

Wednesday, 21 March 2007

Human Development

If Divided, will it Stand?

A brief reflective essay regarding
racism and PBS FrontLine's "*A Class Divided*."

Is racism a set of beliefs and attitudes—making a racist out of anyone who agrees with them—or does it require action, power, and systematic discrimination for one to be called a “racist?” Personally, I agree with the former over the latter. While I think that it *does* require action for one to be a 'racist,' I think that simply having discriminatory thoughts and the belief that one group of people is superior over others based on a superficial aspect like the color of their skin, inevitably evokes action. Not necessarily extreme action, like hate crimes, but even just making racist jokes while with a group of friends further perpetuates racist ideology. I, therefore, *don't* believe that only people in positions to persuade the masses are capable of being racist.

This opinion stems from my belief that racism is not about recognizing differences between people, but is rather used as an excuse to treat people poorly and hurt one another physically, emotionally, psychologically, or socially. In the PBS FRONTLINE film “*A Class Divided*,” one of the brown-eyed boys said that when they “were on the bottom, it felt like everything bad was happening to [them]” (Peters, 1985). While some of the children were abusive to the brown-eyed kids, many of them (as well as the teacher) were not. Many boys and girls simply treated the brown-eyed kids differently...poorly. Though there was no extreme action, the discriminatory treatment caused an aura of hurt surrounding the classroom.

Because of that painful atmosphere that's created whenever racist ideals are evident, I believe that merely suggesting that those ideals are acceptable further perpetuates the problem of racism. People—especially children—can be easily influenced by hearing others' perspectives. Though they may not personally adopt those perspectives themselves, the new ideas stay with them. This malleability can be more concretely seen during a conversation between Mrs. Elliot and a blue-eyed student during her racism experiment in “*A Class Divided*.” She asked the student if he had called another boy “brown eyes,” to which the student said he had. When she asked him why he had done this, the little boy said “because he *does* have brown eyes.” Mrs. Elliot made an excellent point of “he had brown eyes yesterday; did you call him that yesterday?” The boy didn't respond, though his face made it clear he knew the answer. He had called his classmate “brown eyes” to be mean, NOT as a way of harmlessly identifying him.

Is there, then, a difference between racism and prejudice? According to Princeton University's WordNet, racism is a particular type of prejudice (2007). This means that there are other prejudices that are just as dangerous as racism—discrimination based on ethnicity, sexual orientation & gender, intellectual ability, and so on. I believe that Fr. Harrison, my history professor from Saint Louis University High School, said it best when he claimed “as long as there is a 'Third World,' there will never be *one* world.” Recognizing the uniqueness of people and general differences therein is one thing, treating them differently is another.

REFERENCES:

Peters, W. (Producer), & Peters, W. (Director). (26 March 1985). *A class divided* [Motion picture]. United States of America: Yale University Films for FRONTLINE.

Princeton University Cognitive Science Laboratory. *WordNet*. Retrieved on 21 March 2007 from <http://wordnet.princeton.edu/>