The Paradox of Power and Privilege

Race, Gender and Occupational Position

by Carl E. James

En tant qu'idéologies, le racisme, la ségrégation raciale, l'intolérance raciale et culturelle sont bien ancrées dans nos structures sociales, politiques, économiques et culturelles. L'auteur examine comment la construction sociale des questions raciales influence la perception et les relations interpersonnelles des gens. En se basant sur sa propre expérience en tant qu'enseignant au Canada, il analyse le rôle que sa race joue dans ses relations avec les gens, plus particulièrement avec ses étudiant-e-s.

On my way to Ottawa by bus recently, I sat next to a young White engineer. After exchanging greetings, I took from my briefcase some essays that I had brought with me to read. Upon noticing the essays, he asked: "Are you a T.A. (teaching assistant)?" I said: "No, I am a professor." He smiled, and in apologizing said: "It is just that you don't look like a professor. You look young." (You should note that my beard is fairly grey.) This reminded me of the time, about ten years ago, when I went to sign my contract in the dean's office at an institution where I had received a faculty appointment. Before going down to the office, I called to ensure that he was in. I spoke to the dean and said that I will be down within five minutes. When I arrived three minutes later, he came to the door, and with a puzzled look on his face asked: "Can I help you?" I said: "I am Carl James and I just talked with you on the phone. I am here to sign the contract. " The dean, a White man seemingly in his sixties, said: "Oh yes. Please come in. I'm sorry. I thought you were a student." After a brief pause and a smile, he said: "You should take that as a complement; you look more like a student than a faculty member, it must be your youthful appearance."

Why was I seen as a student and not a professor? Was my age the only characteristic that was used to ascertain my occupational position? Was it my dress or "appearance"? Did my race play a role in the assessment?

Many Canadians tend to believe that compared to our southern neighbours, "race doesn't matter here"—that individuals in Canada are not judged by the colour of their skin, but on their personality, attitude and behaviour; and their achievements are based on merit, i.e., ability and skill rather than colour. For some Canadians, particularly racial minorities, this view is contrary to their experiences. They hold that race does play a role for they experience differential treatment from neighbours, teachers, employers, clients and many other Canadians. For these Canadians, their participation in whatever activities is influenced by perceptions, stereotypes, and/or assumptions of their racial groups. So why do Canadians tend to say that race doesn't matter?

Sunday Afternoon on the Queen Streetcar — *Erica Findlay*

Age, gender, class, race and social interaction

Typically when first meeting someone, we tend to use the most obvious things about them, such as appearance, age and sex, among other things, to "assess" them. And if we have to approach them, these characteristics become our clues in "figuring out" what we know about this (kind of) individual, or what we can expect from this (kind of) individual. Our interaction with the individual then, will be influenced by our experience, knowledge and assumptions of this "kind of individual." For example, how we relate to a man dressed in a suit and tie will be different from how we relate with someone wearing a t-shirt and sandals. We make different assumptions about them—about what they are doing at the moment, about their educational and occupational status, their skill level and their status in the community. Consequently, we relate to them differently.

What we do is categorize people, and use these categorizations as the basis for relating with them. We do this because of our need to "control" the many stimuli that bombard us in our encounters with others. So we "organize" or "categorize" the multitude of information in order to "make sense" of them. This might allow us to establish a "comfort level" with the individual, to assess if "we have anything in common, " and in our interaction or communication, to help us understand "where the person might be coming from."

Our reference for the assessment is

not simply based on our personal experiences or what we have learned, but also on what our society, through the educational institutions, media etc., has taught us, and how the various peoples have been presented to us in this society. It is this information—this social construction of women, adolescents, men in suit and tie—that helps us make the assessment of the individuals we encounter, and which informs our perceptions, attitudes toward, and interpretation of them and their behaviours.

We are less willing to acknowledge race as a factor in our interactions.

When we first meet someone, after exchanging greetings and talking about the weather, we routinely ask such questions as: "What do you do?" or "Where do you work?" This not only gives us an idea of the individual's occupational status, it is also a way of establishing social class. We associate certain occupations with the level of education the person might have, and the amount of money she/he might make. Another way of establishing "status" or social class is by asking the question: "Where do you live?" Not only does this question sometimes give a crude indication of the individual's income level but it might also tell us about the possible ethnicity of the person because of the ethnic enclaves in which some Canadians reside. In essence, we make assessments or assumptions about people based on our experience and knowledge about their "type." Our views are certainly not independently constructed, they are in large part influenced by what we have learned from our society about different occupations, workplaces, residences etc.

While we are somewhat reluctant to acknowledge social class, we are less willing to acknowledge race as a factor in our interactions. Some middle class and upper class Canadians (sociologically speaking) might claim that the social class of a person does not matter, and that an individual's interactions and successes are based on "personal" qualities and efforts. However, many working class people have no problems identifying how their situation is a product of social inequality and lack of access to economic, social and political resources and power. Similarly, while White Canadians may deny that race plays a role in their interactions and opportunities, non-White Canadians often assert that this "colour-blind" idea is a myth. For while race might not be obviously (on the surface, that is) a factor in the assumptions we make of someone, or how we treat them, it is necessarily one of those characteristics like age, gender and social class about which we are conscious. The fact is, we consciously and unconsciously pay attention to differences. We notice what is different from the norm.

