The Personal, the Political, and Race

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With the election of Barack Obama, newspapers and pundits announced that America had finally moved beyond race, a claim with which many scholars of American race relations strongly disagreed (Barnes 2009; Cho 2009; Hutchings 2009). One clear sign that America is not in some sort of postracial moment is that even now, when the topic is racial inequality, for many Americans the "personal" is also political. Contrary to the pundits' announcement, guided more by hope than by expectation, one of the enduring cleavages in this society is how the state should address issues of racial inequality. Some favor a more interventionist approach that involves the government stepping in to correct racial inequality; others feel that the government should not intervene (Hutchings 2009). The difference in these approaches is decidedly political.

One of the most direct ways of thinking about how the personal *becomes* political is the relationship demonstrated in Richard Lempert's Law & Society Association Presidential Address. Lempert's address illuminates the relationship between one's background or experiences and the beliefs that one has come to hold. Lempert begins his address with a few incidents from his past because he says these aspects of his life "shaped my commitment to racial equality—especially black-white equality" (p. 431, this issue). We might think of an experience that creates a significant impression on us and thus sets the stage for later ideas about race as a personal, or individual, "racial origin" story. Such stories can lead an individual to develop a commitment to racial equality, and that was the case for Lempert. The racial origin story in Lempert's address is a complicated one involving his parents' experience of discrimination as Jews. It also involves several encounters of his own with blacks, including one encounter with black inequality (attending the birthday party of the son of his family's domestic) and another with an African Harvard Law School student.

Lempert is not alone in telling a racial origin story.[1] Such stories are often used to explain the origins of racial progressiveness.

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[1] Nor are racial origin stories, necessarily, always positive. See for example Dettmar (2010).

One of my favorites is a racial origin story recounted by civil rights lawyer Morris Dees, who founded the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama. His father was a tenant farmer and worked in the fields with black field hands. Dees remembers being impressed by his father drinking from the same gourd as the blacks with whom he was working. Dees recalls:

> There is something about this simple scene, something that it says about my father, that even now in the memory brings tears to my eyes. The field hands, all of them Black, never thought twice about drinking one after another from the dipper until the bucket was empty. . . . [H]ow many White men in Montgomery County, in the South, in the entire nation for that matter, would have been color-blind enough to do what my daddy did in 1948 —when the Jim Crow laws were at their peak, when there were separate water fountains for White and "colored?"
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> (Southern Poverty Law Center 2001: n.p.).

This story is noted on the Southern Poverty Law Center's Web page as part of Dees's biography. Dees also told it to me in person, many years ago, evidently seeking to emphasize how as a child he learned that blacks and whites share a common humanity.

Lempert's full story is less certain that early experiences with race shape later approaches to racial equality. He notes the science that provides some support for such ideas but is not persuaded entirely, writing, "I don't know if Emmett Harmon's [the law student he encountered as a child] brief visit profoundly affected my attitudes toward blacks . . ." (p. 437, this issue). Lempert goes on to discuss his background in the discipline of sociology and his training and experience as a researcher, and locates his approaches to racial equality in these as well. For my part, I believe that racial origin stories can have profound impact on our later approach to racial inequality, if we let them and, more important, if we share them.

Let's *Not* Talk About Race

What is most remarkable about Lempert's Presidential Address is not the story itself, but rather that he *tells* it. In a Black History Month speech at the Department of Justice, in February 2009, America's first black Attorney General, Eric Holder, accused Americans of avoiding the topic of race. Using strong words, Holder noted, "Though this nation has profoundly thought of itself as a melting pot, in things racial, we have always been and continue to be, essentially a nation of cowards" (Holder 2009: n.p.). Holder was commenting on the discrepancy between the prevalence of race in our political discussions and its absence in the everyday

conversations of the average American. He attributes this to our lack of comfort with race, and to some extent the nation's history.[2] According to Holder, racial progress is linked to the ability to have frank conversations about racial matters (Holder 2009).

