

different races are presented and how these representations can influence public opinions in general.

2. *Research and Persuasive Writing:* Visit the ACLU's Web site on racial inequality at [www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org) and review its information about race and race relations. What are the most pressing issues concerning race and racial inequality today? Select an issue on the Web site and research it in greater depth. Write a short essay summarizing the issue, your position, and your thoughts about it.
3. *Expository Writing:* What is your own perception of race? Do you think you enjoy certain benefits or encounter certain obstacles because of your race? Explain.

### GROUP PROJECTS

1. In this essay, Jenkins offers some suggestions for working toward a more color-blind society. With your group acting as a "think tank," evaluate each of his suggestions for implementation strategies, plausibility, and outcome.
2. Jenkins charges that the media, especially television, contributes to racism by presenting groups of people differently. With the help of *TV Guide* or another television guide, make a list of programs on prime-time (beginning at 8:00 PM and ending at 11:00 PM) network television and describe the characters in terms of race and ethnicity. For example, are African Americans more likely to be portrayed as dysfunctional or poor? Based on your review of the prime-time lineup, discuss how television may contribute to racial stereotypes. Alternatively, if your data reveal little or no racism, make a note of that as well. Share the results of your group discussion with the class.

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## People Like Us

David Brooks\*

From the hallowed halls of academia to the boardrooms of Fortune 500 companies, the concept of racial and social diversity is an important factor in efforts to create a balanced, equal society. But despite efforts to promote diversity, all too often we witness "self-segregation." As David Brooks explains in this next essay, while we tend to pay lip service to ideals of diversity, we really prefer to associate with "people like us." Is the melting pot merely a myth?

Maybe it's time to admit the obvious. We don't really care about diversity all that much in America, even though we talk about it a great deal. Maybe somewhere in this country there is a truly diverse neighborhood in which a black Pentecostal minister lives next to a white anti-globalization activist, who lives next to an Asian short-order

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\* David Brooks, *The Atlantic Monthly*, September 2003.

cook, who lives next to a professional golfer, who lives next to a postmodern-literature professor and a cardiovascular surgeon. But I have never been to or heard of that neighborhood. Instead, what I have seen all around the country is people making strenuous efforts to group themselves with people who are basically like themselves.

2 Human beings are capable of drawing amazingly subtle social distinctions and then shaping their lives around them. In the Washington, D.C., area Democratic lawyers tend to live in suburban Maryland, and Republican lawyers tend to live in suburban Virginia. If you asked a Democratic lawyer to move from her \$750,000 house in Bethesda, Maryland, to a \$750,000 house in Great Falls, Virginia, she'd look at you as if you had just asked her to buy a pickup truck with a gun rack and to shove chewing tobacco in her kid's mouth. In Manhattan the owner of a \$3 million SoHo loft would feel out of place moving into a \$3 million Fifth Avenue apartment. A West Hollywood interior decorator would feel dislocated if you asked him to move to Orange County. In Georgia a barista from Athens would probably not fit in serving coffee in Americus.

3 It is a common complaint that every place is starting to look the same. But in the information age, the late writer James Chapin once told me, every place becomes more like itself. People are less often tied down to factories and mills, and they can search for places to live on the basis of cultural affinity. Once they find a town in which people share their values, they flock there and reinforce whatever was distinctive about the town in the first place. Once Boulder, Colorado, became known as congenial to politically progressive mountain bikers, half the politically progressive mountain bikers in the country (it seems) moved there; they made the place so culturally pure that it has become practically a parody of itself.

4 But people love it. Make no mistake—we are increasing our happiness by segmenting off so rigorously. We are finding places where we are comfortable and where we feel we can flourish. But the choices we make toward that end lead to the very opposite of diversity. The United States might be a diverse nation when considered as a whole, but block by block and institution by institution, it is a relatively homogeneous nation.

5 When we use the word “diversity” today we usually mean racial integration. But even here our good intentions seem to have run into the brick wall of human nature. Over the past generation, reformers have tried heroically, and in many cases successfully, to end housing discrimination. But recent patterns aren't encouraging: according to an analysis of the 2000 census data, the 1990s saw only a slight increase in the racial integration of neighborhoods in the United States. The number of middle-class and upper-middle-class African-American families is rising, but for whatever reasons—racism, psychological comfort—these families tend to congregate in predominantly black neighborhoods.

