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Racism

What It Is and What It Isn't

Lawrence Blum

People use the word "racist" to refer to all sorts of race-related moral failings. Should they? Blum argues that they shouldn't. Instead, he contends that we should reserve the term "racist" for those who have specific negative beliefs or attitudes toward people of other races. Then, we should distinguish between several different race-related problems, such as racial insensitivity, failure to recognize racial identity, racial ignorance, racial anxiety, racial injustice, and racial homogenization. Since these issues require different remedies, keeping them separate helps us think more clearly about how to make moral progress.

We in the United States are notoriously poor at communicating about racial matters. . . . For the past several years I have taught courses on race and racism to undergraduates, graduate students in education, and high school students. Most of my classes are quite racially and ethnically diverse. In my experience a range of reasons accounts for the lack of productive conversation. People are afraid of giving offense. They are afraid of revealing prejudices they know are not

socially acceptable. They are afraid of *appearing* prejudiced, even if they are actually not. They feel ignorant of groups other than their own and are afraid to risk revealing their ignorance and trying to remedy it. The whole idea of "race" just carries unpleasant associations with them, and they would rather avoid it. They may think we should all be "color-blind," that it is somehow wrong even to take notice of or make reference to other people's racial identity. . . .

The words "racism" and "racist" have become deeply entrenched in the moral vocabulary of the United States and Western Europe. . . . "Racist" has become the standard way to condemn and deplore people, actions, policies, symbols, and institutions for malfeasance in the racial domain.

In serving as a term of moral reproach, "racism" has joined more time-honored vices such as "dishonesty," "cruelty," "cowardice," and "hypocrisy." Apart from a small number of avowed white supremacists, most Americans wish very much to avoid being called "racist." In this regard, "racist" operates similarly to "cruel." Few admit to being cruel. Persons who are cruel might say the target of their cruelty deserved it, or they might simply fail to recognize the harm caused by their actions. Similarly, no one admits to being racist. Those who are, or are thought to be, might say their remarks were just a joke; they did not intend any harm; people are just being oversensitive; it was a personal, not a racial, thing; and the like. . . .

Overusing "Racism"

. . . [T]he widely-shared reproach carried by "racist" is threatened by a current tendency to overuse the term. Some feel that the word is thrown around so much that anything involving "race" that someone does not like is liable to castigation as "racist"—for example, merely mentioning someone's race (or racial designation), using the word "Oriental" for Asians without recognizing its origins and its capacity for insult, or socializing only with members of one's own racial group. . . . A few observers go even further and suspect that the word has lost all significant meaning. "Racism is . . . what black activists define it to be. . . . When words lose coherent meaning, they also lose the power to shame. 'Racism,' 'sexism,' and 'homophobia' have become such words. Labels that should horrify are simply shrugged off" (Nuechterlein, 1996, p. B9). . . .

A major reason for what Robert Miles calls the "conceptual inflation" (Miles, 1989, pp. 41–68), to which the idea of "racism" has been subject is

its having become the central or even only notion used to mark morally suspect behavior, attitude, and social practice regarding race. The result—either something is racist, or it is morally in the clear. In Boston a white police officer, as a bizarre joke and apparently with no malice intended, placed a hangman's noose on the motorcycle of a black police officer. "Police probe sees no racism in noose prank," says the headline of an article reporting the findings of an investigation into the incident. Perhaps the white officer was not "a racist," nor operating from racist motives; but, as the victim in the incident said, "You cannot hang a noose like that near any black man who knows his history and say it does not have tremendous significance" (*Boston Globe*, p. B1). [The black officer seemed clearly to be referring to lynching.] If our only choices are to label an act "racist" or "nothing to get too upset about," those who seek to garner moral attention to some racial malfeasance will be tempted to call it "racist." That overuse in turn feeds a diminishing of "racism's" moral force, and thus contributes to weakened concern about racism and other racial ills.

