



SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

When Whites Just Don't Get It

After Ferguson, Race Deserves More Attention, Not Less

AUG. 30, 2014

Nicholas Kristof

MANY white Americans say they are fed up with the coverage of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo. A plurality of whites in a recent Pew survey said that the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves.

Bill O'Reilly of Fox News reflected that weariness, saying: "All you hear is grievance, grievance, grievance, money, money, money."

Indeed, a 2011 study by scholars at Harvard and Tufts found that whites, on average, believed that anti-white racism was a bigger problem than anti-black racism.

Yes, you read that right!

So let me push back at what I see as smug white delusion. Here are a few reasons race relations deserve more attention, not less:

- The net worth of the average black household in the United States is \$6,314, compared with \$110,500 for the average white household, according to 2011 census data. The gap has worsened in the last decade, and the United States now has a greater wealth gap by race than South Africa did during apartheid. (Whites in America on average own almost 18 times as much as blacks; in South Africa in 1970, the ratio was about 15 times.)

- The black-white income gap is roughly 40 percent greater today than it was in 1967.

- A black boy born today in the United States has a life expectancy five

years shorter than that of a white boy.

- Black students are significantly less likely to attend schools offering advanced math and science courses than white students. They are three times as likely to be suspended and expelled, setting them up for educational failure.

- Because of the catastrophic experiment in mass incarceration, black men in their 20s without a high school diploma are more likely to be incarcerated today than employed, according to a study from the National Bureau of Economic Research. Nearly 70 percent of middle-aged black men who never graduated from high school have been imprisoned.

All these constitute not a black problem or a white problem, but an American problem. When so much talent is underemployed and overincarcerated, the entire country suffers.

Some straight people have gradually changed their attitudes toward gays after realizing that their friends — or children — were gay. Researchers have found that male judges are more sympathetic to women's rights when they have daughters. Yet because of the de facto segregation of America, whites are unlikely to have many black friends: A study from the Public Religion Research Institute suggests that in a network of 100 friends, a white person, on average, has one black friend.

That's unfortunate, because friends open our eyes. I was shaken after a well-known black woman told me about looking out her front window and seeing that police officers had her teenage son down on the ground after he had stepped out of their upscale house because they thought he was a prowler. "Thank God he didn't run," she said.

One black friend tells me that he freaked out when his white fiancée purchased an item in a store and promptly threw the receipt away. "What are you doing?" he protested to her. He is a highly successful and well-educated professional but would never dream of tossing a receipt for fear of being accused of shoplifting.

Some readers will protest that the stereotype is rooted in reality: Young black men are disproportionately likely to be criminals.

That's true — and complicated. "There's nothing more painful to me," the

Rev. Jesse Jackson once said, “than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery — then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved.”

All this should be part of the national conversation on race, as well, and prompt a drive to help young black men end up in jobs and stable families rather than in crime or jail. We have policies with a robust record of creating opportunity: home visitation programs like Nurse-Family Partnership; early education initiatives like Educare and Head Start; programs for troubled adolescents like Youth Villages; anti-gang and anti-crime initiatives like **Becoming a Man**; efforts to prevent teen pregnancies like the Carrera curriculum; job training like Career Academies; and job incentives like the earned-income tax credit.

The best escalator to opportunity may be education, but that escalator is broken for black boys growing up in neighborhoods with broken schools. We fail those boys before they fail us.

So a starting point is for those of us in white America to wipe away any self-satisfaction about racial progress. Yes, the progress is real, but so are the challenges. The gaps demand a wrenching, soul-searching excavation of our national soul, and the first step is to acknowledge that the central race challenge in America today is not the suffering of whites.

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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

When Whites Just Don't Get It, Part 2

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Nicholas Kristof

IN my column a week ago, “When Whites Just Don’t Get It,” I took aim at what I called “smug white delusion” about race relations in America, and readers promptly fired back at what they perceived as a smugly deluded columnist.

Readers grudgingly accepted the grim statistics I cited — such as the wealth disparity between blacks and whites in America today exceeding what it was in South Africa during apartheid — but many readers put the blame on African-Americans themselves.

“Probably has something to do with their unwillingness to work,” Nils tweeted.

Nancy protested on my Facebook page: “We can’t fix their problems. It’s up to every black individual to stop the cycle of fatherless homes, stop the cycle of generations on welfare.”

