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## The Myth of “Race”

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*Biologically, races are not real.*

~Robert Sussman

## **Inventing Race**

Humans have been wary of outgroups throughout our hunter-gatherer history. But it took Western science to identify who should be targeted as outcasts. The roots of “scientific” racism were established by Swedish Biologist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) who was among the most respected scholars in the world. He created the system by which animal and plant life is classified using Latin botanical and zoological labels. Not content to stop at the species *homo sapiens*, Linnaeus invented the fiction of biological race. He classified humans based on presumed appearance, personality, and morality. Find yourself in his list of races:

*Europeanus*: White, gentle, inventive

*Asiaticus*: Yellow, melancholy, greedy

*Americanus*: Red, ill-tempered, subjugated

*Africanus*: Black, impassive, lazy

A century after Linnaeus, English biologist and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) applied ideas of evolution to justify rule by the white “race.” He led a movement called social Darwinism, coining the term “survival of the fittest.” Spencer reasoned that favored races will naturally rise to dominate inferiors. And reversing the Golden Rule, he argued that policies to help those less fit, the poor, uncivilized, and women breed an inferior race. Spencer unleashed ideas that persist today to justify racism, colonialism, and global domination.

White racial supremacy was mainstream among political leaders and even scientists until World War II. Psychologists embraced the notion of higher intelligence among whites, and Eurocentric anthropologists cast their culture as superior to that of “savages.” They launched the “science” of eugenics to justify policies to curtail immigration and limit expansion of non-white populations. The idea of racial superiority proved to be popular and was put on public display. The 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair featured a zoo of races as scientists arranged athletic contests trying to prove white superiority.

The eugenics movement held that intelligence, crime, and morality were largely genetic so such persons should not reproduce. This notion was fueled by the immensely popular book *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeble Mindedness*

by psychologist Henry Goddard (1912). Goddard tracked descendants of Martin Kallikak, a Revolutionary War hero who impregnated two women, one a feeble-minded tavern maid, the other a well-bred Quaker. Kallikak’s dalliance with the barmaid produced a horde of alcoholics, criminals, and other degenerates. But the other side of the family tree was prosperous and upstanding. Considered to be leading-edge science, these accounts later were shown to be fabricated.

Hitler was impressed with American efforts in eugenics including the segregation of races which inspired his Aryan fantasies. When Hitler hosted the 1936 Olympics, this was to be an opportunity to flaunt Aryan superiority on the world stage. But much to Hitler’s dismay, African American track star Jessie Owens was the most successful athlete, winning four gold medals. But autocratic leaders like Hitler have always sought to bolster their power by posing as a strong man dominating a feared and despised minority. The link between authoritarianism and mistreatment of those less powerful is well established (Keltner, 2016).

## **Racism and Rankism**

The fact that there is no such thing as a biological race does not support the view of those who claim, “I do not see race.” We are conditioned in a culture of racism which is a social invention, albeit not a genetic reality. Travelling with my Lakota colleague Martin Brokenleg has been a short course in the varieties of racism experienced by persons of color.

**Overt Racism:** We introduced our book *Reclaiming Youth at Risk* at a 1990 conference in New York City held across the July fourth holiday. After enjoying the Macy fireworks extravaganza, we and a million others jostled toward the subway. A man who bumped against Martin Brokenleg angrily shouted, “Why don’t you go back where you came from!!” Martin stood his ground with a simple rejoinder, “I am Native American and was here first.”

**Implicit Racism:** As apartheid was being dismantled, Martin Brokenleg and I were invited to address the childcare association of South Africa. We departed from Atlanta on South African Airlines, the state-owned carrier of that country. We each handed our ticket to the agent who checked us in who then returned both tickets to me. He obviously assumed that when a person of color was accompanied by a Caucasian, the white person would be in charge.