Not all racial incidents are racist incidents. Not every instance of racial conflict, insensitivity, discomfort, miscommunication, exclusion, injustice, or ignorance should be called "racist." This more varied and nuanced moral vocabulary needs to be more fully utilized, complementing "racist" and "racism." All forms of racial ills should elicit concern from responsible citizens. If someone displays racial insensitivity, but not racism, people should be able to see that straightforwardly as a matter of moral concern. In a soccer game, a nine-year-old white boy said, "Boy, pass the ball over here" to one of his black teammates, and "was virtually accused of being a racist by the father of one of his teammates," says an article on the incident. (That description may itself reflect the loss of an evaluative vocabulary other than "racist" and "racism," rather than what the black boy's father actually said.) In any case, the white boy was almost surely not "a racist" and the article itself goes on to express more accurately the racial ill involved in his remark: "The word 'boy' is a tripwire attached to so much charged racial baggage that it is no longer safely used as a term for a prepubescent male."

Defining "Racism"

... "Racism" was first used by German social scientists in the 1930s to refer to the ideology of race superiority central to Nazism, and its core historical meaning broadened out to other systems of racial domination

and oppression, such as segregation, South African apartheid, and European colonialism. In this light, I want to suggest that all forms of racism can be related to either of two general "themes"—*inferiorization*, and *antipathy*. Inferiorizing is treating the racial other as inferior or of lesser value and, secondarily, viewing the racial other as inferior. Racial antipathy is simply a strong dislike, often tinged with hostility, toward individuals or groups because of their race. Of the two modes, inferiorization is more obviously linked to historical racist doctrines and social systems. Slavery, segregation, imperialism, apartheid, and Nazism all involved certain groups being regarded as and treated as inferior to other groups.

Inferiorizing and antipathy racism are distinct. Some superiority racists do not hate the target of their beliefs. They may have a paternalistic concern and feelings of kindness for persons they regard as their human inferiors. This form of racism was prevalent among slave owners, and characterized many whites' views of blacks during the segregation era in the United States. The concern and kindness are misdirected, and demeaning, because the other is not seen as an equal, or even as a full human being; it is a racist form of concern. Nevertheless such attitudes are distinct from antipathy and hatred.

On the other side, not every race hater regards the target of her hatred as inferior. In the U.S. antipathy toward Asians and Jews often accompanies, and is in part driven by, a kind of resentment of those seen as in some ways superior (e.g., more successful). And some whites who hate blacks do not really regard blacks as inferior; they may fear and be hostile to them, but fear and hostility are not the same as contempt and other forms of inferiorizing. (Again, antipathy and contempt may accompany one another.) Survey research suggests that pure superiority racism toward blacks has substantially decreased since segregation, more so than hostility-based racism (Schuman et al., pp. 156–157). Nevertheless, the great and persistent racial inequalities in our society provide a standing encouragement to advantaged groups to see disadvantaged groups as somehow deserving their lower status.

However, antipathy and inferiorizing racism are not entirely separate either. The paternalistic inferiorizing racist (e.g. a white segregationist) often hates those members of the racial group who do not accept the inferior social position he regards as appropriate to their inferior natures—for example, blacks who do not engage in the deference behavior the paternalistic racist expects. Emmett Till was lynched in 1955 out of hatred

directed toward a young black man who had transgressed the rules of racial deference and constraint defining him as an inferior being. In addition, many racists both hate *and* regard as inferior members of a particular racial group (and not only a particular subcategory of such members, such as those who do not "stay in their place").

Racial and Racist Stereotypes

If we confine racism to manifestations or representations of racial antipathy or racial inferiorizing, we can see that many things can go wrong in the area of race without being racist. Consider two objectionable stereotypes of blacks, for instance—blacks as intellectually deficient, and blacks as good dancers. The first is a straightforwardly racist stereotype; it portrays blacks as inferior in regard to a fundamental human attribute. The second, however, is not racist, on my account. It attributes a positive rather than a negative quality. It is a far less objectionable stereotype than the inferiority stereotype.

Nevertheless, the stereotype of blacks as good dancers is still an objectionable one. Like any stereotype, it wildly overgeneralizes about a group; it blinds us to the internal diversity of the group—some blacks are bad dancers, some are good, some are so-so (and this is so of every racial group). Also, all stereotyping discourages recognizing the individuality of members of the group.

