. For example, young adults today are expected to be more forthright and explicit about their own racial/ethnic identity, presenting this as part of their overall social location. This new racial awareness also confronts Whites with recognizing their own “race” and the unearned privileges that accrue on that basis. Amidst these changes, young adults are taking more time to accentuate tolerance and the need to create hospitable social spaces in a way that recognizes and accepts different racial/ethnic distinctions.

It is important to note that a person’s family and home environment remains the most important influence on racial/ethnic identity. Family and neighborhood cultivate a person’s “ethnic pride,” particularly among second- and third-generation immigrants. The experience of multiculturalism in the United States often leads to even stronger feelings of loyalty or pride in an immigrant’s ethnic identity or heritage. This “ethnic reinforcement” contradicts the more common assumption that immigrants melt into mainstream American culture as they grow older.

One example of a distinctive ethnic identity can be seen in Fernando, a young adult Mexican American living in Los Angeles. Fernando has developed a strong personal sense of “La Raza Mexicana.” In the face of threats that tell him he holds an inferior status, Fernando’s ethnic pride promotes an ethnic distinction that connects him to other Mexican Americans, reinforces a collective dignity, and produces a more positive reflection on his own self. Such ethnic pride forms as a response to negative

views among Mexican Americans as a stigmatized group.

In contrast is the story of Yousef. Political events in Iran, including the Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis in 1979, have strongly discouraged Iranian immigrants in the United States from identifying with their ethnic heritage. For immigrants like Yousef, larger sociopolitical events become more influential than family and neighborhood in forming ethnic identity. He and other Iranian immigrants abandon their Iranian ethnic identity to avoid negative stereotypes. One indication of this is that he has Americanized his name; so Yousef calls himself “Joseph.”

Expanding on the experiences of Fernando and Yousef, we find that non-Anglo individuals can develop a strong sense of ethnic pride as a minority or attempt to assimilate into the larger “American” melting pot. In both cases, their status as viewed by the broader mainstream society significantly influences the formation of their ethnic identity as they try to protect themselves from the threat of prejudice and discrimination. They help us understand how we must interpret the development of any young adult’s racial identity within a larger social context.

Young adult Whites face a different set of circumstances. They often draw on “symbolic ethnic identities” from which they choose an ethnic affiliation. For example, Jane, one of my White students, claimed to be “a mix of Italian, French, and Irish.” Although she had never been to Italy, France, or Ireland, Jane regularly accessed her “culture” by eating pizza, drinking Merlot, and wearing green on Saint Patrick’s Day. Even more surprising are other White students who say they have “no ethnicity” and wish they had one—and who are jealous of Jane! Overall, research shows that Whites are less concerned about reactions from people outside their own racial groups, have less diverse relationships in comparison with other groups, and are less accepting of interracial dating and marriage. Even more, the majority of White Americans will overlook the distinctive experiences of other racial and ethnic groups because they tend to believe discrimination is no longer an issue. In their minds, America is a firmly established meritocracy because prominent African Americans are “obviously” successful in sports and entertainment and because the outright denial of access to jobs, housing, and public accommodations is now “illegal.”

What White students in my classes fail to realize is that non-White young adults do not have the option of either taking on an aesthetic ethnic identity (“I’m Irish”) or ignoring classification of their racial/ethnic group (“I have no ethnicity”). In contrast to Whites, the racial identity of non-White young adults is imposed through interactions that are often discriminatory, and non-Whites learn to navigate the definitions of their identities within those constraints. A further complication is that identity appears to be more fluid among Latino and Asian immigrants than for Blacks because of the history of African American relations in the United States, which makes Black racial boundaries distinct and more prominent than those of other groups. This is especially noticeable among first-generation immigrants who are Black and born in the Caribbean Islands or on the African continent. Their dark skin pigmentation leaves them lumped into being categorized as “African American” even though they may not originate from “Africa” or consider themselves yet to be “American.”

The power of categorization can be seen also in the rise of Pan-Hispanic and Pan-Asian identities. The emergence of “panethnicity” comes in part from the growing population of bi-ethnic and multiracial Latin Americans and Asian Americans, but these broader labels simplify cultural distinctions and homogenize differences between groups at a very young age. These broad categories intentionally blur lines of ancestry so that Cuban, Mexican, Colombian, and so on become absorbed into “Latino” or “Hispanic” and Japanese, Chinese, Korean, and so on become “Asian.” The labeling of such “racial” classifications is pervasive in the lives of today’s young adults, even through the seemingly benign systems of “diversity-conscious” educational institutions. These categories are then reinforced through bureaucratic mechanisms ranging from state-mandated record-keeping practices to company hiring procedures.

