

## Racism: A Learned Behavior

### I. Introduction

Racism is one of the most controversial social topics in the world today even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As the term has been associated through the centuries for negative connotations such as discrimination, prejudice and even violence, racism remains to be a volatile issue affecting millions of lives today. The definition of racism is based on the belief that a particular race based on physical genetic features is more dominant than another. As such, the one that views that his or her ethnicity possesses human traits and capacities that are inherently superior compared to another is an exhibition of racist behavior. As such, this belief becomes the basis for particular ethnic groups to discriminate on others that can be seen through institutional racism. This is when an entire ethnic population denies another racial group basic civil liberties and benefits thus, continuing on the cycle of preferential treatment of a particular race. It is important to note that the United Nations has declared that racial discrimination and ethnicity discrimination are one and the same.

Significantly, the partition of races can be traced back in history as early societies have traditionally divided human populations based on their race. As such, through the centuries sociologists, anthropologist and psychologists have tried to determine the root cause of racism especially with the detrimental effects of discrimination as a result of racist beliefs. Thus, the effects of racism continues to be a prevailing problem. It has been the cause of wars and conflicts throughout human history however, the question remains whether racism is inherent to a person's genetic makeup or whether it is a learned behavior. This paper will evaluate the different theories and studies on racism to explore whether racism is actually a learned behavior

or not. More importantly, it will investigate theories to real life scenarios to determine if racism is learned or inherited.

## II. Literature Review

### A. Learned Behavior

In order to answer the problem statement whether racism is a learned behavior or not. It is first important to define learned behavior. According to psychologists and sociologists, learned behaviors are a product of a person's observation. The application of the learning is because the person has deduced that this behavior provides personal benefits. As such, learned behavior is a product of motivation wherein individuals are conditioned by their external environment to internalize the behavior. Significantly, learned behavior is also a natural response of an individual as this is a result of a person's observations using the basic senses. Thus, a learned behavior is a conditioned response to an external stimulus. This stimulus may or may not be intentionally done nevertheless the learning is passed on to the observer (Smith and Ross, 2006).

Learned behaviors are also a result of experience as an individual reacts or erudite reflective actions. To distinguish learned behaviors, crying for example is an instinctive human response. Babies themselves come out of the womb crying without anyone teaching them to do so. On the other hand, dressing one's self is a learned behavior as a child builds the capacity to choose and wear his own clothes based on the teachings of their parents who dress them. It is also important to note that scholars would like to distinguish learned behavior from innate behavior. Primarily, the difference is a matter of choice as an individual decides to learn a specific behavior. The concept of choice and personal decision is important as a person chooses to learn how to read or write based on the behaviors seen amongst his peers or adults. Natural or

innate behaviors are like crying and laughing which is born out of instinct and is not a behavior one needs to learn based on observation. These natural behaviors are what many consider as raw emotional responses that are present in every man. It can then be correlated that learned behaviors can be learned or unlearned if an individual chooses to do so. More importantly, learned behaviors are deliberate actions of an individual where his full consciousness is used to act on those behaviors. Second, learned behaviors can also be habitual especially when this has been imbibed into the individual's consciousness system making the behavior regardless whether it is right or wrong part of his or her own personality (Pachter et al., 2010).

There are some psychiatrists pioneering the study that racism is a psychiatric disorder however, in general most agree that racism is a learned behavior especially since an individual learns this belief system under a social context. For example, societies have practiced racial discrimination through three dominant methods through the centuries namely segregation, persecution and domination. Sociologists agree that these institutional forms of racism reinforce the ideas that racism is a learned behavior since it supports the agenda of racial superiority. It is also important to note that scholars in general agree that racism amongst individuals is not a form of psychopathology even if there are some small research studies that have revealed that those with psychiatric disorders exhibit racist behaviors. This however, does not adequately explain the centuries of segregation, persecution and domination of races even documented before biblical times. Some argue that behaviors are actually multidetermined which is a result of biological, psychological and sociological predetermination. As such, there are those who would contend that racism is a form of mental illness and psychiatric disorder explaining that there is a pathological bias amongst humans in terms of ethnicity. However, those who support this perspective is in the minority considering the abundance of sociological, historical and

anthropological research that contends this idea. In general, many agree that racism remains to be a complex matter but all scientific fields of study agree nearly one hundred percent of the time that racism is in fact, a learned behavior (Brewer, 2006).