6 In fact, evidence suggests that some neighborhoods become more segregated over time. New suburbs in Arizona and Nevada, for example, start out reasonably well integrated. These neighborhoods don't yet have reputations, so people choose their houses for other, mostly economic reasons. But as neighborhoods age, they develop personalities (that's where the Asians live, and that's where the Hispanics live), and segmentation occurs. It could be that in a few years the new suburbs in the Southwest will be nearly as segregated as the established ones in the Northeast and the Midwest.

7 Even though race and ethnicity run deep in American society, we should in theory be able to find areas that are at least culturally diverse. But here, too, people show few signs of being truly interested in building diverse communities. If you run a retail company and you're thinking of opening new stores, you can choose among dozens of consulting firms that are quite effective at locating your potential customers. They can do this because people with similar tastes and preferences tend to congregate by ZIP code.

8 The most famous of these precision marketing firms is Claritas, which breaks down the U.S. population into 62 psycho-demographic clusters, based on such factors as how much money people make, what they like to read and watch, and what products they have bought in the past. For example, the "suburban sprawl" cluster is composed of young families making about \$41,000 a year and living in fast-growing places such as Burnsville, Minnesota, and Bensalem, Pennsylvania. These people are almost twice as likely as other Americans to have three-way calling. They are two and a half times as likely to buy Light n' Lively Kid Yogurt. Members of the "towns and gowns" cluster are recent college graduates in places such as Berkeley, California, and Gainesville, Florida. They are big consumers of Dove Bars and Saturday Night Live. They tend to drive small foreign cars and to read *Rolling Stone* and *Scientific American*.

9 Looking through the market research, one can sometimes be amazed by how efficiently people cluster—and by how predictable we all are. If you wanted to sell imported wine, obviously you would have to find places where rich people live. But did you know that the

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16 counties with the greatest proportion of imported-wine drinkers are all in the same three metropolitan areas (New York, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.)? If you tried to open a motor-home dealership in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, you'd probably go broke, because people in this ring of the Philadelphia suburbs think RVs are kind of uncool. But if you traveled just a short way north, to Monroe County, Pennsylvania, you would find yourself in the fifth motor-home-friendliest county in America.

10 Geography is not the only way we find ourselves divided from people unlike us. Some of us watch *Fox News*, while others listen to NPR. Some like David Letterman, and others—typically in less urban neighborhoods—like Jay Leno. Some go to charismatic churches; some go to mainstream churches. Americans tend more and more often to marry people with education levels similar to their own, and to befriend people with backgrounds similar to their own.

11 My favorite illustration of this latter pattern comes from the first, noncontroversial chapter of *The Bell Curve*. Think of your 12 closest friends, Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray write. If you had chosen them randomly from the American population, the odds that half of your 12 closest friends would be college graduates would be six in a thousand. The odds that half of the 12 would have advanced degrees would be less than one in a million. Have any of your 12 closest friends graduated from Harvard, Stanford, Yale, Princeton, CalTech, MIT, Duke, Dartmouth,

Cornell, Columbia, Chicago, or Brown? If you chose your friends randomly from the American population, the odds against your having four or more friends from those schools would be more than a billion to one.

12 Many of us live in absurdly unlikely groupings, because we have organized our lives that way.

13 It's striking that the institutions that talk the most about diversity often practice it the least. For example, no group of people sings the diversity anthem more frequently and fervently than administrators at just such elite universities. But elite universities are amazingly undiverse in their values, politics, and mores. Professors in particular are drawn from a rather narrow segment of the population. If faculties reflected the general population, 32 percent of professors would be registered Democrats and 31 percent would be registered Republicans. Forty percent would be evangelical Christians. But a recent study of several universities by the conservative Center for the Study of Popular Culture and the American Enterprise Institute found that roughly 90 percent of those professors in the arts and sciences who had registered with a political party had registered Democratic. Fifty-seven professors at Brown were found on the voter-registration rolls. Of those, 54 were Democrats. Of the 42 professors in the English, history, sociology, and political science departments, all were Democrats. The results at Harvard, Penn State, Maryland, and the University of California at Santa Barbara were similar to the results at Brown.