**Structural Racism:** While at a conference in New Orleans, Martin and I took a tour of the city. Our guide was expounding on the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France of over 800,000 square miles in the heartland of the continent. Martin interrupted declaring, “It was never for sale.” What the U.S. actually “purchased” was the “preemptive” right to gain Native lands by treaty or conquest. To this day, Native Americans are the most economically disadvantaged in the nation.

In his classic 1954 study, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Gordon Allport developed a scale of five levels at which bias occurs:

**Speaking Against.** A group verbalizes and freely supports negative images of an outgroup. This is often seen as harmless by the majority but is a precursor to prejudice.

**Avoidance.** Members of the in-group actively avoid the out-group or outcast. Even if no harm is intended, this can cause psychological trauma through isolation or rejection.

**Discrimination.** The out-group is denied opportunities or rights to be treated with dignity. Examples are Jim Crow laws in the U.S. and anti-Semitic practices in Germany.

**Physical Attack.** The in-group vandalizes or destroys out-group property and carries out violent threats, bullying, or aggression on individuals or groups.

**Extermination.** The in-group seeks to eliminate the out-group or its representatives. Examples are the assassination of civil rights leaders and genocide of Native Americans.

Robert Fuller broadened the concept of racism with his term *rankism* in his 2003 book *Somebodies and Nobodies*. In a world where racism, sexism, and other “isms” are hotly debated, rankism incorporates these with other cases where somebody uses their rank to exploit, abuse, or treat persons as inferiors. Rank itself is not a problem since we all want talented leaders, teachers, physicians, athletes, and musicians. Some hierarchy is often necessary to organize efforts of a group, and that creates rank. But rankism is using status or power to deprive others of their dignity. We all know how this feels since none of us is immune from having been treated as a nobody.

Like implicit racial bias, much rankism is unconscious—perhaps as simple as failing to treat those who serve us in a restaurant with dignity. And rankism can be entrenched in the structure of our society—for example believing adults can shout at kids or that a boss is entitled to a salary hundreds of times more than coworkers. While servant leadership and seeking consensus were the preferred model of governance in many Indigenous cultures, boss leadership perpetuates the colonial tradition.

Sussman’s (2016) book *The Myth of Race* is subtitled “the troubling persistence of an unscientific idea.” For a century, the Anti-defamation League has fought discrimination. Their current research tracks a resurgence in white supremacy fueled by beliefs like these:

1. Whites are entitled to dominance over people of other backgrounds.
2. Whites should be able to live by themselves in segregated communities.
3. White people have their own “culture” that is superior to other cultures.
4. White people are genetically superior to other “races.”

Many white supremacists also fear that the white race is in danger of extinction due to a rising “flood” of non-whites and that imminent action is needed to “save” the white race (ADL, 2021). This mindset of rankism is the modern rebirth of colonialism with one group believing it is entitled to supremacy over another.

## Countering Colonialism

Colonial history in the Americas is a centuries-long story of the struggle to impose—or escape—cultures of domination. Recently, Martin Brokenleg (2020) authored a chapter in a book titled *Decolonizing Discipline*. This volume recounts the removal of First Nations children from their families to be placed in abusive residential schools. In both the US and Canada, such conscious acts of cultural genocide sought to purge children of their Native identity, language, and values. Ironically, the premiere value in Native cultures is to treat children as sacred beings. Brokenleg proposes that the therapy for such cultural abuse is to restore culture. The Circle of Courage values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity are a birthright of Native children and a gift to all children of the world.

But isn't cultural abuse a thing of the past? Recently I was offering a two-day training for youth workers in a First Nations community in British Columbia. Ground-penetrating radar had just discovered the remains of 215 children, some as young as three, in a mass grave on the site of what was once Canada's largest Indigenous School near Kamloops. Participants in our training had attended this school, and trauma was retriggered. Marie Yellow Horse Brave Heart (2003) was the first to define intergenerational cultural trauma as the cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over the lifespan and across generations, resulting from massive group trauma and unresolved grief. This is the legacy of colonization, slavery, and the Holocaust.