Holder suggests that silence about race in the workplace stems from American instinct and learned behavior. Researchers and cultural critics note the lack of honest talk between blacks and whites on issues of race (Hacker 1992; Shippler 1998; Subotnik 2005; Williams 1995). One experimental study of racial interaction suggests that whites' reluctance to discuss race when it is relevant may stem from their fears of being seen as racists. In experiments where whites were confronted with situations where race was relevant, many practiced "strategic colorblindness," pretending that race was not involved in the situation at all (Apfelbaum et al. 2008:929).

Avoidance of talk about race does not just occur in mixed race settings, but also within families as white parents avoid talking about race for fear of communicating to their children that people should be treated differently because of their race (Bronson & Merryman 2009). One study of 17,000 kindergarten families found that 75 percent of the white parents never or almost never talked about race (Bronson & Merryman 2009:55). Avoiding talking about race may have unintended consequences within families and in cross-racial interaction. In surveying multiple studies, Bronson and Merryman report that when parents avoid the topic of race, children do not necessarily adopt a color-blind perspective but rather think of race as taboo (Bronson & Merryman 2009). In the experimental study of black-white interaction mentioned above, whites' avoidance of talking about race in interracial situations led blacks to believe that the reticent whites were *more* prejudiced, not less (Apfelbaum et al. 2008:928).

Workplaces may be the high-water mark of racial interaction because outside the workplace minorities and whites have very little casual interaction; in America, the two races spend most of their nonwork hours in separate and segregated spaces. Thus many children born in the 1990s will have an experience not very much more integrated than the one that Lempert describes. As of the 2000 U.S. Census, the typical white person lives in a neighborhood that is 80.2 percent white (Logan 2001: n.p.). The lives of blacks are dramatically different, with the typical black person in America

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[2] This of course is not the first recognition by someone in the political sphere that there was a lack of honest talk in America about race. The Clinton Administration sponsored a national conversation on race, ethnicity, and culture in 1997, whose stated purpose was to "conduct dialogues that will serve as models for civil, serious and honest exchanges among Americans of diverse backgrounds" (see http://clinton4.nara.gov/Initiatives/OneAmerica/Practices/pp_19980902.7374.html#background).

living in a neighborhood that is more than half black (Logan 2001). Though the living situation of Asians and Latinos is much more integrated than that of blacks, in general minorities live in neighborhoods with high minority representation and a smaller number of whites (Logan 2001). Blacks are America's most racially segregated minority, with roughly one-third of all blacks—those who dwell in metropolitan urban environments—experiencing extreme segregation across multiple dimensions simultaneously (Logan 2001; Massey & Denton 1998).

Many of the markers of black inequality that Lempert's address raises—wealth, income, crime, employment—stem from the racial segregation of American housing. Approximately one-third of African Americans living in situations of intense segregation are not only extremely isolated from whites, but also face crime, substandard housing, and little access to prospects for employment. Their children attend underresourced schools. Those trapped in poor communities often lack access to role models of productive adults (Engel 1999; Massey & Denton 1998).

Living in underresourced communities is not an issue faced solely by poor African Americans. Studies show that even middle-class African Americans live in neighborhoods that are more segregated than one would expect given their income (Charles 2003). The concentration of blacks in poorer neighborhoods than one might expect given their class background is not linked to black preferences—the desire of African Americans to live among others of their racial background. Instead, it stems from a combination of discrimination and fears of violence or hostility that might occur were they to rent or purchase homes in predominantly white neighborhoods (Charles 2003; Massey & Denton 1998).