There was a deluge of such comments, some toxic, but let me try to address three principal arguments that I think prop up white delusion.

First, if blacks are poor or in prison, it’s all their fault. “Blacks don’t get it,” Bruce tweeted. “Choosing to be cool vs. getting good grades is a bad choice. We all start from 0.”

Huh? Does anybody really think that we all take off from the same starting line?

Slavery and post-slavery oppression left a legacy of broken families,

poverty, racism, hopelessness and internalized self-doubt. Some responded to discrimination and lack of opportunity by behaving in self-destructive ways.

One study found that African-American children on welfare heard only 29 percent as many words in their first few years as children of professional parents. Those kids never catch up, partly because they're more likely to attend broken schools. Sure, some make bad choices, but they've often been on a trajectory toward failure from the time they were babies.

These are whirlpools that are difficult to escape, especially when society is suspicious and unsympathetic. Japan has a stigmatized minority group, the *burakumin*, whose members once held jobs considered unclean. But although this is an occupational minority rather than a racial one, it spawned an underclass that was tormented by crime, educational failure, and substance abuse similar to that of the American underclass.

So instead of pointing fingers, let's adopt some of the programs that I've cited with robust evidence showing that they bridge the chasm.

But look at Asians, Mark protests on my Google Plus page: Vietnamese arrived in poverty — and are now school valedictorians. Why can't blacks be like that?

There are plenty of black valedictorians. But bravo to Asians and other immigrant groups for thriving in America with a strong cultural emphasis on education, diligence and delay of self-gratification. We should support programs with a good record of inculcating such values in disadvantaged children. But we also need to understand that many young people of color see no hope of getting ahead, and that despair can be self-fulfilling.

A successful person can say: "I worked hard in school. I got a job. The system worked." Good for you. But you probably also owe your success to parents who read to you, to decent schools, to social expectations that you would end up in college rather than prison. So count your blessings for winning the lottery of birth — and think about mentoring a kid who didn't.

Look, the basic reason young black men are regarded with suspicion is that they're disproportionately criminals. The root problem isn't racism. It's criminality.

It's true that blacks accounted for 55 percent of robbery arrests in 2012, according to F.B.I. statistics. But, by my calculations, it's also true that 99.9 percent of blacks were not arrested and charged with robbery in 2012, yet they are still tarred by this pernicious stereotype.

Criminality is real. So is inequity. So is stereotyping.

The United States Sentencing Commission concluded that black men get sentences one-fifth longer than white men for committing the same crimes. In Louisiana, a study found that a person is 97 percent more likely to be sentenced to death for murdering a white person than a black person.

Mass incarceration means that the United States imprisons a higher proportion of its black population than apartheid South Africa did, further breaking up families. And careful studies find that employers are less likely to respond to a job inquiry and résumé when a typically black name is on it.

Society creates opportunity and resiliency for middle-class white boys who make mistakes; it is unforgiving of low-income black boys.

Of course, we need to promote personal responsibility. But there is plenty of fault to go around, and too many whites are obsessed with cultivating personal responsibility in the black community while refusing to accept any responsibility themselves for a system that manifestly does not provide equal opportunity.

Yes, young black men need to take personal responsibility. And so does white America.

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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

When Whites Just Don't Get It, Part 3

OCT. 11, 2014

Nicholas Kristof

SOME white Americans may be surprised to hear Archbishop Desmond Tutu describe Bryan Stevenson, an African-American lawyer fighting for racial justice, as “America’s young Nelson Mandela.”

Huh? Why do we need a Mandela over here? We’ve made so much progress on race over 50 years! And who is this guy Stevenson, anyway?

Yet Archbishop Tutu is right. Even after remarkable gains in civil rights, including the election of a black president, the United States remains a profoundly unequal society — and nowhere is justice more elusive than in our justice system.

When I was born in 1959, the hospital in which I arrived had separate floors for black babies and white babies, and it was then illegal for blacks and whites to marry in many states. So progress has been enormous, and America today is nothing like the apartheid South Africa that imprisoned Mandela. But there’s also a risk that that progress distracts us from the profound and persistent inequality that remains.

After the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., I wrote a couple of columns entitled “When Whites Just Don’t Get It.” The reaction to those columns — sometimes bewildered, resentful or unprintable — suggests to me that many whites in America don’t understand the depths of racial inequity lingering in this country.