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Native American psychologist Joseph Gone (2015) of Harvard contends that restoring culture is the antidote to cultural trauma. But many are oblivious to the reality they are still swimming in the colonial mindset, like fish unaware of the sea around them. For example, Gone suggests that current mandates requiring "evidence-based" treatments are tethered to the colonial model of control and failure to respect persons and their cultural heritage. Likewise, our justice system and school discipline policies are too often frozen in rankism rather than rearing children in cultures of respect. Gone and colleagues (2020) identify three bodies of knowledge that help us understand and prevent intergenerational cultural trauma:

1. Healing Trauma: Fostering mental health
2. Overcoming the Odds: Building resilience
3. Changing the Odds: Confronting colonialism

Cultural and racial trauma are widespread in authoritarian cultures which pit the powerful against the weak and vulnerable. This rankism becomes virulent in negative school or group climates which spawn harassment and bullying. Thus, successful interventions seek to build a positive relational climate in schools and treatment settings (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 2019).

***Beyond White Supremacy***

*Never doubt that a small group of persons can change the world. This is the only thing that ever has.*  
~Margaret Mead

Margaret Mead may have been describing her role in a small group of renegade anthropologists who set out to remake the world. Their saga is recounted in an oddly titled book, *Gods of the Upper Air* (King, 2020), which takes a panoramic view of the myth of racial superiority. This group was inspired by Franz Boas (1858-1942) who is the founder of modern anthropology. Boas was a German-American scientist who came to North America to live among the Inuit peoples on Baffin Island. He was profoundly impressed that this supposedly primitive society was remarkably adept at creating a stable culture in a hostile environment. Their sophisticated mental abilities in many ways exceeded Western civilization in its narrow view of the world. Boas would go on to study First Nations people in British Columbia, creating thousands of pages describing those rich cultures. He transformed traditional anthropology in two important ways:

- *Cultural relativism* meant that each society must be understood based on its own experience, and not judged by the standard of one's own culture.
- *White racial supremacy* was a massive Eurocentric bias that was blind to the brilliance and creativity of persons across all human cultures.

In the classic 1911 book, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, Franz Boas challenged widely held beliefs about race, intelligence, and white superiority. His research showed there was no biological basis for race. Furthermore, societies that call themselves "civilized" are not superior to those considered "primitive." Differences in peoples are based on "culture" which is the accumulated knowledge of a society. He wrote that if we were to select the most intelligent, imaginative, energetic, and emotionally stable humans, all races would be present.

Franz Boas went to battle against the prevailing white superiority mindset, and he formed a group of colleagues who would carefully document the complexity and wisdom of Indigenous cultures. His most prolific student was Ruth Benedict who spent eleven years studying Native North American Native cultures. She authored many books dismantling race theory, including

*Patterns of Culture* (1934). Benedict trained Margaret Mead (1928) whose book *Coming of Age in Samoa* popularized anthropology and shattered gender stereotypes. They both worked closely with Dakota Sioux anthropologist Ella Deloria (1944), a relative of Martin Brokenleg. Deloria and Boas co-authored an exhaustive study of the highly sophisticated Dakota language. The fourth woman in this quartet of Boas scholars was Zora Hurston who studied African culture in the American South in the early 1900s.

Abraham Maslow studied anthropology with this group and Ruth Benedict secured funding to spend the summer of 1938 living with the Blackfoot tribe in Canada. This experience totally transformed his thinking and laid the foundation for his positive psychology (Hoffman, 1988). His earlier view that power was the main human motivation was shattered by experiencing the generosity that permeated Native culture. His research showed that 80 to 90 percent of the Blackfoot people had exceptional mental health (showing *ego security*), while a minority of persons in mainstream American culture displayed these strengths. In the same vein, Maslow (1964) cites Benedict who found some cultures were *secure* and *harmonious* while others were *anxious* and *surlly*. Wealth, race, or size of the society did not matter. Instead, secure cultures have *high synergy*, serving the needs of both the individual and the group. But in *low synergy* cultures, individuals seek dominance over others. This is supported by current research showing that societies with great disparity in wealth (the U.S. heads this list) have massive social problems while more equal societies live in harmony (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2011).