Significantly, scholars cite that those who contend that racism as a mental disorder is only referring to a small population of around five percent of individuals who are psychotic with high anxiety and personality disorders. As a whole the psychiatric community, agrees that the concept of fear is very much intertwined with racism especially with two opposing viewpoints of public definition of racism. Surveys have indicated that Caucasians whether American or European have recently adopted more tolerant views of other races. Significantly, many respondents prefer to focus on creating an ideal society that does not judge a person by their ethnic backgrounds. However, this in stark contrast to African Americans who when surveyed spoke about the reality of racism in their daily lives. In fact, they are surveyed to be extremely race sensitive as persecution and segregation was a large part of their history only being liberated in general in the 1960's. They also responded to have experienced racism itself through aggressions and insults as they have had to battle with stereotyping especially with their perceived lack of capacity and status (Doane, 2006).

There have been recent genetic studies to try to determine whether the human DNA consists of a racist gene to which, no scientific evidence has yet to be discovered to support this theory. Many sociologists argue that to blame racist behaviors on the physical makeup of an individual is a very limited view considering this belief system has been in place for centuries. In fact, the creation of institutionalized racism debunks the idea of racist genes. As a consequence, sociologists state that humans have learned to fear what they do not understand and significantly, conform when faced with mounting peer pressure. This is widely supported to have supported

the existence of racist regimes citing the cultural and sociological external environment one lives in conditions a person to adapt and accept racist beliefs (Brewer, 2006).

## B. Political Ideas of Racism

Many scholars cite how racism is actually related to power as this is a common desire among man. It is the quest for power that has led people from the ancient times to conquer people from another land and build empires. It is the love for political, military and material strength that propagates racist ideas among societies. Significantly, the fear of losing this power also is a factor that fuels institutional racism. Scientists have also agreed that racism is also rooted in differences which are beyond the control of any human being or society. These differences may be cultural or physical as such, those who have inherent different ideas, lifestyles and physical looks contend to distrust one another. Psychiatrist note this human behavior as associating similarity with comfortability. These heterogeneity beliefs are seen to be the underlying foundation of racism that drives people into conducting harmful practices (Doane, 2006).

As such, this idea supports that racism is a learned behavior since individuals must be able to understand a different cultural background in order to exhibit tolerance and acceptance. The lack of understanding creates a cultural incompetence meaning it is still a learned behavior but an individual or a society chooses to only understand one side which is inherently only their own. Prejudice is the most harmful effect of racism as individuals quickly stereotype other cultures based on their race. In this sense, stereotyping is also based on observation and experience. Both of which support that racism is a learned behavior. An individual would only have developed these ideas based on their interaction or lack thereof. More importantly,

stereotyping is a result of external influences propagated either by institutions such as religions or schools but more importantly this is also reinforced by the family unit (Doane, 2006).

Other studies have noted that racism also leads to sexism where men have created a patriarchal society and abhorring the rights of women. As psychological studies have shown, the difference between males and females can be seen even as children. The difference and lack of understanding for another contributes to the idea that racism is a learned behavior. For example, it is a common occurrence for boys to bully or pick on girls as observed during play time. This is especially evident when girls are unable to play as rough as boys during games wherein it has been noted that boys observe and learn that they physically can outdo most of their female classmates. Significantly, this simple illustration also correlates with larger forms of hate and violence associated with race and sex as many studies conclude how women have become marginalized in society. Women in fact, are even cited as having the higher crime victim rate compared to men. As such, the issue of racism extends to other forms of degradation and hatred where negative feelings are harbored and manifested through actions. These actions as many studies have cited are a direct result of learned behaviors. For example, domestic violence where children witness their fathers physically and emotionally abusing their mothers learn how this behavior is generally accepted or even ignored by society. This is what many scholars are citing as a continuing cycle of violence that escalates as young children observe and learn negative attitudes from their basic family unit. This in essence is their first exposure to the real-world scenario, as such children being sponges of knowledge are impressionable due to their age and lack of ability to cognitively reason and logic eventually learn to accept negative belief systems including racism (Doane, 2006).