This inequity is embedded in our law enforcement and criminal justice

system, and that is why Bryan Stevenson may, indeed, be America's Mandela. For decades he has fought judges, prosecutors and police on behalf of those who are impoverished, black or both. When someone is both and caught in the maw of the justice system — well, Stevenson jokes that “it's like having two kinds of cancer at the same time.”

“We have a system that treats you better if you're rich and guilty than if you're poor and innocent,” he adds.

Stevenson, 54, grew up in a poor black neighborhood in Delaware and ended up at Harvard Law School. He started the Equal Justice Initiative, based in Montgomery, Ala., to challenge bias and represent the voiceless. It's a tale he recounts in a searing, moving and infuriating memoir that is scheduled to be published later this month, “Just Mercy.”

Stevenson tells of Walter McMillian, a black Alabama businessman who scandalized his local community by having an affair with a married white woman. Police were under enormous pressure to solve the murder of an 18-year-old white woman, and they ended up arresting McMillian in 1987.

The authorities suppressed exculpatory evidence and found informants to testify against McMillian with preposterous, contradictory and constantly changing stories. McMillian had no serious criminal history and had an alibi: At the time of the murder, he was at a church fish fry, attended by dozens of people who confirmed his presence.

None of this mattered. An overwhelmingly white jury found McMillian guilty of the murder, and the judge — inauspiciously named Robert E. Lee Key Jr. — sentenced him to die.

When Stevenson sought to appeal on McMillian's behalf, Judge Key called him up. “Why in the hell would you want to represent someone like Walter McMillian?” the judge asked, according to Stevenson's account.

Stevenson dug up evidence showing that McMillian couldn't have committed the crime, and prosecuting witnesses recanted their testimony, with one saying that he had been threatened with execution unless he testified against McMillian. Officials shrugged. They seemed completely uninterested in justice as long as the innocent man on death row was black.

Despite receiving death threats, Stevenson pursued the case and eventually won: McMillian was exonerated and freed in 1993 after spending six years on death row.

I suggested to Stevenson that such a blatant and racially tinged miscarriage of justice would be less likely today. On the contrary, he said, such cases remain common, adding that he is currently representing a prisoner in Alabama who has even more evidence of innocence than McMillian had.

“If anything, because of the tremendous increase in people incarcerated, I’m confident that we have more innocent people in prison today than 25 years ago,” Stevenson said.

Those of us who are white and in the middle class rarely see this side of the justice system. The system works for us, and it’s easy to overlook how deeply it is skewed against the poor or members of minority groups.

Yet consider drug arrests. Surveys overwhelmingly find that similar percentages of blacks and whites use illegal drugs. Yet the Justice Department says that blacks are arrested for such drug offenses at three times the rate of whites.

One study in Seattle found that blacks made up 16 percent of observed drug dealers for the five most dangerous drugs and 64 percent of arrests for dealing those drugs.

Likewise, research suggests that blacks and whites violate traffic laws at similar rates, but blacks are far more likely to be stopped and arrested. The Sentencing Project, which pushes for fairer law enforcement, cites a New Jersey study that racial minorities account for 15 percent of drivers on the turnpike, but blacks account for 42 percent of stops.

THE greatest problem is not with flat-out white racists, but rather with the far larger number of Americans who believe intellectually in racial equality but are quietly oblivious to injustice around them. Too many whites unquestioningly accept a system that disproportionately punishes blacks and that gives public schools serving disadvantaged children many fewer resources than those serving affluent children. We are not racists, but we accept a system that acts in racist ways.

Some whites think that the fundamental problem is young black men who show no personal responsibility, screw up and then look for others to blame. Yes, that happens. But I also see a white-dominated society that shows no sense of responsibility for disadvantaged children born on a path that often propels them toward drugs, crime and joblessness; we fail those kids before they fail us, and then we, too, look for others to blame.

Today we sometimes wonder how so many smart, well-meaning white people in the Jim Crow era could have unthinkingly accepted segregation. The truth is that injustice is easy not to notice when it affects people different from ourselves; that helps explain the obliviousness of our own generation to inequity today. We need to wake up.

And that is why we need a Mandela in this country.

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SundayReview | OP-ED COLUMNIST

When Whites Just Don't Get It, Part 4

NOV. 15, 2014

Nicholas Kristof

WHEN I write about racial inequality in America, one common response from whites is eye-rolling and an emphatic: *It's time to move on.*

"As whites, are we doomed to an eternity of apology?" Neil tweeted at me. "When does individual responsibility kick in?"