An important challenge to all of these broad racial/ethnic classifications comes from “mixed-race,” multiracial children. The growing number of interracial marriages in the United States has resulted in a generation of children that identify as “multiracial,” making the multiracial population more visible and relevant in conversations about race. Multiracial individuals have more freedom and flexibility to define their identity. Their options include either mainstream White assimilation, strong minority identification, or a hybrid identity that is neither mainstream nor minority. Children of

Black-White couples, like Felicia, tend to identify as “other” rather than choosing one of their parent’s racial identities, so they more often choose an “interracial identity” than an “exclusive” racial group. Maintaining a multiracial identity seems to protect Felicia from social threats, because multiracial individuals like her tend to understand from a young age that race is a social construct and are less likely to accept racial stereotypes or be affected by negative labels. Multiracial individuals like Felicia also make easier connections to people from other racial groups, yet they can experience internal conflicts as they try to reconcile their multiple racial or ethnic identities. As a young adult, Felicia began openly saying, “I don’t really fit anywhere.”

While conceptions of race and ethnicity are fluctuating, some scholars believe this flexibility may be only broadening the boundaries of whiteness. In other words, we may be witnessing a reshaping of the dualistic Black/non-Black racial hierarchy as lighter-skinned “model minority” Asians and Hispanics merge together with Whites, while darker-skinned Asians and Hispanics are categorized as Black. Quasi-Whites, including those from interracial unions, will benefit from the social advantages of being White, and categorical Blacks will face continued discrimination and blocked opportunities. On the other hand, other scholars argue for greater nuance. As the number of Hispanics and Asians increases, these scholars see the emergence of a new “racial middle” defined by their ambiguous place between the Black-White divide.

At least some young adults are attempting to sidestep the issue of race entirely by putting more emphasis on attitudes, beliefs, and lifestyles than “race” in forming intimate relationships. For example, the rate of interracial marriage among young, college-educated individuals is increasing, with connections based on similar educational level and social-class background. Another example comes from multiracial churches and para-church campus organizations. Churches like Mosaic, Oasis, and Evergreen in Southern California are bringing together young adults who see diversity as normal and perceive these places of worship as sites where the stigma of race/ethnicity is avoided and interracial relationships are accepted. Campus ministries like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship are raising diversity intentionally as a goal and successfully drawing students on the basis of that vision. These religious congregations are intriguing places, where interracial contact is cultivated based on a shared religious

identity rather than race. Taken together, these developments show a growing emphasis on shared social class and life attitudes over mere racial classification.

Racial/Ethnic/Multiracial Dynamics for America's Future

Over the course of the semester, my students' appreciation for these new racial and ethnic dynamics grows. They find that the accumulated changes in America's racial composition, the various types of racial interactions now available, and the new forms of personal ethnic identification are creating a "new normal" for their lives as they study, work, and live in a more diverse social world. With their increased sensitivity, they gain a broader understanding of White privilege and recognize "race" as a social construct that is a historic result of the allocation of power, privilege, and wealth. They come to see that a person's racial and ethnic identity is no longer a private or hidden aspect of the self but a recognizably public one. And they begin to recognize how their college environment beyond the classroom continually presses them to acknowledge these dynamics throughout their college career.

Colleges and universities are at the forefront of efforts to raise racial awareness, as faculty teaching, student orientation, and administrative encouragement are pushing for vocal and written recognition of diversity in all forms. The more open and racially aware atmosphere of campuses is moving into homes, congregations, and workplaces as students filter their lives into the world. Such developments may be leading to a new form of acceptance of diversity among the more educated groups, while discrimination continues unfortunately to be a factor of lower economic groups. The hope is that educated Americans of all backgrounds will participate in restructuring systems to create a less prejudicial, more equitable, and unavoidably more diverse future.

Annotated Bibliography

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. (2009). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. 3rd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

In this popular and engaging book, Bonilla-Silva documents the subtle and seemingly nonracial ideology he labels “color-blind racism” to explain current racial dynamics in America. He argues that Whites and non-Whites think about “race” differently. He also describes the causes for the ideology of color-blind racism among Whites and the continued structural sources of discrimination and inequality in the United States. At the end of the book, Bonilla-Silva answers questions and considers objections to his analysis.

Michael K. Brown, Martin Carnoy, Elliott Currie, Troy Duster, David B. Oppenheimer, Marjorie Shultz, and David Wellman. (2003). *Whitewashing race: The myth of a color-blind society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Utilizing knowledge from a team of scholars, this book scrutinizes the logic behind the “color-blind society” that explains lack of minority achievement due to “laziness” and provides an alternative explanation for racial inequality in the United States. While the authors acknowledge that we live in a post-civil-rights era in which outright discrimination is illegal and African Americans have emerged to middle-class lifestyles and professional occupations, they also give overwhelming evidence of the largely unintended effects of institutions for continued gaps in wealth, education, and well-being. The book ends with principles for social action.