Science is slow to impact policy and public beliefs, and the view that Western culture is superior to “less-developed” societies persists. Mahatma Gandhi, who opposed the British colonization of India, mocked this arrogance; when asked what he thought of Western civilization, Gandhi replied, “I think that would be a good idea.”

### **Creating Cultures of Respect**

Inge Bolin has spent decades studying Indigenous people of Highland Peru who rear children in *cultures of respect* (2006). She describes how the Circle of Courage values of Belonging, Mastery, Independence, and Generosity create a society where all thrive and live in harmony (Bolin, 2010). This is a bold contrast with cultures of conflict based on power and authoritarian dominance.

In these polarized times, people become locked in contests for power, the counterfeit measure of respect in cultures of dominance. When respect is the property of those in power, the loss of power is proof of one’s status as a nobody. Today, it is a truism that our task is to fight racism if we are to save democracy. But how do we “fight” without driving deeper divisions. Those who cling to myths of white supremacy and fear their loss of identity are not our enemies but our brothers and sisters.

Peggy McIntosh (2019), who is known for her research on white privilege, describes this contrast of cultures. Western society is *hierarchical*, and behavior is motivated by the belief *win lest you lose*. We see this all around in the quest for power, wealth, and privilege. Most traditional cultures are *horizontal* alliances with the belief *we are a community*. As Ella Deloria wrote, “Be related, somehow, to everyone you know” (Deloria, 1944, p. 32). Native Americans present a simple formula for building a culture of respect: *mitakuye oyasin* is the oft repeated Lakota phrase meaning “we are all relatives.”

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There are many resources for fostering foster racial healing (e.g., Longhurst et al., 2015), and this is now a major mission of the renowned W. K. Kellogg Foundation (2020). Yet, ultimately, the path to living in harmony will not be found in some mandatory diversity training program. Rather, we must reclaim the traditional wisdom that humans once knew but now have forgotten, how to build cultures of respect.

For many years, we have worked with colleagues in Germany to establish peer-helping groups with youth at risk (Brendtro & Kreisle, 2021). Our goal is to encourage young people to help one another develop their strengths in the four areas of the Circle of Courage:

**Belonging:** Building positive relationships with significant others

**Mastery:** Thinking clearly, solving problems, and achieving

**Independence:** Growing in personal power and responsibility

**Generosity:** Developing empathy and concern for others

Recently, Beate Kreisle hosted us at a professional conference in Germany where we met a group of young people who had participated in Positive Peer Culture groups. They led a workshop session describing the values they had chosen to guide their lives:

*We treat each other with respect!*

*We look out for one another!*

*We help others if they have problems!*

*We reject all physical or psychological violence!*

Most were recent immigrants from diverse ethnic backgrounds whose lives had been marked by trauma and conflict. They had been participating in a peer-helping program based on the Circle of Courage. Their personal experience with violence was countered by values of respect. Translating their words:

*Violence in any form includes humiliation and depreciation of the other person. When we engage in violence, we want to make the other "small" and ourselves superior. That stands in bold contrast to showing respect to one another.*

So, who were these youth? They were residents in a large youth prison near Adelsheim in southern Germany. Accompanying them to the conference was a veteran prison guard. He recounted that many correctional staff used to call in sick because of the stress of this job. "But now we enjoy coming to work!" Although confined in a secure prison, these youth have formed bonds of respect with peers and adults in authority.

Recounting their transformation, one youth observed, "We used to have fights every day, but now we never fight because we have learned to treat one another as human beings." When the PPC groups mix with residents of other prison units, they encounter those who feel they must put on a front of toughness. While PPC youth are sometimes ridiculed by other inmates as being soft, they are secure in their core values: "We treat each other with respect."

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