

# “The Color of Suspicion”: Race Profiling or Racism?

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When I was asked to write a commentary on the recent article by Jeffrey Goldberg in the *New York Times Magazine*, titled “The Color of Suspicion” (June 20, 1999), it made me think of all the recent reports of racial profiling allegedly practiced in the police departments of New Jersey and New York, not to mention the race riots in Los Angeles a few years ago and the O.J. Simpson trial.

Checking the Internet, I found close to 2000 articles about this topic and sampled some of them. One carried the title: “Arrest the Racism: Racial Profiling in America.” The American Civil Liberties Union was very much involved in the issue of racism, stating among other things that “Jim Crow justice is alive and well in America.” Not too long ago, I came across a new term, “driving while black” (DWB). We are all familiar with a recent hate crime incident, in which a law student who belonged to one of the white supremacist groups went on a shooting spree and killed three innocent people.

Needless to say, the victims were all non-white. The reporting of such incidents made me wonder whether racism was on the rise, or were we all just finally becoming more sensitive to it?

Is race profiling the same as racism? It is not, according to the dictionary. Race or racial refers to a group, tribe, people, or nation belonging to the same stock; a class or kind of people unified by community or interests, habits or characteristics. Racism is discrimination based on race. Profiling refers to creating a contour or outline; more specifically in this case, it refers to a set of data, often in graphic form, portraying the significant features of something, a graph representing the extent to which an individual exhibits traits or abilities as determined by tests or ratings. Apparently there is some scientific basis for race profiling.

It is a well known fact in the medical community that a deficiency of glucose-6-dehydrogenase is very common in Central Africa and South Asia. This trait has been demonstrated to be associated with increased resistance to malaria, and most carriers of this trait come from malaria-infested areas. If a physician ordered tests

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for this trait only in his African-American and Asian-American patients, it might be called racial profiling, but certainly not racism. However, what is being discussed in the Goldberg article is different. The two police officers who were interviewed for the article, one black and one white, maintained that their form of profiling was not based solely on race, but that they took many other factors into account. Furthermore, asked one officer: "Why shouldn't I look at race when I am looking for crime? It is no state secret that blacks commit a disproportionate amount of crime, so 'racial profiling' is simply good police work." Even if this statement were true, does it make every black a criminal? It is the sort of stereotyping that leads to bias and prejudice and discrimination. It also begs the question of why there is such a high crime rate among blacks. Does it not have something to do with their socioeconomic status, oppression, and lack of the opportunities that are so easily available to whites?

It may be more appropriate to broaden the discussion to minorities in general, because most minority groups have experienced discrimination. However, all minorities don't have quite the same history of slavery, of decades of oppression, of being made to feel inferior to the "white man." I am reminded of the book that I have been reading recently, titled *The Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison. He describes the internal struggle of a black person trying to form an identity, wanting to be American while not feeling ashamed of being black; how she/he is seen, only in terms of the skin color but not the person, who she/he is.

In another *New York Times* article (July 12, 1999), by Fox Butterfield, about prisons brimming with the mentally ill, a study done by the Justice Department showed that there are about 283,000 inmates with emotional/mental illnesses. An interesting aspect of the study is that the rate of mental illness varied by race and gender, with white and female inmates reporting higher rates than black and male inmates. The highest rate was among white female state prisoners, with an estimated 29 percent of them reporting emotional disorders, compared with 20 percent of black female prisoners. Overall, 22.6 percent of the white state prisoners were identified as mentally ill, compared with 13.5 percent of the black prisoners. A psychiatrist was quoted as saying that the differences resulted from white psychiatrists' poor recognition of mental illness in minority individuals. Psychiatrists were more likely to dismiss aggressive behavior in men, particularly black men, as a result of their being bad and not mentally ill.

The preceding point brings me to why this issue is so pertinent for psychiatric professionals, who make evaluations and recommendations about a person's state of mind that may affect their fate. We are familiar with prejudice, bias, discrimination, and many of us have experienced it in one context or another. Notwithstanding the fact that we are mental health professionals, we are not free of these beliefs and feelings. Deep within ourselves, many times buried in our subconscious minds, we carry our prejudices. When they come to the surface, they may affect our judgments and the fates of

those we examine. This influence is something we need to be aware of constantly. It is of particular significance for forensic psychiatrists who give opinions in cases varying from competency to stand trial to state of mind at the time of committing a capital offense. Psychiatric opinion is often sought by the courts, and our evaluations and testimonies may affect the outcome of the judicial process.

In an ideal, prejudice-free world, where everyone is regarded as equal, where human beings look at their fellow humans as part of the same world and at the same time accept their differences, things would be fair and just. Reality is far from this utopian concept. Racism is alive and well in America. While inevitably people will get blamed for racism unfairly, more often than not our deep-rooted internal belief system, which after all is what racism or discrimination is based on, directs our thinking and judgments. We as professionals, as psychiatrists and forensic psychiatrists, will serve our patients better by looking at them as fellow humans,

by being in touch with our biases, so that we do not look at them through the prism of stereotyping. We, as human beings and part of the broader society, owe it to ourselves and to our patients to keep this dialogue alive in an effort to help educate the public.

I end this with some words from Ralph Ellison's book *The Invisible Man*, which capture this struggle of race so beautifully:

Let man keep his many parts and you will have no tyrant states. Why, if they follow this conformity business, they will end up by forcing men, an invisible man, to become white, which is not a color but the lack of one. Must I strive toward colorlessness? . . . Think of what the world would lose if that should happen. America is woven of many strands. I would recognize them and let it so remain. . . . Life is to be lived, not controlled, and humanity is won by continuing to play in face of certain defeat. Our fate is to become one, and yet many. . . . One of the greatest jokes in the world is the spectacle of the whites busy escaping blackness and becoming blacker every day, and the blacks striving toward whiteness, becoming quite dull and gray. None of us seems to know who he is or where he's going.