The stereotype of blacks as good dancers is also objectionable in a more specific, historically contextual sense, which can be recognized in the more variegated moral vocabulary revealed by loosening our fixation on "racism" and "racist." This stereotype harkens back to the slave era, when viewing blacks as good dancers was bound up with their being seen as mentally inferior. While this direct implication is no longer clearly attached to the "good dancer" stereotype, stereotypes must be viewed historically as well as contemporarily, and a given stereotype's resonance with a much more distinctly racist stereotype renders it objectionable in a way that stereotypes without such historical resonance would not be. Other stereotypes lacking such historical resonance are, for example, Asians as poor drivers, blacks as poor swimmers, and whites as not being able to jump. All are objectionable, racial (race-based) stereotypes. But it is moral overload to call them *racist* stereotypes, and to do so contributes to a cheapening of the moral force of the idea of "racism."

Racial Discomfort or Anxiety

Another application of the definition of racism is the difference between racial antipathy and what I will call "racial discomfort" or "racial anxiety." Consider the following example.

Ms. Verano is a white fourth grade teacher. She feels comfortable with all the children in her very racially-mixed class. She holds all students to equally high standards of performance. But, though she has never admitted this to herself, she is not really comfortable with most of the black parents. She does not dislike blacks, nor does she think they are inferior. However, she is not particularly familiar with African-American culture, knows very few blacks other than her students, and is not confident about her ability to communicate with blacks other than her students, and is not confident about her ability to communicate with black adults. As a result Ms. Verano is somewhat defensive when speaking with black parents in parent conferences, and is not able to listen to their concerns and viewpoints about their children as well as she does with parents in other racial groups. Because she does not glean as much information from the black parents about their children as she does from the other parents, she is not able to serve these children as well as the other children in her class. Ms. Verano does not have antipathy or inferiorizing attitudes toward blacks. To call her a "racist" would be conceptual inflation. She bears no antipathy toward blacks; I have built this feature into the example. Nor does she regard blacks as inferior.

Ms. Verano's situation is best described by saying that she is uncomfortable with black adults (not children). She has "racial discomfort" or "racial anxiety."

Racial anxiety is quite common in the United States, especially, I believe, among whites, although it can be found in any racial group. Racial anxiety can stem from different sources, and one of them can be anxiety that one's racist prejudices be revealed. In this case racial anxiety would be a manifestation of racism. However, racial anxiety is not always racist in its genesis. We can realize that a group of persons is different from us in some socially important way, and we can feel that we are just not knowledgeable enough about this group to feel comfortable in the presence of its members. We can be anxious that we will embarrass ourselves by saying or doing the "wrong thing." We may worry that the group will dislike or reject us if we attempt to approach it. This social anxiety is perfectly familiar regarding cultural differences; the individual is anxious approaching a

culture about which she lacks knowledge. Members of different racial groups are also often quite ignorant of one another's modes of life (sometimes but not always because cultural and racial differences correspond), even if they interact in schools and workplaces. In a sense racial anxiety is even *more* likely than mere cultural anxiety, since differences in "race" are more socially charged than are cultural differences. If one is equally ignorant of the other group, there is more reason to be anxious that one will violate some unforeseen norm with regard to a racially different group than a culturally different one.

In itself, racial anxiety or discomfort is not racism. Nor is racial discomfort the sort of thing for which its possessor is subject to moral criticism. It is not morally bad to be racially anxious, as it is morally bad to be racially prejudiced. However, racial discomfort is still a bad thing, and an individual who recognizes her racial anxiety should not rest content with it just because it is not a moral blot on her character. This is so, in part, because, as in Ms. Verano's case, it can lead to acts of a discriminatory character. Ms. Verano is unlikely to be able to educate her black pupils to the same degree as she does her other students, since she will lack information pertinent to them. . . .