14 What we are looking at here is human nature. People want to be around others who are roughly like themselves. That's called *community*. It probably would be psychologically difficult for most Brown professors to share an office with someone who was pro-life, a member of the National Rifle Association, or an evangelical Christian. It's likely that hiring committees would subtly—even unconsciously—screen out any such people they encountered. Republicans and evangelical Christians have sensed that they are not welcome at places like Brown, so they don't even consider working there. In fact, any registered Republican who contemplates a career in academia these days is both a hero and a fool. So, in a semi-self-selective pattern, brainy people with generally liberal social mores flow to academia, and brainy people with generally conservative mores flow elsewhere.

15 The dream of diversity is like the dream of equality. Both are based on ideals we celebrate, even as we undermine them daily. (How many times have you seen someone renounce a high-paying job or pull his child from an elite college on the grounds that these things are bad for equality?) On the one hand, the situation is appalling. It is appalling that Americans know so little about one another. It is appalling that many of us are so narrow-minded that we can't tolerate a few people with ideas significantly different from our own. It's appalling that evangelical Christians are practically absent from entire professions, such as academia, the media, and filmmaking. It's appalling that people should be content to cut themselves off from everyone unlike themselves.

16 The segmentation of society means that often we don't even have arguments across the political divide. Within their little validating communities, liberals and conservatives circulate half-truths about the supposed awfulness of the other side. These distortions are believed because it feels good to believe them.

17 On the other hand, there are limits to how diverse any community can or should be. I've come to think that it is not useful to try to hammer diversity into every



neighborhood and institution in the United States. Sure, Augusta National should probably admit women, and university sociology departments should probably hire a conservative or two. It would be nice if all neighborhoods had a good mixture of ethnicities. But human nature being what it is, most places and institutions are going to remain culturally homogeneous.

<sup>18</sup> It's probably better to think about diverse lives, not diverse institutions. Human beings, if they are to live well, will have to move through a series of institutions and environments, which may be individually homogeneous but, taken together, will offer diverse experiences. It might also be a good idea to make national service a rite of passage for young people in this country: it would take them out of their narrow neighborhood segment and thrust them in with people unlike themselves. Finally, it's probably important for adults to get out of their own familiar circles. If you live in a coastal, socially liberal neighborhood, maybe you should take out a subscription to *The Door*, the evangelical humor magazine; or maybe you should visit Branson, Missouri. Maybe you should stop in at a megachurch. Sure, it would be superficial familiarity, but it beats the iron curtains that now separate the nation's various cultural zones.

<sup>19</sup> Look around at your daily life. Are you really in touch with the broad diversity of American life? Do you care? ♦

### CRITICAL THINKING

1. When you were growing up, with whom did your parents socialize? Where did they live and what social functions were they likely to attend? Now that you are an adult, with whom do you choose to socialize? What is the demographic anatomy of your social group? Is it influenced by race and ethnicity? Is it influenced by common interests? Explain.
2. What does Brooks mean when he says "Human beings are capable of drawing amazingly subtle social distinctions and then shaping their lives around them" (paragraph 2)? What examples does he give of such distinctions? Can you think of any "subtle distinctions" in your own life that influence where you live and with whom you choose to associate? Explain.
3. What is "cultural affinity"? How does it influence the social and cultural values of a particular area? How is it reinforced, and how can it break down? Explain.
4. When we refer to the word "diversity," what do we usually mean? What types of diversity are identified by the author? What factors tend to influence people to find others like them?
5. What is ironic about the way many institutions that stress diversity (paragraph 13)? Why do they emphasize the need for diversity, and how do they fall short of actually practicing it? Explain.
6. Brooks states that he believes when we live with "people like us" we tend to be happier. Do you agree? If this is true, why do we tend to pay so much lip service to the idea of diversity but actually fail to achieve it?
7. Brooks begins his essay with the statement, "We don't really care about diversity all that much in America, even though we talk about it a great deal." Do you agree? Why or why not?

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