

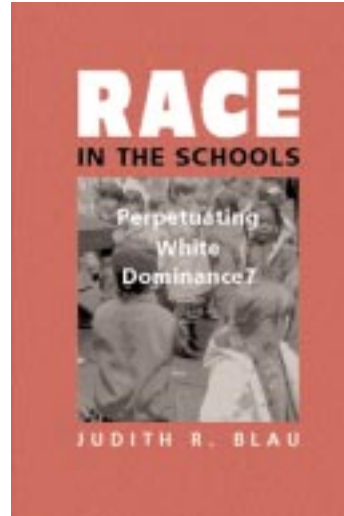
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Race in the Schools:
Perpetuating White Dominance?

Judith R. Blau

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PREFACE

Race is powerful in contemporary America in the phenomenological sense; the meanings people attach to race and racial differences pervade everyday life, shape social action, and are a dynamic component of interpersonal relations. It is precisely because of its phenomenological power that the study of race simultaneously opens up some doors for our understanding of American society and closes other doors. That is, the sheer phenomenological or subjective power of the categories of race and ethnicity—especially, black and white—means that we can unravel many puzzles when we take these categories into account, including, for example, how economic inequalities are patterned. Yet these categories bedevil our communications because the language categories we use—black, African American, white, Caucasian—are conflated with many meanings that we collectively, individually, and autobiographically attach to them. It may not be possible to overcome this perplexing dilemma, but it helps if we are self-reflective and self-critical and place contemporary racial relations into a historical context. Whites have advantages and privileges about which they are often unaware, as they are also often unaware of processes whereby racial advantage and privilege are reproduced over time and over social space, that is, from one situation to another and from one social institution to another.

In this book, the result of more than a decade of research, I inquire about the significance of racial and ethnic differences for the members of a cohort of American adolescents who began high school in 1990 and were in their mid-20s in 2000. I framed the research questions mostly to compare black and white students because black-white relations are most emblematic of the complexities involving intergroup relations in the United States. Racial constructions and practices are by no means constant, and American institutions and normative structures that affect racial practices are also dynamic. The youth in the study grew up during the transition from an industrial society into what is sometimes termed the postindustrial society

or the New Economy. This transition also accompanied great changes in intergroup relations and intergroup perceptions.

I draw conclusions from the results of quantitative analyses using large datasets for adolescents, schools, and neighborhoods. An advantage offered by such analyses is that they allow rigorous, systematic comparisons and hypotheses testing, but the price can be that conceptual richness is sealed off by the formality of the analytical techniques that these data require. To overcome this problem, I have drawn extensively from the work of ethnographers and theorists to give the reader interpretative opportunities and to create open-ended conceptual possibilities for the important comparisons I make. My main focus, again, is on the complicated comparison involving whites and blacks, but many analyses include Asians and Latinos as well.

The research is based on analyses of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS) and its metropolitan companion, the High School Effectiveness Study (HSES), which were designed and carried out by the U.S. Department of Education. The NELS is widely used by researchers because of the high quality of the design of its questionnaires and the data collection procedures and also its breadth and scope. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the research methods. Chapter 2 summarizes my argument about how contemporary racism is deeply embedded in an ideology that is acceptable to white Americans, making racism difficult to overcome. In Chapters 3 through 5, I inquire about race and ethnic differences in various respects, including in educational values (Chapter 3, "Locating Difference"), in integrity and honesty (Chapter 4, "Encountering Character"), and in delinquency (Chapter 5, "Getting into Trouble"). Chapter 6 ("Tracking the Curricula") examines the ways that school structures promote or impair interracial relations; Chapter 7 is about gains on social studies tests ("Social Learning") and the final analytical chapter ("Going to College") presents an analysis of black and white probabilities of pursuing education past high school.

A premise of this book is that liberalism, a core component of the American historical experience, culture, and institutions, has evolved over recent decades into a decidedly selfish neoliberalism that has altered the nature of racism and racialization. Liberalism has become an ideology, a defense used by white Americans to maintain their dominance. However, social values are never static, and I argue that neoliberalism, which accompanied the brief transition from an industrial society to postindustrialism, is not compatible with contemporary economic and social conditions. The New Economy encourages less hierarchical authority but more contingency, informality, and in-group preferences. Therefore, existing racial privileges and inequalities are easily reproduced and reinforced. This premise informs the study, but the results help to support it. The analyses reveal that white American youths are caught in these contradictions and that they are themselves harmed by white

liberalism, just as the ideology of liberalism more obviously harms youths of color. Without practical support, no ideological construction can be expected to last. For this reason, it is not implausible to assume that American institutions will become more democratic, representative, and pluralistic. My optimism is in part grounded in my teaching experiences and the great changes I have observed among white students over the past decade or so. They are working hard and earnestly and, in collaboration with their brothers and sisters of color, understanding and undoing racial barriers.

The research was carried out under the umbrella of a training program, Researching Adolescent Pathways (RAP). I was exceedingly fortunate to have an excellent team of graduate and postdoctoral students who worked with me on the data analyses. In the initial stages of RAP, I worked with Rory McVeigh and Ken Land on a study of junior colleges and black student outcomes. Then Vicki Lamb, Lisa Pellerin, and I began using multi-level analysis to study contextual effects on adolescent outcomes, which became useful for many of the analyses presented in this book. When Vicki accepted a research position at Duke University and Lisa a teaching position at Ball State University, Elizabeth Stearns took over most of the responsibility for data analysis. Other students who participated on the larger project include Berhane Araia, John Hipp, Tracy Holloway, Keri Iyall, Natalie Spring, and, as a postdoctoral student, Gladys Mutangandura. More directly involved in data analyses for book chapters were Nathan Hamilton, who carried out much of the statistical analyses in Chapter 5, and Steve Lippmann, who carried out the analyses reported in Chapter 6. He also helped with the descriptive analyses reported in Chapter 3, as did Jenifer Hamil-Luker and Stephanie Moller. Lyle V. Jones, a psychometrician affiliated with my university's psychology department, contributed immensely to the project through his superior knowledge of the Department of Education's datasets and variable construction.