Race, Identity, and Recognition

Another race-related ill distinct from racism is illustrated in the following example. A Haitian-American girl is one of two black students in her class. When a race-related issue arises in discussion, the teacher turns to her and asks her what "the black point of view" is on the question at hand.

There seem several distinct though related wrongs this teacher has committed. He has failed to recognize Haitian-Americans as a distinct ethnic group within the larger "black" umbrella. He has treated a racial group in an overly homogeneous manner, implying that there could be something that could coherently be called "the black point of view" on an issue. Finally, he has failed to recognize the student as an individual, with her own individual views.

These three related forms of misrecognition are directed toward an individual or a group of which the individual is a member. The latter two—racial homogenization, and not acknowledging individuality—are particularly serious failings in a teacher. However, that is not to say that they are "racist." The teacher's behavior need not imply that he harbors animus toward blacks, or regards them as inferior.

Racial Motives and Racial Stereotypes

Confusion about both the location and the meaning of racism infected public understanding of a particularly tragic event that took place in Providence, Rhode Island, in January, 2000. Several women were fighting in a late-night diner. The night manager threw the patrons out of the diner, at which point some male friends got involved, one of whom drew a gun. Inside the diner, an off-duty patrolman, Gornel Young, Jr., an African American, was waiting for a take-out order. Meanwhile, the police had been called to the scene outside. Officer Young, after warning the patrons to get down, rushed outside to help the two officers on the scene, his gun drawn. (Providence police are required to carry their firearms when off duty.)

The two officers had ordered the male friend to drop his gun, which he did, and they then turned to Officer Young and ordered him to do so as well. It is not clear whether Young heard the order, but in any case he did not comply, and the two officers, who were white, shot and killed him. It emerged that, despite the officers' failing to recognize Officer Young, one of the officers had been a police academy classmate of Young's, and both had graduated in the same class three years earlier.

The killing sparked community outrage and anguish. Charges of racism were made. It was said that the killing was "racially motivated." Eventually a federal civil rights investigation took place, and the two officers were cleared of having intended to deprive Officer Young of his civil rights, or of acting out of racial animosity.

It is impossible to know whether the two officers were racially biased against blacks. However, their behavior is perfectly consistent with their lacking any form of racial prejudice or racial motivation. It is not likely that they shot at Young because they disliked black people. Some people, recognizing this, then felt some relief. The incident turned from one involving racism to a (mere) "tragic accident."

But this response oversimplifies. Racism may be absent in motivations and attitudes but be present elsewhere. In this situation, it is much more plausible to think that it lay in the stereotypes that the officers carried in their minds about blacks. That is why, or part of why, they reacted to a black man with a gun in plain clothes as if he were a perpetrator, even though they actually knew him as a fellow officer. In another widely-reported case around the same time, four white officers in New York City killed an innocent black man whom they wrongly took to be reaching for a gun. Treating blackness as if it were an indicator of suspiciousness or criminality is referred to as "racial

profiling" and has come in for a good deal of public criticism as a result of these and similar incidents, not only ones involving fatalities.

The white officers who killed Officer Young were apparently genuinely remorseful and upset by their having unwittingly killed a fellow officer. But this does not mean they were not prey to racial stereotypes linking blackness to criminality. Officer Young's mother was surely correct when she said that her son would be unlikely to have been shot had he been white. But it is important to be careful about what we mean if we say that he was killed "because he was black." It does not necessarily mean "out of hostility or animosity toward black persons." It could mean "because he was seen in the moment as a dangerous person and this was so in part because he was black." I believe it is also plausible to refer to this racial stereotype as "racist." But my point here is not so much to defend that position as to encourage clarity as to the location of what is, or was, racially objectionable in the situation. It was in the stereotype, not in the motives of the white officers. And it shows the tremendous danger that can accompany racist stereotypes even in the absence of racial antipathy; they can be life threatening. . . .

