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Exploring Race

Race is a very controversial topic in the United States. When talked about, it may bring out many different emotions in different people. There is no one way to look at this topic. Whether you look at how it has affected the past or the impact it holds over today’s society, there are many different perspectives. I decided to dive deeper into this issue looking at race and racial issues from an individual perspective, collecting different types of data along the way.

From a sociological perspective, race is defined as, “human-created or -constricted categories that have come to assume great social importance” (Ferrante, 276). The categories of race which the United States has chosen to recognize are “American Indian/Alaskan Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and White” (Geissler). As an activity in my Sociology 101 class, we looked at famous people’s pictures and guessed which label we would use to identify them. This means on a bigger scale, we have decided to define a person’s category based off the color of their skin. Does this also mean that we associate a person’s worth depending on what color you are?

After talking about race in my class, I decided to attend several different Race Talks held at Parkland College. People often do not want to think about racial issues or
acknowledge that racism exists. The environment of the talks allowed people to address racial issues head-on in an appropriate manner which provided an open conversation. These talks were very eye-opening.

At the first talk I attended, we were supposed to sit at a table and have a conversation with those around us. However, a stipulation was added before we sat down. The people at that table could not be anyone we knew or anyone that looked like yourself. There was a set of questions provided for the whole table to ask one another and discuss different ideas. The opening question was about where we grew up and how racially diverse our town and/or school was. It was amazing that everyone at my table had a completely different background. I learned that my small town did not put me in situations which other people had been in. Different cultures were never discussed or represented within my school. I personally have not gone through the hardships which many of the other people at my table had faced. There was a woman who shared this sad story about how she felt her family was personally targeted by the police due to the fact that they were black. I, personally, have never had a negative encounter with a police officer. Hearing her talk about this got me wondering if that was because of my skin color, which allowed me to not be a victim. This then led to the conversation at my table about white privilege. It was not hateful or negative, simply just hard for me to hear everything that was being said.

The second race talk I attended involved all the participants sitting in a large circle. There was an open facilitated conversation. The facilitator asked many different types of questions that included peoples’ thoughts on: immigration, generations
becoming more open to change, and what impact media has on racial issues. The answers were actually brutally honest; no one held back. One example of this was that one of the participants had first-hand experience with her father being deported. Talking about this nearly brought her to tears, because of the fact that she could not believe the cruelty tearing apart families. Racial common sense, which is defined as, “ideas people share about race that they believe to be so obvious that they do not even think to question their validity,” was displayed through this form of communication (Ferrante, 279). Granted, people could only speak based on personal experience, but it felt like each individual was representing an entire community. There are many things that I take for granted which other people are not provided with, due to life chances. I left saddened to see the division that has separated our country.

I have always tried to be involved in many different activities, but this one was different. The talks themselves were not something I was a part of. I felt like my place was just to listen; listen to the struggles which minorities are still suffering from. This experience made me want to join a group to make a change. Racism is still present, and it honestly is never going away unless a major change is brought about.

One positive outcome of my research is I have learned that my generation and the generations below me seem to be more aware of the issue and are willing to work on a better outcome. During the talks, people brought up news and current events that are happening all over that involve the issue of race. Major topic discussed was the use of media and how that affects people’s thoughts, and ultimately carves the outline of people’s perception on race and racial issues. The students that were involved in the
talks appeared angry that media was manipulating the information to make specific races always depicted as “the villain.” This told me that our generation is ready for a social change.

I decided to research this topic even further after participating in the race talks. In order to get first-hand feedback, I interviewed a few individuals who have all experienced different life circumstances. To keep them anonymous, I am going to introduce them as Participant A, Participant B, and Participant C. Participant A identifies as a Latina female who is 19 years old. Participant B identifies as a 20-year-old while male. Participant C identifies as a Black female who is 24 years old. The first question I asked them was, “What does race mean to you?” Participant B said, “Race is a way people use to separate different groups of people from each other. It allows for stereotyping and placing people based solely on their skin color. Some people use race to show that they are entitled or powerful, specifically over other groups. Participant C said she doesn’t believe race is real. I asked her to elaborate and she continued to say, “[Race] is a made-up concept which the government uses to group people into categories, and it mean nothing more than that.” Then participant A stated, “It’s ancestry; where people come from. The foundation that is laid which people build their character from. I am proud to tell people where I come from, and I can definitely say [my race] has shaped me into who I am today.” As you can tell, their answers were very different from one another. This goes back to my original argument that race means something different to everyone.
The next question I asked was, “Have you yourself seen or experienced racism?” Participant B responded to the question, much like I, personally, would have, by saying, “I have not seen or experienced racism first hand. I lived in a small town growing up and came from a small school. My school was mainly only made up of white students. With little to no cultural diversity, there was no way of having racial issues or racism present at my school.” Participant C responded in the opposite manner compared to Participant B. She said within her school, racism was a daily issue. “Students were often targeted or discriminated against because they were not of the majority.” She thinks because her teachers and administrative staff were predominantly white, it factored into the problem. Participant A said, “Racism was not an issue, but people tended to stay in groups of people that share the same cultural background.”

The last question I asked in the interviews was, how do you think the problem of racism should be addressed and what do you think the solution to the problem of racial discrimination is? Participant A stated that the issue of racism was not problem she foresees being fixed in her lifetime. Her only thoughts on how to go about the issue is to openly talk about things. She thinks people often get too offended when someone doesn’t agree with them. She wanted to make note that, “It’s okay to be wrong every once and awhile. Just listen to those around you.” Participant B said, “Many steps have been taken in the past to try to fix racial issues. We need to continue that trend, but find ways of doing it to fit this day and age. Times have changed, so the ways that made change happen probably will not work now. We need to find solutions that will work for
how society is today.” Participant C said, “I am not sure, but our current president is not helping the issue.”

My understanding from the interviews is that racism may be covered up, but is still a big problem facing today’s society. Some places may have seem as if there is little to no racial issues, but that does not mean there isn’t an issue once people leave the comfort of their small town. People’s background and cultural differences change how people perceive race. It is not always in a negative way, but a general understanding should be practiced.

Overall, I don’t think there is a definite conclusion as to how we fix the racial problems or why there is still a remaining issue. My eyes were opened and my social imagination was changed though the research I conducted. I am now more aware of the problems we face. We need to stand together, no matter what category you fall under, and now is the time. The world may never be rid of racial tension, but we can make it so that it no longer breaks people down.
WORKS CITED:
