

**The prompt:**

In several of the readings a considerable amount of time is spent discussing the concepts of race and ethnicity. In this paper you will be asked to write about your own experiences as they relate to these concepts. Specifically:

- When did you first become aware of your own race/ethnicity?
- How did you become aware of your own race/ethnicity?
- What generalization do people make about your race/ethnicity?
- How have you engaged in the construction of your racial/ethnic identity?
- To what extent have you either benefited or suffered from race/ethnic inequality?

To write this paper it will be necessary to start off with a broad discussion of what race/ethnicity is (or means) in a US context. Provide some background of the development of race/ethnicity in the US and then discuss your experience as a member of a particular group. Papers will need to draw upon at least two sources from course readings.

## **The Non-Existing "Other"**

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I came to the US as an adult. Before that all my information about life in contemporary US came from movies and the news. During this last year at UCSB I took a course in 19<sup>th</sup> century US history, another one in 20<sup>th</sup> century history and took a class on Asian American literature. I learned a lot about the historical background of race relations in the US. How slow the process of abolishing slavery was, what kind of social groups fought for and against it, supported or attempted to prevent it. The Civil War, where 8% of the population was killed was essentially fought over this issue. I also learned to appreciate the role African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans and Asian Americans played in the various social movements including women's rights, civil rights, labor rights or simply what we understand as human rights.

Each of these (and some other) groups started out in modern US history as marginalized for different reasons. The ancestors of African Americans were brought over as slaves and ever since then they are fighting for social equality with varying success. Just last week Senate issued a formal apology for its failure to criminalize lynching earlier. This late timing shows how slow progress is/was. Congress apologized for the first time for the internment of Japanese Americans only in 1988. The legal process from various exclusion acts, preventing Asian Americans to fully become "Americans" was tedious. Native Americans, the indigenous people of the land were killed and stripped of their land, heritage and dignity en mass. Since the 1960s the American Indian Movement and other organization struggled to gain visibility to promote their cause for equal rights. Mexican Americans were recruited as cheap labor when needed and were marginalized and attacked during periods when unemployment was high. These events and processes, the relatively little knowledge about them support "the need for greater cultural diversity in the curriculum." (Takaki 1) The history of the US as to include all people who lived in this land, not just whites. I am happy that the three classes I mentioned taking above gave me a wider perspective with extra focus on race relations.

All of the aforementioned discriminations were done by white people under the prevailing ideology that their race is superior. As Gould showed "biological justification imposed

the additional burden of intrinsic inferiority upon despised groups." (Gould 31) For most white Americans throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and for some even today) it was not a question whether other races are inferior, but what to do with them. In other words they assigned social importance to biological characteristics. Thus the social construct of race was born and reinforced.

I was brought up in Hungary, a country that was much less mixed racially and ethnically than the US. I, like everybody in my age group had very little exposure to non-white people. As I practically didn't encounter people of other race or ethnicity as a child I didn't develop the associated concept internally for a long time. By "internally" I mean not just theoretically based on books or visual media.

Furthermore I was socialized during the last decades of the communist era. They, the political establishment, preached equality everybody in this political system was supposed to have equal rights to work and to freedom. This, the social equality of all people regardless of their differences appealed to me, but as I became older the price became more obvious: some rights were curtailed.

Hungary had and has its own type of racism is similar to the US practice against African Americans. There gypsies are looked upon by a portion of the white population as people who don't work, "breed" too much, ruin the economy. They also criminalized and socially less integrated into the mainstream culture. I was aware to a certain degree of this, but the general sentiments against them were kept in control until the fall of the communist system. Gypsies make up about 3% of the population, but as far as I remember I had no contact them, didn't know anybody. Now that I attempted to recall everybody in my life I realized that my grandmother's neighbor were gypsies and they had a son same age as I am. We used to play together but I never thought of him or his family as different in any way.

The only other encounter I had with non-whites was seeing tourists and Cuban textile workers. Both groups were separate from my every day life, although the latter lived in a nearby dormitory. I saw these women going to work regularly on our morning commute, but as they

spoke no Hungarian I had no way of relating to them. They seemed exotic, but beside interest in their otherness I had no emotions pro or con regarding them.

As I was growing up I was not really aware that I am Jewish. According to Jewish religious law, Halacha, a person is Jewish if her/his mother is Jewish. This definition would make 'Jewishness' an ethnicity, to which I do belong, because my mother and her mother are Jewish. But I can detect no difference in my secular upbringing to that of my non-Jewish friends. The homogenizing nature of communist society worked well in our case. I became interested in Judaism as a religion in my late teen years and now I identify myself as a religious Jew.

I am more ambivalent about the question whether I am ethnically Jewish. I was not acculturated to be Jewish as a child. The question first came up for me when I visited Israel the first time at the age of 25. To a certain extent I felt being immersed in my own people, going 'home'. But as I was critical to some aspect of that society I could not fully identify myself with them. The same applies to American Jewry. There are two factors that I feel uncomfortable with in this regard. I acknowledge that they are stereotypical, but they also conform to my experience. First, there are a lot of Jews, who are loud. I mean simply their manner of talking. I am a quiet person and do not feel relaxed in the company of too many loud people. Second, there are militant Zionists, whose pro-Israel speech alienates me. I do support the existence of Israel but peace and prosperity of the whole Middle Eastern region is important for me. When militants would solve issues with total disregard of the other side of the dispute I have difficulties associating myself with them. I know that I just made two generalizations. I know plenty of Jews (and non-Jews) who do not fit these stereotypes. But those who do, make it difficult for me to be proud of my Jewish heritage all the time.

Having covered my background I can turn to the effect of my first multiracial environment. I first came to the US at the age of 22 and worked for half a year in downtown Oakland in a coffee shop. It does not get any more multiracial than that. I have to admit I was a bit concerned about it in advance. Previously I thought of myself as a person without any hint of racism for two reasons. As explained above the society I was brought up in didn't have the US-

like historical and emotional baggage that could have indoctrinated my subconscious with the stereotypes. Furthermore I was consciously working on to see everybody as equal. Nevertheless I did not know what my reactions would be when I first would be contacting people of other race/ethnicity on a daily basis. I wanted to be positive but was afraid that maybe I would have racist tendencies in myself. Fortunately I did not find any.

My immediate boss was an elderly Mexican-American gentleman, from whom I learned a lot and could truly admire his humanity. (He always gave some leftover food or cup of coffee to the homeless or poor who entered our shop.) My co-worker was an African-American man of my age, who was funny. It took me some time for me to learn to understand him, because he spoke a dialect I was not familiar with. He was funny and that helped to get along with him. The lady who was making our sandwiches was from Columbia and did not speak English. As I don't speak Spanish our communication was limited to non-verbal means. As far as I can tell the stereotypes prevalent in the US had little effects on my relations to people of color.

So far I was talking about how my own experiences and thoughts about interacting with people of other races or ethnicities. I have little to say about my own race or ethnicity. For it primarily exist in the context of how I relate to others. As I was brought up in a society where practically everybody was white the questions of race/ethnicity did not arouse as a source of conflict or identity. It became something to think about only when I moved to the US. When working at the aforementioned coffee shop it amused me when the patrons tried to guess my background and listed all the European countries. (My English accent was thicker at the time.)

I believe that in my interactions to my coworkers and customers their age and sex played more role than their race. I operate within the framework the "gentlemanly" traditions of being more courteous and respectful towards the elderly and towards women then young people or men. At the same time I could not help noticing the race distribution of the customers and employees. I was the only white person working in this shop. In the back of my mind I knew that many white people would consider this job too low level, while many people of color would have been happy to grab the opportunity to work there. On average 4-5 people would drop by a

week looking for a job despite that we were not looking for anybody. They were almost exclusively African Americans with a few Hispanics, never Caucasians. This might be explained by the racial makeup of the neighborhood, but looking at my customers I knew that there were plenty of white people working in the neighborhood. The majority of my customers came from one of two distinct types: people working in the downtown office buildings or people of some transitional status. The proportion of whites in the former group was much higher than in the latter. The latter group, people with visible lower income, consisted mostly of older people or women with their children. This proves that "multiple systems of inequalities are [...] interdependent." (Allen et al 800) I witnessed myself every day that African American elderly people and single mothers were much worse off than any other group I encountered in terms of age, gender or race.

I never experienced any kind of hostility or sympathy based on my race at my workplace. I recall only once incident when my race played an active role. I was walking back in Washington DC towards the youth hostel I was staying in, in the middle of the African American "ghetto." I was warned in advance that I should not stay out because it is not entirely secure for a white person to walk there at night. On the 10 blocks or so I walked I was asked four times by African Americans whether I am lost and I need any help to find my way. It was heartwarming to experience that much caring and friendliness that disproved for me the warning the white receptionist gave me about not going out.

Being an immigrant myself I belong to a minority group who is facing the question of to what extent to assimilate into US society. I recognize that the advantage of being white can help me in a society where "normalcy" is defined as white. But living in one of the most multicultural state, California, I hope that this advantage as such will disappear over time and I will be treated based on my own characteristics and not based on my race (or gender, age, religion.) I hope for this because I know that I cannot be truly happy as long as I know that others are mistreated based on any of these factors.