Conclusion

Gaining some clarity about what "racism" means will help us engage in productive conversations about racial matters—conversations that are too infrequent, both inside and outside classroom settings. We have seen three ways by which we might gain that clarity. First, within a given category (actions, jokes, stereotypes, remarks, stereotypes, persons), we should confine "racism" to especially egregious wrongs in that category. Not every stereotype is racist. Not every remark that is racially offensive is racist. Not every racially insensitive action is a racist action. I have suggested that the distinct opprobrium attaching to "racism" and "racist" can be retained and protected if we recognize that racism refers to racial inferiorization or racial antipathy, and that the different categorical forms of racism can all be related to either of those two definitions.

Second, we should not confuse racism in one category with racism in another. A person who is prey to a racist stereotype is not necessarily "a racist"; nor does she necessarily operate from racist motives. A remark can be unquestionably racist without the person making the remark being a racist, or making the remark for a racist reason, or motive.

Finally, in endeavoring to protect the distinct moral opprobrium of the accusation of "racism" from conceptual inflation and moral overload, as well as from categorical drift and confusion, we must at the same time recognize that "racism" by no means captures all of what can go wrong in the domain of race. There is a much larger terrain of moral ills in the racial domain than racism itself, and we should draw on our manifold linguistic resources—racial insensitivity, failure to recognize racial identity, racial ignorance, racial anxiety, racial injustice, racial homogenization, and so on—to express and describe moral disvalue in this domain. Moral concern is appropriately directed toward this wider domain, and should not be confined to racism appropriately so called.

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Comprehension Questions

1. Blum thinks we use the words "racism" and "racist" to talk about everything that's race-related and morally problematic. Why shouldn't we?
2. What's the difference between a "racial" incident and a "racist" incident?
3. What's the difference between the two "themes" of racism—inferiorization and antipathy?
4. What's wrong with *positive* stereotypes about members of a particular racial group?
5. Why isn't "racial anxiety" racism?
6. Why aren't you racist if you employ a racist stereotype?

Discussion Questions

1. What sorts of things do your peers describe as “racist”? Do you agree that the term is overused? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of any arguments for describing most race-related moral failings as racism? What are the benefits of using “racism” to cover a lot of race-related moral issues?
3. Blum thinks we shouldn’t just talk about racism—we should also talk about racial insensitivity, failure to recognize racial identity, racial ignorance, racial anxiety, racial injustice, and racial homogenization. But you might just think that these are different *dimensions* or *aspects* of racism. How might Blum respond to this?
4. Go through the stories that Blum discusses—the hangman’s noose on the motorcycle; saying, “Boy, pass the ball over here”; Emmett Till’s lynching; describing blacks as “good dancers”; the teacher’s discomfort with black parents; asking for “the black point of view”; the killing of Officer Young. Do you agree with Blum about how to characterize what’s wrong about each case? Why or why not?

Case

Woodrow Wilson—the USA’s twenty-eighth president—was also a Princeton alum and Princeton’s president. Unfortunately, he didn’t have a great track record on matters of race. During his time in the White House, he segregated the federal offices in Washington (which meant firing some black employees), he banned interracial marriage in the District of Columbia, and he required people to submit photographs with their applications for federal jobs. Due to Woodrow’s relationship with Princeton, his name is featured prominently at that university. In 2015, however, many black students objected to this fact, and they made this demand of the administration:

WE DEMAND the university administration publicly acknowledge the racist legacy of Woodrow Wilson and how he impacted campus policy and culture. We also demand that steps be made to rename Wilson residential college, the Woodrow Wilson School of Public Policy and International Affairs, and any other building named after him. Furthermore, we would like the mural of Wilson to be removed from the Wilcox dining hall.¹

Many historically significant figures are now symbols on college campuses. They are remembered in the names of buildings, in statues, in artwork. How should we think about the presence of these symbols? Does

someone deserve to be called racist for placing them there? Is someone racist for *keeping* them there? If “racist” isn’t the right term, then what is? Moreover, how should we go forward? Should these symbols be removed? If so, what should happen to them? If not, then how should we address the concerns of those who are troubled by them?

Note

1. <http://princetonprogressive.com/2015/11/19/black-justice-league-demands-addressed-to-president-eisgruber-and-princeton-university-staff/>