Terry asked on my Facebook page: "Why are we still being held to actions that took place long ago?"

"How long am I supposed to feel guilty about being white? I bust my hump at work and refrain from living a thug life," Bradley chimed in. "America is about personal responsibility. ... And really, get past the slavery issue."

This is the fourth installment in a series of columns I've written this year, "When Whites Just Don't Get It," and plenty of white readers have responded with anger and frustration at what they see as the "blame game" on race. They acknowledge a horrific history of racial discrimination but also say that we should look forward, not backward. The Supreme Court seems to share this view as it dismantles civil-rights-era rulings on voting rights.

As Dina puts it: "I am tired of the race conversation. It has exasperated me. Just stop. In so many industries, the racial ceiling has been shattered. Our president is black. From that moment on, there were no more excuses."

If only it were so simple!

Of course, personal responsibility is an issue. Orlando Patterson, the eminent black sociologist, notes in a forthcoming book that 92 percent of black

youths agree that it is a “big problem” that black males are “not taking education seriously enough.” And 88 percent agree that it’s a big problem that they are “not being responsible fathers.” That’s why President Obama started “My Brother’s Keeper,” to cultivate more prudent behavior among men and boys of color.

But we in white society should be equally ready to shoulder responsibility. In past articles in this series, I’ve looked at black/white economic inequality that is greater in America today than it was in apartheid South Africa, at ongoing discrimination against African-Americans in the labor market and at systematic bias in law enforcement. But these conversations run into a wall: the presumption on the part of so many well-meaning white Americans that racism is a historical artifact. They don’t appreciate the overwhelming evidence that centuries of racial subjugation still shape inequity in the 21st century.

Indeed, a wave of research over the last 20 years has documented the lingering effects of slavery in the United States and South America alike. For example, counties in America that had a higher proportion of slaves in 1860 are still more unequal today, according to a scholarly paper published in 2010. The authors called this a “persistent effect of slavery.”

One reason seems to be that areas with slave labor were ruled for the benefit of elite plantation owners. Public schools, libraries and legal institutions lagged, holding back working-class whites as well as blacks.

Whites often don’t realize that slavery didn’t truly end until long after the Civil War. Douglas Blackmon won a Pulitzer Prize for his devastating history, “Slavery by Another Name,” that recounted how U.S. Steel and other American corporations used black slave labor well into the 20th century, through “convict leasing.” Blacks would be arrested for made-up offenses such as “vagrancy” and then would be leased to companies as slave laborers.

Job and housing discrimination also systematically prevented blacks from accumulating wealth. The Federal Housing Administration and other initiatives greatly expanded home ownership and the middle class but deliberately excluded blacks.

That's one reason why black families have, on average, only about 6 percent as much wealth as white households, why only 44 percent of black families own a home compared with 73 percent for white households.

The inequality continues, particularly in education. De jure segregated schools have been replaced in some areas by de facto segregation.

Those of us who are white have a remarkable capacity for delusions. A majority of whites have said in opinion polls that blacks earn as much as whites and are as healthy as whites. In fact, black median household income is \$34,598, compared with \$58,270 for non-Hispanic whites, according to census data. Black life expectancy is four years shorter than that of whites.

Granted, race is just one thread in a tapestry. The daughters of President and Michelle Obama shouldn't enjoy affirmative action preference (as their dad has acknowledged), while disadvantaged white kids should.

Yet one element of white privilege today is obliviousness to privilege, including a blithe disregard of the way past subjugation shapes present disadvantage.

I've been on a book tour lately. By coincidence, so has one of my Times Op-Ed columnist colleagues, Charles Blow, who is African-American and the author of a powerful memoir, "Fire Shut Up in My Bones." I grew up in a solid middle-class household; Charles was primarily raised by a single mom who initially worked plucking poultry in a factory, and also, for a while, by a grandma in a house with no plumbing.

That Charles has become a New York Times columnist does not mean that blacks and whites today have equal access to opportunity, just that some talented and driven blacks manage to overcome the long odds against them. Make no mistake: Charles had to climb a higher mountain than I did.

WE all stand on the shoulders of our ancestors. We're in a relay race, relying on the financial and human capital of our parents and grandparents. Blacks were shackled for the early part of that relay race, and although many of the fetters have come off, whites have developed a huge lead. Do we ignore this long head start — a facet of white privilege — and pretend that the competition is now fair?