Chapters 4 through 8 are collaborative. Elizabeth in particular devoted considerable time to the project from 1998 to 2001 as a graduate research assistant, and then from 2001 to 2003 as a postdoctoral fellow while she was also affiliated with the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University. Elizabeth helped to coordinate the final analyses as I began to write the book. Throughout, I distinguish between myself ("I") as author and research director, and all of us ("we") who participated in decisions about measurement and statistical modeling. The computer work was completed by student researchers. This research received funding over six years from a variety of funding agencies. I am extremely grateful for support from the Mellon Foundation, the National Science Foundation, the Spencer Foundation, and the American Educational Research Association.

Living in one of Chicago's most impoverished ghettos ("the other side of the Midway"), later a black middle-class community (after "it had

tipped”), and participating in an integration project in Chicago’s South Side provided me with a range of experiences in black communities that whites rarely have. In one frightening incident, when national guardsmen mistakenly assumed I was a black resident, I had a moment’s experience with cruel, raw, racial hatred. I am aware that such experiences provided an incentive for me to do this research and no doubt helped to shape the research questions.

Participating in classes and seminars at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in which I was the only white person, has been invaluable; nonwhite undergraduates have openly shared their experiences and feelings with me, for which I am grateful. William (Sandy) Darity and Henry Frierson provided me with opportunities to teach in the university’s summer Minority Undergraduate Research Assistant Program (MURAP). Students shared with me their humiliating experiences with discrimination, racism, and racial profiling, but they also shared with me the value of wit, irony, and solidarities when coping with such humiliation. Graduate students reflected less about race as a lived experience and more within a scholarly discourse. For sharing their ideas with me, I thank John Dye, Nate French, Ellington Graves, Chandra Guinn, Alison Roberts, and Demetrius Semien. In particular, I thank Keri Iyall, whose insights about the cultural rights of indigenous groups were helpful to me when considering other American minorities.

Most especially, I am grateful for the support and encouragement of my colleague Rachel Rosenfeld. We had common research interests in education and inequality. She was also a friend, and her death last year was a great loss to me. Sociology of education is populated with many good citizens who promote the development of the field as well as provide support to those who work in it. I especially want to thank the following: Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, Claudia Buchmann, Roslyn Mickelson, Jeannie Murdoch, Rubén Rumbaut, Barbara Schneider, Larry Suter, Charles Thompson, Kenneth Dodge, and the other members of the Duke-UNC Spencer Consortium, as well as Joseph E. Schwartz, a dear friend who was always generous when I asked him for statistical advice. I am also grateful to staff members in the Department of Education, especially Ralph Lee and Jeffrey Owings.

I feel especially fortunate having Karolyn Tyson as a colleague. Drawing on observations in her school studies, and interviews with children, adolescents, and teachers, Karolyn was generous with her time and ideas. I am indebted to her for reflections and frank comments. Edward Reeves and Carol Wright provided valuable comments on an earlier draft of the manuscript and I thank them for their astute and insightful criticisms. Shea Farrell’s professionalism and efficiency with manuscript preparation is gratefully acknowledged. As we have transitioned together over the years from DOS to Windows, Pine to Netscape, and from unzipped to zipped documents, she has


been the better and more accomplished teammate, patient when I have lost and misnamed files, and correcting my botched formatting. The entire process of manuscript preparation and revision went extraordinarily well, and for this I thank Bridget Julian, Lynne Rienner, Lesli Athanasoulis, and most especially, Alan McClare. He was my coach, adviser, and support team all rolled into one.

I experienced some difficulty plunging into writing this book during the summer of 2002, and were it not for my commitments to the graduate students who had carried out the analyses, I may not have completed it. Peter, my husband of, as he would have put it, “just over one third and a third of a century,” was hospitalized with pneumonia in late February and died mid-March. Together we had shared many summers when one of us was buried with a book project. We took it for granted that both would share the same isolation and that social life—theater, concerts, travel, even eating out—would come to a standstill until the manuscript was completed. Over drinks and dinner, the one not immersed in writing was responsible for updating the other about the world outside, that is, domestic and international news, and the one who was writing would sketch out what was on the schedule for the next day. No chapter left the house without at least some rewriting in response to the other’s criticisms. Still, writing this book I had a cheerleading team: my daughters, Reva and Pammy, my sister, Merilee, and my father, Harold. Although they were not underfoot, they approved the progress and were very poor critics.

Charles V. Willie’s reflections on youth and development and his writings in the fields of race, education, families, and communities played a major role in my deciding to carry out this research. He stresses the idea that it takes a team to prepare and educate young people. Parents, mostly, but also teachers, neighbors, siblings, and kin are the members of that team and together, much by way of example, they instill among youths a deep respect for the dignity of others and the understanding that it is difference that makes sharing and reciprocity possible. With great admiration for Dr. Willie and in appreciation for his wisdom about matters of race and schooling, I dedicate this book to him.

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