

Why *Human* is not an appropriate answer to the question, “*What is your race?*”

Engaging in the discourse and work of educational equity inevitably requires us to name and talk about race.

As a man of Lebanese descent, I have the option of identifying as “other white” (even as others within my culture would identify as people of color.) Yet, as a multi-cultural man who has benefited from white skin privilege his whole life, and as an educator in a system that privileges those from dominant culture with unearned advantages and creates unnecessary obstacles to success for students and families of color, and more specifically as a facilitator of the very conversations about race that I posit are necessary, I must identify as white.

When I facilitate, I ask participants to self-identify their race; too frequently, too many are made invisible when offered only a limited set of forced choices within a prescribed, drop-down menu of racial identities. Yet, given the open choice, many also have struggled to answer the question, “*What is your race?*”

Answering this seemingly “simple” question can be quite complicated given that the very concept of race is a manmade construct that continues to change over time. Originally, historic race categories were limited to Mongoloid, Negroid and Caucasoid, while our current concept of race is complicated by the many faces of mixed races (frequently underrepresented in our discourse), the oversimplification of complex, multi-ethnic, racial groupings such as those within our Latina/o and Asian communities, and the sociopolitical challenges that come with identifying racially as “other white”, Middle Eastern or Jewish. These convolutions – along with extreme discrepancies in racial experiences can reinforce the persistent perception and false dichotomy of race being limited to a black and white dynamic.

Yet, while some are challenged to answer, “*What is your race?*” because of authentic confusion about terminology and meaning in relation to their actual lived experiences, there are those who resist (consciously or unconsciously) answering the question due to the discomfort that comes from the very act of naming and discussing race – or worse yet, due to the fear for the potential consequences (perceived or real) of claiming (or being ascribed) a specific race. Specifically, many who benefit from skin privilege are resistant to claim a race or even to recognize that race is a valid characterization of people as it potentially puts at risk the unearned benefits that come from their race.

In my facilitation work, especially over the past decade, those who are challenged or resistant to answer the question “*What is your race?*” increasingly have provided one response more than any other: “*human*”... as in the human race. This self-defined group tends to consist primarily, while not exclusively, of white people who frequently claim they “*do not to see color*”, some even admitting never having had to identify themselves as white out loud before. I am certain that these participants understand the deeper intent of the question as they frequently are quick to justify their response – even before being challenged - with caveats such as, “*I am not just white*” or “*I am more than white*” or “*I am white, but I am a different or “good” white because...*”

- *I am married to, am dating or have dated a person of color;*
- *I have a child who is not white;*
- *my friends (especially my friends of color) don't see me as a white person, or*
- *I was poor... am gay... am a woman... am handicapped... (or any combination of these and many other qualifiers for what a colleague describes as the oppression Olympics) and therefore cannot be part of the oppressive group of the most privileged and understand the plight of people of color.*

In addition to fearing the loss of unearned advantage, there are some within dominant culture have resist to naming, discussing and identifying racial identity because they fear being called a racist simply by acknowledging that race exists and that they are white. In reality, this fear masks a desire to be exempt from the personal responsibility to recognize each person's own place in – and unearned benefits from – our systemic, socio-political reality.

“Racism makes all white people racists.” - Tobin Miller Shearer

While the majority, white people are not the only ones who self-identify as the “*human*” race; and for our colleagues of color, their motivations seem to stem from different root issues. While participants of color who define their race as human frequently defend their categorization with the belief and hope that the only way to stop racism is to stop talking about race, deeper work has surfaced confusion, discomfort and fear because they:

- benefit from light skin privilege,
- come from multi-racial families that include white people and people of color,
- immigrated to the U.S. from homelands where they represented the dominant culture, and/or
- have been harmed deeply by systemic racism and seek to protect themselves from conversations and interactions in mixed groups that may cause additional harm.

When curriculum requires participants to cluster by their self-identified race (i.e. racial affinity groups) and the “human” race group forms, I assume those participants did not understand the question and my first impulse is to clarify the question – and in doing so, implicitly communicate that they are wrong. The few times I tried this, participants quickly checked me for asking a “gotcha” question, underscoring that I asked them to self-identify. Over time, I learned to avoid this dance, expect the more than likely possibility of a “human” race group forming, and adjust my facilitation accordingly.

In the long run, this shift supported a core objective to engage in deep dialogue and discovery about race as it allowed peer participants to engage in provocative discourse with “human” race group members about definitions for and beliefs about race – every time. Frequently supported by personal stories about varied and unique, lived experiences, many participants (mostly people of color) reference how they do see themselves racially – with pride, and how not acknowledging race continues to dehumanize them and make invisible their unquestionable experiences in a racialized world that does not afford colorblindness to most people of color. Furthermore it must be noted during these conversations – within the context of our work – colorblindness is not afforded to our students of color given how the world sees them each day in the skin they are in, as evidenced by the inequitable, racialized data that continues to plague us. Frequently, these discussions served as authentic, formative assessments for where work needed to begin.

More and more frequently however, the conversation about whether or not race actually exists serves as a detour from deeper discourse about race for the majority of the people in the room or for the needs of our context. This was most evident at one such seminar in which a white, female participant put a whole new spin on the conversation. When asked, “*What is your race?*” she answered, “*The half marathon.*”

While I would have loved to give her points for creativity, my actual thought was, “*The half marathon?!? C’mon. That’s not the question – and you know it.*” The boldness displayed with this new, resistant response recharged my own courage to challenge even within my invitation to self-identify as I explicitly communicated that her answer was wrong. “*The prompt was not asking you to identify your choice ‘competition of speed’*”. Frustrated by the microaggression¹, I considered the different fears that drive our resistant behaviors and realized that there was little

¹ Sue, D.W., Capodilupo, C.M., Torino, G.C., Bucceri, J.M., Holder, A.M.B., Nadal, K.L., & Esquilin, M. (2007). Racial microaggressions in everyday life. *American Psychologist*, 62(4), 271-286.

difference between this answer and claiming “human” as one’s race and so I pushed further in anticipation of the next detour, “...just as the intent of the question is not to identify your species”.

It is easy to be drawn to the utopian ideal of true equality and harmony throughout the human race (as a species), yet we cannot avoid the current reality that race – even as a manmade, social construct continues to be a force that impacts the experiences of all within our society (overtly or covertly) – including and especially the youth within our public schools. So, until the social construct called race ceases to have an inequitable impact on individuals and communities, race will be real enough to require that we name, discuss and respond to it. And as long as race is a real force on our lives – and our work as educators, we must ask – and answer, “*What is your race?*” because we must face how our world distinguishes people (and how our school system distinguishes students) – not from other species – but from each other. We must ask and answer, “*What is your race?*” in order to discuss race not only as an abstract but also as a force and its impact on our lives, others’ lives and how we interact with each other. Consider:

In denying the existence of race, to what extent do we also deny (or seek to deny) the existence of racism?

In denying the existence of racism, whose experiences affected by racism do we also deny?

In denying the experiences of those affected by racism, we make invisible and deny the humanity of those affected by racism (including those who deny the existence of racism). And as long as race continues to affect people – students – in ways that determine who we serve and don’t serve in schools, then engaging school communities in the work of educational equity must include talk and work about race. To support this, schools need to create conditions for educators to work through the messiness of this conversation, and educators need to increase their awareness of racial identity – their own and their students - as well as the relationship between them. When this is acknowledged and accepted, then the work can begin.

So. What is your race?

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