

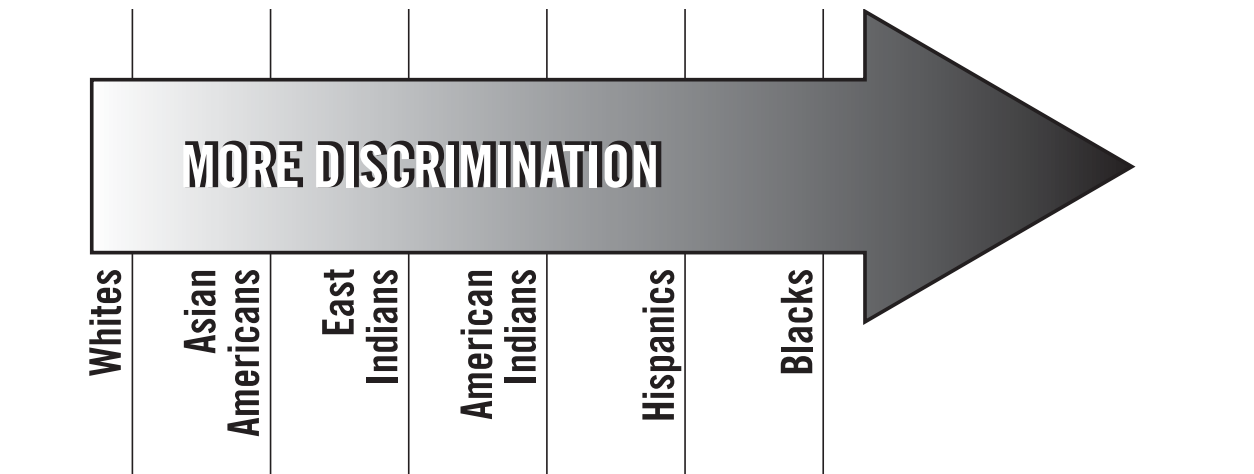
Colorism: A Reframing of Racism

Today, in America and in most organizations, blatant racism is no longer acceptable. Still, uneasiness exists between blacks and whites. While the rawest of racist language and the most obvious humiliations may be gone, perplexing things still happen.

For instance, take a conference room—any company, anywhere in the United States—with a white man, a white woman, and a black person who is facilitating the meeting. If someone from outside the group comes into the room and does not know what is happening, she or he will inevitably approach the white man to ask for information. White men, after all, *are* in charge. By this stereotype, no black man *could* be. Certainly no black *woman* could be. Although this is a small supposition, it is fraught with residual racism.

Or take language. “Black” English often pigeonholes a black as stupid or uneducated while dialects of “white” English, in many instances, do not. Dropped “g’s” or black slang place a black as ghetto-reared or from a lower socio-economic group. But a white person who talks the same general way is considered a “character,” perhaps a “good old boy,” or a sly “country boy.” A “white” accent or dialect is considered interesting. An accent for a black person gives rise to dark forebodings about her or his background—and the inferences are all negative. Even the pronunciation of the word “business,” rendered as “bin-ness” by some business people, is all right for whites. It is considered normal, an “in” kind of variation, but it stereotypes a black person as “unpolished.”

Black people are almost always black first; their professional titles are secondary. A black person who is a lawyer is a *black* lawyer. A black person who is a doctor is a *black* doctor. Yet, a white person who is a lawyer is a lawyer, and a white person who is a doctor is a doctor.



We have also observed that if a black person is hired to do an organizational consulting job that does *not* deal with either racism or affirmative action issues, there is inevitably some subliminal uneasiness about competency or the ability to lead the group effectively. And if the group the consultant will deal with is all white, there is a dismaying predisposition for the person who has hired the consultant to say: “I hope this is going to work out.” It is as if black consultants are qualified only to work issues with racial implications.

In a diverse group, when black members associate with other black members, the white members of the group are apt to ask, “How come blacks always cluster together?” But nobody ever asks, “How come whites always cluster together?”

It makes no sense at all if we think about it, but we continue to assume that a black farmer in Des Moines, Iowa, and a black executive in Detroit, Michigan, will have more in common than a black and a white with similar geographic, occupational, and economic experiences. There is also a tendency to assume that all blacks in Detroit fall into a single

category that is lower than the category assigned to all whites in Detroit.

We have assumed that racism was derived from the concept of “race.” But we may need to reframe our concept of racism. The *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* offers the following definition of “race”:

A family, tribe, people, or nation
belonging to the same stock; or a class
or kind of people unified community
of interests, habits, or characteristics.

There’s nothing in this neutral definition about ranking or power concepts that could justify what we experience as racism. So how do we get the concept we know as racism out of the basic fact that people look different from each other—some very different from others, some not so different?

We think the concept of racism, as practiced today, arises from color, pure and simple. It is *color* that we, in the United States, have used to keep blacks and whites apart. Background, hair, facial characteristics, bodily proportions, class, and ethnic heritage are often absorbed into America’s melting-pot culture, a concept that the United

States and its citizens take intense pride in. Still, color represents a discriminatory bar.