### C. Racism and the Family Influence

Many cite that even though institutions today have progressed to accept and promote issues such as diversity and the basic family unit still promotes the inherent beliefs in a child. This is noted as babies are not born to hate or become racist. In fact, they develop these ideas through conditioning as they grow older. To a larger extent, the media is also noted to play a large influence in propagating racist ideas even at a subliminal level where races are stereotyped to play certain roles in television and movies. This even reinforces the teachings of parents and peers for example, the constant depiction of violence among African Americans or type casting certain races in specific roles such as the Caucasian millionaire, the Mexican maid or the Asian scientist. These external factors support how racism is a learned behavior through the process of labeling and stereotyping. Media superimposes the ability of the public to generate their own self-awareness about races creating a cycle of negativity and hatred that fuels racist beliefs (Pachter et al., 2010).

As mentioned, scholars have noted that children are sponges when it comes to learning as such, akin to learning how to talk young children also learn how develop belief systems. This is imposed by parents and their peers. Significantly, there is also segregation that occurs that undoubtedly implies racism such as similar ethnic groups living in close proximity to one another. This is evident all across the United States where ethnic groups can actually be traced across geographical boundaries. This environment according to sociologists also reinforce racism as a learned behavior since children are not adequately exposed to other cultures. This results in a limited mindset wherein research has even claimed to be a difficult aspect for individuals to unlearn. As children are bred with familiarity of certain ideas, they lack in the ability to logically reason or accept ideas such as tolerance as this is rooted mainly in the notion of difference. It is

also important to note that even recent studies have revealed that racial discrimination even exists in what is considered diverse corporate populations. For example, surveys amongst human resource departments of corporation have noted that names that are Caucasian sounding are fifty percent more likely to be called for an interview compared to applicants with African sounding names. Some studies have also shown how the prestigious management positions in corporate America are eighty percent belonging to Caucasian or Asian races with only ten percent belonging to Hispanic or African Americans (Smith and Ross, 2006).

#### D. Economic ideas on Racism

To further prove that racism is a learned behavior, many scholars have cited the economic reasons behind racial discrimination. First, the lack of education given to a certain race have been noted by many as a means of controlling their power. Being uneducated creates less opportunities for a particular race and allows another race to continue on with the system of hegemony. Education is seen by many as a powerful tool in empowering a minority race as such, the denial to this creates a lasting superior-inferior racial relationship. It has been noted that those who have accepted persecution and segregation through the centuries did so since these were the accepted norms of society. It is suffice to say they did not question or do any better because they in fact did not know anything else. Significantly, this further supports that it is a learned behavior since on the opposite end those who have become persecuted have observed that this is how the world is ordered. For example, the caste system in India that prevails up until today or the centuries African Americans accepted the role of slavery in American civilizations (Howell, 1994).



Historians have noted that without the help of educated, courageous and pioneering individuals the ideas of equal rights and liberties would never have been legalized. The works of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X are known to have helped instigate the Black propaganda that eventually led to equal rights and abolishment of slavery for many African Americans. Jose Rizal a European educated Filipino helped his fellow countrymen free itself from racial discrimination under the Spanish that eventually led to the independence of the Philippines. Even the causes of women's rights would not have been made possible without the feminist ideals and women who lobbied for equal rights in the United States. As such, even the science of history acknowledges that racism is a learned behavior by being able to prove that through education one is able to observe the detrimental effects of racism. Significantly, by learning to fight against persecution constitutes how racism is indeed learned and reinforced by public institutions where it is left in the hands of a few to fight for human liberties of a particular race (Stitzlein, 2009).

#### E. The Role of Culture in Racism and Learning

Culture also plays a role in learned behavior. Culture is defined as creating division since it is the transmission of a systemic structure such as morals, values, rituals and customs. Culture in essence is not synonymous with cohesion since this is the basic foundation that differentiates human societies from each other. As such, culture is a mechanism for a society and individuals to adopt learned behavior. Sociologists have long established that culture is a learned behavior as such; it has the greatest influence on human development. In fact, this is seen as being a primary determinant for psychological and sociological orientation of an individual. Culture encompasses both material and non-material objects. To define this, materials such as national costumes or books are created and given meaning unique to a particular ethnic race. Non-material refers to

abstract creations such as language, customs, family patterns and even political systems (Vaught, 2008).