Of course not. If we whites are ahead in the relay race of life, shouldn't we acknowledge that we got this lead in part by generations of oppression? Aren't we big enough to make amends by trying to spread opportunity, by providing disadvantaged black kids an education as good as the one afforded privileged white kids?

Can't we at least acknowledge that in the case of race, William Faulkner was right: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

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When Whites Just Don't Get It, Part 5

NOV. 29, 2014

Nicholas Kristof

WE Americans are a nation divided.

We feud about the fires in Ferguson, Mo., and we can agree only that racial divisions remain raw. So let's borrow a page from South Africa and impanel a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to examine race in America.

The model should be the 9/11 commission or the Warren Commission on President Kennedy's assassination, and it should hold televised hearings and issue a report to help us understand ourselves. Perhaps it could be led by the likes of Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush and Oprah Winfrey.

We as a nation need to grapple with race because the evidence is overwhelming that racial bias remains deeply embedded in American life. Two economists, Joseph Price and Justin Wolfers, found that white N.B.A. referees disproportionately call fouls on black players, while black refs call more fouls on white players. "These biases are sufficiently large that they affect the outcome of an appreciable number of games," Price and Wolfers wrote.

If such racial bias exists among professional referees monitored by huge television audiences, imagine what unfolds when an employer privately weighs whom to hire, or a principal decides whether to expel a disruptive student, or a policeman considers whether to pull over a driver.

This "When Whites Just Don't Get It" series is a call for soul-searching. It's very easy for whites to miss problems that aren't our own; that's a function not of being white but of being human. Three-quarters of whites have only

white friends, according to one study, so we are often clueless.

What we whites notice is blacks who have “made it” — including President Obama — so we focus on progress and are oblivious to the daily humiliations that African-Americans endure when treated as second-class citizens.

“In the jewelry store, they lock the case when I walk in,” a 23-year-old black man wrote in May 1992. “In the shoe store, they help the white man who walks in after me. In the shopping mall, they follow me.”

He described an incident when he was stopped by six police officers who detained him, with guns at the ready, and treated him for 30 minutes as a dangerous suspect.

That young man was future Senator Cory Booker, who had been a senior class president at Stanford University and was a newly selected Rhodes Scholar. Yet our law enforcement system reduced him to a stereotype — so young Booker sat trembling and praying that he wouldn’t be shot by the police.

My sense is that part of the problem is well-meaning Americans who disapprove of racism yet inadvertently help perpetuate it. We aren’t racists, yet we buttress a system that acts in racist ways. It’s “racism without racists,” in the words of Eduardo Bonillo-Silva, a Duke University sociologist.

This occurs partly because of deeply embedded stereotypes that trick us, even when we want to be fair. Researchers once showed people sketches of a white man with a knife confronting an unarmed black man in the subway. In one version of the experiment, 59 percent of research subjects later reported that it had been the black man who held the knife.

I don’t know what unfolded in Ferguson between Michael Brown, a black teenager, and Darren Wilson, a white police officer. But there is a pattern: a ProPublica investigation found that young black men are shot dead by police at 21 times the rate of young white men.

If you’re white, your interactions with police are more likely to have been professional and respectful, leaving you trustful. If you’re black, your encounters with cops may leave you dubious and distrustful. That’s why a Huffington Post/YouGov poll found that 64 percent of African-Americans believe that Officer Wilson should be punished, while only 22 percent of

whites think so.

That's the gulf that an American Truth and Reconciliation Commission might help bridge just a little. In 1922, a Chicago Commission on Race Relations (composed of six whites and six blacks) examined the Chicago race riots of 1919. More recently, President Clinton used an executive order to impanel an advisory board on race that focused on how to nurture "one America."

A new commission could jump-start an overdue national conversation and also recommend evidence-based solutions to boost educational outcomes, improve family cohesion and connect people to jobs.

White Americans may protest that our racial problems are not like South Africa's. No, but the United States incarcerates a higher proportion of blacks than apartheid South Africa did. In America, the black-white wealth gap today is greater than it was in South Africa in 1970 at the peak of apartheid.

Most troubling, America's racial wealth gap, pay gap and college education gap have all widened in the last few decades.

There are no easy solutions. But let's talk.

I'm trying something new, an email newsletter. When you sign up, you'll receive an email about my columns as they're published and other occasional commentary. [Sign up here >>](#)

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