If we think about the concept of race and apply it to another species, it is easier to see the problem and perhaps easier to analyze the faulty logic behind discrimination based on color. When we talk about the difference between a black and a white person, we are not talking about the difference between a dog and a horse. We're not even talking about the difference between a Great Dane and a Collie. What we're talking about is more like the difference between a grey Dane and a fawn Dane.

Similarly, the difference between blacks and whites is color. Color is the determinant for "racism" in the United States. *Colorism* is the block that keeps blacks and whites apart.

Examples of colorism abound. Consider, for instance, those highly visible blacks who initially "made it" in the white establishment. They were, by and large—however competent, distinguished, and able—the first, or one of the first, through the door and light-skinned: Thurgood Marshall, Justice of the Supreme Court; Coleman Young, Mayor of Detroit; Edward Brooke, former Senator from Massachusetts; Maynard Jackson, former mayor of Atlanta; Roy Wilkins of the NAACP; and Andrew Young, former Ambassador to the United Nations, and his successor, Donald McHenry. Jackie Robinson was of a darker skin than most of these other notables, but he was one of the lighter-skinned blacks from the black baseball league that nurtured his career.

Even today, many visible and prominent blacks in America tend to be lighter skinned. Condoleeza

Rice, National Security Advisor to President Bush; Colin Powell, Secretary of State; Tom Joyner, a radio personality; and Tavis Smiley, selected by *Time* as one of America's fifty most promising young leaders, are examples that the dynamic of colorism has not shifted greatly over the past thirty years.

The darkest-skinned person of color who first reached a high level of success that comes to mind is Barbara Jordan, former Congresswoman from Texas and a distinguished legislator and leader. Clarence Thomas, the second African American on the Supreme Court, comes to mind when we think of today's dark-skinned, prominent people of color.

Sidney Poitier was one of the first black people with darker skin color to achieve highly visible success in the entertainment industry, and his success has come in notably black roles, such as *Raisin in the Sun*. Also, like Sidney Poitier, Sammy Davis Jr. and other blacks had difficulties landing "non-black" roles; studios relegated blacks to "negro" roles and, in those roles, the darker an actor's skin color was the more convincingly "black" that actor was.

In organizations, it is particularly easy to see a continuum for success or dominance that closely parallels a color continuum.

At the left of the continuum are whites, who suffer the least discrimination, even if their deviance from group norms is considerable. To their right, moving into more discrimination, are Asian Americans, then Indian Americans (ancestors from India), American Indians, Latinas/os, and finally, to the right, blacks. The darker skinned a black person is, the further to the right on the discrimination scale she or he falls.¹

Still another phenomenon we have observed is the automatic adjustment of this scale in an organizational group when the darkest-skinned person moves out of the group. If there are African Americans in the group, Lebanese or Latinas/os may be identified with and accepted by the whiter group and fall further to the left on the scale of dominance, acceptance, and discrimination.² If the darkest-skinned people leave the group, however, the next darkest-skinned people are moved almost automatically into the positions formerly occupied by those who have left. It is as if every group needs a scapegoat or low-status person most easily determined by color.

Interestingly, when both black and white people are present in the group, the other dark-skinned people (Asian Americans, Hispanics, Lebanese) operate as a transition force between these two groups. For some of these lighter-skinned people, this can produce anxiety because their identification with one group or the other—though often perfectly clear to the two groups who may either accept them or reject them depending on the group dynamics—is unclear to them. Often, however, the lighter-skinned people of color can find themselves in the middle, rejected by both groups.

When we are talking about *people*, it is not just that some people are fat and some thin, some have blue eyes and some brown, some are short and some tall, some are good and some bad, some have black hair and some brown, some are rapacious and some generous, some are mean-spirited and some noble, but that, apparently, some have light

skin and some have dark skin. And the gradations from light to dark in skin tone have discriminatory implications—economic, political, social, and cultural. At the turn of the new millennium, we, in the *United States*, still classify each other by the color of our skin.³ In the United States we are proud of our melting-pot heritage and the newly emerging cultural stew image, and we still use this most primitive and crude method for segregating ourselves.

In fact, the true, tangible, measurable differences between and among people—culture, upbringing, heredity, individual personality, gender, temperament, environment, circumstance, education, diet, and income level—are based on nearly everything *but* color. But we keep acting as though the differences among people were all a function of their color.

Reframing our perceptions will allow us to arrive at a view that—even if embarrassing to admit to ourselves—will clear the misconceptions away and permit us to look at what we, in the United States, are doing to ourselves—our own people—in our knee-jerk, ossified responses to color. Once we have addressed these primitive, embedded, irrational responses, the rest should be relatively easy. At the least, we will have a fighting chance to finally eradicate racism in the United States and globally.

ENDNOTES

1. This kind of make-up might vary somewhat, depending on the section of the country we are examining and the concentration of people of color.
2. When Kaleel (who is Lebanese) and I first developed this scale, we debated where people from the Middle-East should be positioned. Today, I think they fall between Asian and Indian.
3. As I revisit this article, it is clear to me that many of the ideas that Kaleel and I wrote about in 1985 are still true today.