Under this perspective racism in fact is a learned behavior since this the foundation for the definition of culture according to prominent sociologists such as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Ibn Khaldun and C. Wright Mills among others. Culture is thus the foundation of learned behavior wherein the socialization of individuals are affected especially in terms of their worldviews. Being prejudice therefore is synonymous with racism as it is considered to be a result of superior beliefs. Thus, it has been argued that learning and embracing one's culture has a consequence of unintentionally reinforcing racist beliefs. The human mind has been studied to respond to mental stimuli especially external ones such that if the environment reinforces the concept of division the mental process of humans simply recalls what has been taught. This has been viewed by many as social programming which has dangerous consequences. Simply because social programming has been noted to shape man to become inhuman void of universal morals and values. This is how sociologists have explained the historical human atrocities rooted in racism. For example, hate crimes, ethnic cleansing and genocide are all forms of violence stemmed from racist beliefs. This explains the cycle of human oppression towards other races that is based on intolerance. For example, during the Second World War young Germans were systematically taught in classes how they are superior to Jews citing anthropological differences. This is even present in modern day Africa where tribes have conducted massive ethnic cleansing of what the outside world perceives as their fellow Africans. However, it is important to note that the tribalistic culture in Africa explains how they perceive their inherent differences amongst race as such; they do not see them as equals or human beings for that matter. Significantly,

sociologists have noted that cultural persuasion is the strongest weapon of racism as it educates generation after generation the same racist beliefs (Vaught, 2008).

Sociologists have noted that learned behavior through culture is the most difficult aspect to unlearn even ideas of tolerance, cultural bias and racism is firmly placed within the cultures of different ethnic groups. Significantly, scientists have been theorizing the educational development of children which happens in stages as a result of social and psychological stimulus. In Jean Piaget's theory of learning a child uses his sensorimotors from the birth to around two years old. This is how children learn using their senses and by the use of motor activities. It is at this stage that children develop innate learnings where socially and psychologically adjust to their environment with little coaching. It is in this process of raising children that parents are cited to face a dilemma since inherently parents who have been oriented with the same culture inevitably passes the same ideas to their children. This can include paranoia and racist beliefs. It is important to note that parents are not seen as the main culprits in fact; scientists note they are merely acting naturally and rationally since they would want their child to be socially adjusted to the world he was born into. However, whether they are imparting good or bad beliefs remains to be dependent on perspective as parents foster and fructify elements of their culture to the next generation (Stitzlein, 2009).

Significantly, humans develop learning similar to animals as the brain develops to absorb fragments of its external environment to create what a child believes to be an aligned and coherent system. The learning process is natural as a child grows physically especially as his cognitive development aids him learning. Learning is therefore natural to human beings as this is a necessary and universal process. This includes cultural orientation that support his or her psychological functions. In fact, the development of a child cannot be different from the process

of learning which places importance on the quality of learning a child attains in order for him to have sufficient development. This educational theory was written by Lev Vygotsky and termed as the zone of proximal development (Stitzlein, 2009).

It is also important to note that learned behaviors are also explained by Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory wherein humans have basic needs that must be met in order for them to reach their full potential. These needs are belongingness, love, achievement, security and safety aside from aesthetic needs. Charles Darwin's philosophy of survival of the fittest also supports Maslow's needs theory both in essence supporting how children develop learned behaviors in order to meet personal needs and survive. As such, scholars have linked these theories in supporting the agenda that racism is a learned behavior. First, children would most likely conform in order to belong which calls them to embrace the dominant social belief. Second, children even at a young age like animals know they must be fit in order to survive. As such, children link themselves to racist beliefs reinforcing their self-confidence and taking pride in their race (Vaught, 2008).

Historically speaking, as the Europeans conquered the New World and deemed the inhabitants as an inferior race this was a clear sign of racism. The result of course was an imperialistic empire dominated by the British, French and Spaniards. They conquered the new people and deemed their culture crude and insignificant. In fact, history has shown how the Europeans sought to civilize these inhabitants by converting them to Christianity. Regardless of the fact that these native people had developed their own cultures and civilizations centuries before their arrival. It was inherently a difference in viewpoints of culture that led Europeans to conquer and divide the New World exploiting the land and people for their own benefit (Stitzlein, 2009).