Research in sociology and other fields suggests that there are distinctly different explanations for white segregation. There is significant data to suggest that whites are so segregated because they wish to avoid neighborhoods where blacks are living (Charles 2003; Krysan 2002; Massey & Denton 1998). In some cases this means that white flight occurs; that is, when African Americans move to neighborhoods, many whites leave. Even in the 1990s, white flight remained a reality. In 1990, as part of the Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality, researchers showed a sample of blacks and whites from Atlanta, Boston, and Detroit pictures of neighborhoods with different percentages of minorities. In this study, 38 percent of non-Hispanic whites surveyed said that they would consider moving out if blacks moved to the neighborhood (Krysan 2002:683).

If acceptance of minority newcomers is not an option, avoiding neighborhoods where minorities are living is preferable to violent resistance. Some whites resist the entry of racial minorities into

their communities. Unwilling or unable to flee, some whites resist minority integration by engaging in hate crimes (Bell 2008). Lempert tells the story of a house that burned down when blacks were about to move into the neighborhood. Sadly, such behavior is not just a relic of the past. Move-in violence—violence directed at minorities upon or soon after moving to a neighborhood—is prevalent enough that, using hate crime and census data from the 1990s and 2000s, researchers found links between integration patterns and hate crime directed at minorities (Green et al. 1998; Grattet 2009; Lynch 2008).

Though neighborhood violence is a significant problem, it is likely that white avoidance of living near blacks is a bigger cause of housing segregation. When whites were asked in a recent study why they would leave, only a minority indicated that they did not like or did not trust African Americans and held negative stereotypes about blacks (Krysan 2002). For the majority of whites surveyed over time, then, racism is not the reason for leaving their neighborhood if someone who is black moves in. Rather, such individuals are more affected by the fears they hold about neighborhoods that are integrating or already integrated. A substantial percentage of those surveyed by Krysan were worried about what would happen if their neighborhoods became integrated (Krysan 2002:694). Other research suggests that whites use stereotypes to construct pictures of what their neighborhoods would look like if blacks moved in (Quillian & Pager 2001).

Race Talk in the Academy

One other strength of Lempert's Presidential Address is his exploration of racial inequality not just outside the academy, but within it as well. The frankness with which Lempert approaches these matters is especially commendable because colleges and universities are similar to other workplaces. Lempert addresses several seldom-talked-about issues having to do with race as an adult: his racial tolerance score, and the issue of race and grading. He raises these issues with uncommon honesty and deals with these issues in ways that might spark additional conversation with colleagues of color regarding, for instance, the relationship between one's racial tolerance score and one's support for racial equality. I am African American; if he and I had worked at the same institution, we might have been able to discuss issues of race and grading. Perhaps we might have crafted some sort of policy or other approach that could have helped address black students' difficulties in a systematic way.

It is not clear how significant the barriers are to open discussions of race among professors. I have not been able to find ethnographies or any other sort of work addressing conversations about race among professors of different racial backgrounds. The closest available studies on racial interaction in the academy involve two studies on the experiences of professors of color in law schools and at predominantly white colleges and universities (Gómez & Baynes 2005; Stanley 2006). In both law schools and colleges and universities, minority faculty have described isolation, lack of interaction with other faculty members, and lack of mentoring from white colleagues (Gómez & Baynes 2005; Stanley 2006). Further study is needed to assess how avoidance of discussions of race relates to avoidance of interaction with faculty of color in general, and perhaps it could help account for the alienation revealed in these studies.

Our racial origin stories are personal and may also shape our political viewpoints. What is most important about them, however, it that because they grow out of our personal experience, they often differ from one another. With such differences in America, "lines that separate us also entangle us" (Shippler 1998:561). The reluctance to talk about race on the part of both blacks and whites means that we cannot know each other well. This lack of knowledge creates distance, as each group regards the other with a mixture of distrust and fear. Lempert's Presidential Address encourages us to shrug off Americans' reticence to talk about race. Ending our avoidance of "race talk" will not be easy but may be a crucial step on the path to ending racial inequality. Until we get beyond the distance created by our reluctance it will be harder to integrate neighborhoods, schools, and the other spaces so essential to ameliorating black-white racial inequality.

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