Kimberly DaCosta. (2007). *Making multiracials: State, family, and market in the redrawing of the color line*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

For most of its history, the U.S. census allowed only one racial classification per person. Then children of interracial couples began to demand recognition as having a mixed-ancestry identity. DaCosta describes how several societal factors came together in the later 20th century to catalyze mixed-race persons to challenge the official government classifications of race and ethnicity. Not only does the census now permit mixed-race designation, but also the greater recognition of “multiracial persons” has spawned new industries, new family types, and new marketing initiatives that actively incorporate them.

Charles A. Gallagher (Ed.). (2008). *Rethinking the color line: Readings in race and ethnicity*. 4th ed. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

In this edited volume of readings, Charles Gallagher provides a rich anthology of short articles covering contemporary issues on race and ethnic relations that affect young adults today. The articles in this book are adapted or excerpted from larger, more detailed works. Clearly organized, filled with charts and graphs, and mixed with intimate narratives of personal experiences, this reader concisely introduces issues and comprehensively explores the complexity of ethnic/racial dynamics in America.

Gerardo Marti. (2009). *A mosaic of believers: Diversity and innovation in a multiethnic church*. 2nd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

This book provides an intimate look at Mosaic, a diverse church in southern California. Mosaic is one of the largest and most diverse multiethnic congregations in America, whose membership consists mostly of 20-somethings. The young adult members of this diverse congregation regularly set aside their particular ethnic/racial identities in favor of a more generally shared religious identity. The book provides insights on how similar attitudes, lifestyles, and educational backgrounds can displace the importance of race in establishing intimate, cross-ethnic relationships.

Eileen O'Brien. (2008). *The racial middle: Latinos and Asian Americans living beyond the racial divide*. New York: New York University Press.

Although O'Brien was initially drawn to the idea that Latinos and Asians were becoming reclassified as "White" or "Black," the author eventually rejected the argument as simplistic. Instead, with evidence from a series of interviews, she argues for the emergence of a distinct racial middle ground. Latinos and Asian Americans are not simply "more White" than African Americans, nor are they becoming part of a new "collective Black." Instead, Latinos and Asian Americans experience a particular type of isolation from members of other racial groups. Unfortunately, members of both groups struggle with their own forms of discrimination in the

United States.

Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut. (2001). *Legacies: The story of the immigrant second generation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

This book focuses on the rising second-generation children of immigrants to the United States. The authors describe the diverse paths taken by the children of immigrants in the United States. There is no single, uniform process to assimilation; instead, some rapidly acculturate and find acceptance into the general American mainstream, while others do not. The authors introduce the concept of “segmented assimilation” to show how different populations of second-generation immigrants have different access to economic opportunities and social networks. On the other hand, “linear” ethnicity describes second-generation immigrants who create networks and social ties within their own ethnic group that keep them from fully acculturating to “American” life. To illustrate their points, the authors present information on a number of topics, including patterns of acculturation, family and school life, language, identity, experiences of discrimination, self-esteem, ambition, and achievement.

Alejandro Portes and Ruben G. Rumbaut. (2006). *Immigrant America: A portrait*. 3rd ed. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Immigrant America is an excellent and accessible overview of migration to the United States in more recent years. The book combines stories and surveys to focus attention on the process by which immigrants become acculturated to the United States and reveals multiple and diverse patterns of immigration. There is no single immigration process; the authors emphasize how broad generalizations and statistical averages obscure the inherent diversity of the immigrant American experience. Instead, the authors describe immigration in the context of various arenas, including housing, work, citizenship, health, education, and religion. The authors point out that immigrants’ incorporation into the United States takes a variety of forms between greater assimilation into mainstream “American” society and remaining differentiated among different ethnic groups.

Neil J. Smelser, William Julius Wilson, and Faith Mitchell (Eds.). (2001). *America becoming: Racial trends and their consequences*. 2 vols. Proceedings of the Research Conference on Racial Trends in the United States (Washington, DC, October 16, 1998). Washington, DC: National Academies Press.

These two volumes bring together papers from a conference on racial trends in the United States convened by the National Research Council (NRC) in 1998. Reports from leading scholars assess past and current trends for America's Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, American Indians, and the other multiple and varied national groupings with respect to several key institutional arenas including demographics, education, employment, income and wealth, housing and neighborhood characteristics, health access and status, and the criminal justice system. Throughout both volumes, chapters provide excellent summaries of comprehensive and detailed information on the definitions, issues, and debates that remain relevant to the contemporary American experience.

Mary C. Waters, Reed Ueda, and Helen B. Marrow (Eds.). (2007). *The new Americans: A guide to immigration since 1965*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

This recent book is another comprehensive guide from an interdisciplinary group of scholars that provides a comprehensive account of the most recent surge of immigrants to the United States. In the first part of the book, individual chapters cover a range of topics, including migration patterns, family relationships, political views, and religious practices. The second part of the book provides more focused information on immigration from specific regions of the world. I especially recommend a chapter by Nancy Foner and Philip Kasinitz titled "Second Generation."