Colonialism in fact has become synonymous with racism as the Europeans sought economic and political control over a people which was a systemic destruction of another people's culture propelling the notion that whites are superior to any other race and eliminating the traditional cultures of the natives by consciously dominating them to embrace the minds and cultures of the colonizers. In effect, this was racism at its prime as nearly the entire world became subjected to European imperialism creating a hegemony of hatred and racial superiority. In fact, historians note that the colonizers had an inherent belief of their superiority that could only be learned and reinforced by their culture and society (Stitzlein, 2009).

As such, imperialism has also become synonymous with racism as this is cited to be a collective defiance against another race. It is the dissemination of annihilating another culture and trying to integrate them with their own such as the adopting of their language and religion. Overall, it was viewed by the colonizers as their moral obligation and did not see their acts as ethically wrong. This is the irony of racism wherein the belief of one's own righteousness makes one inherently commit human atrocities and abandoning universal beliefs of human equality (Stitzlein, 2009).

It is also important to note that the colonizers pursued their efforts under the guise of religion wherein they saw their efforts as victorious, triumphant and ironically, the will of God that justifies their actions of causing the mass deaths of natives living in the New World. Currently, we can see racism occur even today in the United States as this is the cultural melting pot of the world. This is especially prevalent with the terrorist attacks by the Muslim extremists that has caused widespread contempt and racist attitudes against the Muslim population in general. Significantly, modern scholars have noted that the cycle of fear and difference is seen as the foundation of racist regimes wherein the United States has been criticized for portraying

Muslims as the enemy for carrying different political and religious philosophies that is a growing and prevailing threat to the Western world. The ideas of the United States is of course universally supported since many have adopted Western cultures and beliefs. This places the Muslims in the minority significantly less powerful than the Americans and its allies (Stitzlein, 2009).

As such, this supports the idea that culture is a learned behavior including racism especially now as the Americans are seen as the greatest influencers globally due to their economic and political dominance. The cultural bias is evident in America's foreign and public policy as the country is now engaged in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to quell a minority population for their different beliefs. In many ways, the Americans like the colonizers justify their actions and racist beliefs under the guise of morality and ethics. However, this is subject to perspective but nevertheless reinforces the point that racism is learned as the numerous racial attacks have occurred since September 11 targeting Muslim populations regardless of the fact they are not extremists at all (Stitzlein, 2009).

Racism is now widely perceived as integral to culture even for its survival as culture is the empowerment tool of a particular race. Significantly, as humans identify themselves with their culture this becomes the system of behavior where shared values are passed to every new generation. In essence, since every individual is part of a particular culture everything one learns including racism is part of culture. Under this perspective, culture is defined by many scholars as not being neutral at all whether in its element or purpose. Culture is the source of an ethnic group's power or lack thereof as such; it is culture that dictates society's acceptable norms. In the ideal sense, culture promotes cohesiveness but only between its members who share the same

values. It is in this manner that individuals grow and learn about who they are and consequently dictates how one should behave including racist actions (Vaught, 2008).

#### F. Differential Association Theory

This theory in criminology is by Edwin Sutherland where it states that criminal behavior is a learned behavior wherein an individual develops their criminal motives based on socialization. In essence, this theory supports that deviant behavior is a conscious rational choice of individuals as they learn these behaviors from their external environment which includes the adopting of values, attitudes and techniques. Social programming plays a role in making it easier for individuals to commit crimes since this becomes part of cultural transmission. Significantly, as it places importance on individual choice, criminals in effect are responsible and accountable for their actions. As this theory supports the idea that people learn through experiences, this becomes a determining factor for individuals to create and place meaning to their environment. As such, using this theory criminal behavior can be predicted. For example, young children being exposed to criminal activities of their parents such as drug pushing. This reinforces their idea to copy the same life choices their parents have taken. More so, if they grow up in a social environment where criminal activity is prevalent and to a certain extent accepted and even admired by peers. The personal benefits one observes from learning from others influences and becomes a motivation for a person to engage in criminal behavior. As such, this theory supports the idea that racism is a learned behavior since the acts associated with racism such as segregation, persecution and domination is imbibed and adopted by observers to be the norm. Significantly, as criminal behavior is learned and based on social interaction through communication the promulgation of racist acts becomes part of their culture which is inculcated and learned by individuals (Ferrari et al., 2008).

Criminal behavior is committed because of personal gain similar to racism which is the perceived superior gain of their ethnic race. Significantly as social programming teaches individuals to adopt to the peer group beliefs so does it become justified in their eyes to violate the law. They are motivated by personal gain and even a rise on social status. Inherently, the theory also is supported by the basic needs of man that motivates individuals to engage in deviant activity since as human beings there is a desire to belong, be loved and to attain security albeit even through illegal means. This theory has been proven empirically through survey where criminals have been surveyed to respond in accordance with the basic principles of the theory. First, many are products of criminal families and have grown up in urban city areas with high crime rates. Second, respondents also show that it was through communication that they learned how to commit criminal acts from minor acts of stealing, theft, burglary to murder. The same survey also concluded how social pressure plays a role in the development of deviant behavior with many citing friends as having a large impact with their criminal act choices. This theory helps illustrates the vulnerability of young children to develop harmful behaviors without proper supervision of parents. It emphasizes how they learn how to develop the attitudes for example that stealing is not an offense but a way to feed their families. It also indicates how social behavior can be dictated by a strong majority which for example, in a study conducted on gang violence racist ideas is seen as their own perspectives of “truths” wherein they are inherently superior to another race. This indicates as well how racism is connected with all the perspectives mentioned earlier as how culture, economic and politics plays a role in making racism a learned behavior. Significantly, it reinforces how harmful and violent actions related to race is a comprehensive result of social inculcation making it a learned behavior for many individuals (Ferrari et al., 2008).



### III. Methodology

The research design of this paper is explanatory in nature, because it utilizes previous studies, theories and empirical data to prove how racism is a learned behavior. The research design of this paper was a deliberate planning and arrangement of conditions for analysis and collection of data in order to provide relevance to the research as well as to answer the problem statement. Secondary research material was used to meet the research objectives of this paper which is a typical research method used and is considered to be at par with industry standard. This design enabled the author to validate and examine past researches on racism under the different scientific perspectives which was used in conducting a comprehensive analysis in order to arrive at a conclusion.

The abundance of literature on this topic benefitted this research to achieve its objectives. The information necessary was sourced from books and scholarly journals in order to conduct a reliable analysis. Significantly as the sources used were based on primary research conducted relevant data was extracted in order to derive conclusive points to support the hypothesis of this research. The sources used provides a thorough examination of the different scientific perspectives from psychological, biological but more importantly sociological studies. This enabled the author to derive relevant data using the quantitative information provided to substantiate that racism is indeed a learned behavior. As the research is open and exploratory in its methodological design the research approach and strategies were easily attained and formulated. Furthermore, the author has taken a positivism approach which makes use of deductive and inductive reasoning to arrive at a plausible conclusion. More importantly, the

exploratory nature accounts for the longitudinal scope of this research that enabled the author to conduct an objective analysis.

#### IV. Conclusion

Based on the definition of learned behavior and racism, it can be concluded that these two terms have a strong correlation proving that individuals do indeed learn the beliefs of racism based on their social environment. As indicated by studies in the different scientific fields from psychological, historical to sociological individuals are molded by their culture to adapt racist ideas. Significantly, social interaction plays a large role in contributing to changing the behaviors of humans that eventually leads to criminal behavior as a result of racism. These criminal behaviors include ethnic cleansing, racial hate crimes and even genocide. History has helped prove that man has always segregated themselves between groups however; sociology has enhanced the study that racism is a learned behavior through the analysis of one's culture. As no biological or genetical study has been able to conclusively prove that there is a racist gene nor has psychologists been able to demonstrate that racism is a psychiatric disorder, it can be concluded that individuals learn racist behaviors primarily from society and social structures. Sociology has proven how racist ideas can be justified and even be inherently part of culture creating a long lasting division between human beings regardless of race. The presence of cultures that in essence defines societies help reinforce racist attitudes and behaviors. More importantly, it creates a cycle where human beings inherently learn to inculcate these beliefs. As such, racism is a learned behavior that is both a product of choice and society that cannot easily be unlearned.

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