In Canada, White Anglo-Celtics are considered the "norm." Listen to individuals describe themselves or others: "I am Canadian." "She is Italian." "I am Polish, I married a Canadian" (she does not mention that *she* is second-generation Canadian). We know what is meant by "Canadian," no other descriptors are necessary. Interestingly, Blacks are the only people who, as a group, are described in terms of "colour," Whites are not. Do you ever wonder why this is so in the Western world? Even social scientists and Statistics Canada (evident in the census) identify Blacks by race. Don't Blacks have ethnicity? Why are Whites identified in ethnic terms—French, Scottish, German, Jewish, and not Blacks? Do you ever wonder how Aboriginals became "Indians"; and Indians became South Asians? And non-Whites are termed "visible minorities?" I can only assume that this is our Canadian way of naming people, especially those who are "different," of socially constructing "the other"—the minorities.

That I am Black (African-Canadian) and male, will play a part in how I am perceived and thus in my interactions with students. Their preconceived ideas about the racial minority group of which I am a member play a significant role in the interaction between myself and students (in this case the teaching and learning process). This relationship between the students and me can be seen as paradoxical in that while the position I hold might appear to be one of power and privilege, my social status as a racial minority will also affect the expectations people have of me.

The discussion that follows examines statements and questions that are often heard in many of my encounters with individuals. My attempt here is to discuss the subtle ways the significance of race is made explicit through statements and actions.

You look like a student

The question that was asked of me by my seatmate on the Greyhound bus to Ottawa, could be seen as a genuine mistake. After all, people do make "wrong" assumptions about others. But these "wrong" assumptions are not without some social or cultural basis. My seatmate, like the dean, live in a society in which professors are often middle aged White men. So it becomes their reference point when they think about my occupation. Hence, in addition to my dress, my age and my sex, race is a characteristic that is factored into the assessment of me in any situation.

Where are you from?

In any first class, instructors typically distribute course outlines then proceed to discuss the course and the expectations. On many occasions after going through this routine, and then asking for questions, within the first five questions I am asked: "Where are you from?" or "Are you Jamaican?" In earlier years of my teaching I used to say: "No. I'm not from Jamaica," or "I'm from the Caribbean." But despite my reluctance to answer the question, some students persist. In response, I would ask: "Why the question?" The questioner would reply (sometimes smiling): "Because you have an accent." Is my accent the only reason for the question? Or is

identifying my accent the "safest response"—a way of not identifying my colour because that might be interpreted "as racist." Why is where I am from significant? Why would students ask this particular question at this point? Are other "non-accented" instructors asked the same questions? That the questioner identifies my accent and not my colour as the reason for the question tends to be the way racism often gets taken up. The underlying belief is that a racist "sees colour," so if one does not "see colour" then one is not racist. This is not only a superficial understanding of individual racism, it negates the significance of systemic or structural racism.

Blacks are the only people who, as a group, are described in terms of "colour."

The motivations for these questions are many. Among them might be that students ask because they are being friendly, to establish a rapport, to break the "first class" tension, and/or to be acknowledged. For racial minority students, and Blacks in particular, this question might represent their attempt to establish a "connection" with me or to "distance" themselves. The latter might be their way of demonstrating that there is a difference: They might be Canadian born "with no accent."

But there are other messages that are communicated by this question. It is a way of bringing into consciousness my "status" as an immigrant and racial minority—"an outsider." It indicates that while I have the privilege or "power" to set the agenda for the course, I am reminded that in the "larger scheme" of things, in society generally, I am one of those people who is termed "visible minority." As immigrants, we are perceived to be at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder, consequently unlikely to have the necessary educational credentials to make it into certain occupational spheres, so we "make it in" through the government's "reverse racism/discrimination policy."

I never expected to be lectured to in a course like this by a Black teacher

Consider this: You enter your French or English class for the first time for the semester, and your teacher is Chinese, would you be surprised? And at university you notice that 90 percent of your civil engineering classmates are males but your professor is a First Nations woman, would you be surprised? Why? Is it because in your experience, you have never seen people from these backgrounds in these disciplines? Would you for a moment wonder about their qualifications for the job? And given the "era of employment equity," would you think they might be "equity hires?"

The expectations that we have about who is "qualified" to teach particular courses is also rooted in the stereotypes we hold of members of particular groups. For example, while individuals will expect that I am able to talk about prejudice, racism, immigrants, and Black people, there might be the tendency to believe that I would be "less qualified" to lecture on Canadian culture, or the history of education in Canada, or about the history of sociology. There is no doubt that the media, early education, textbooks etc., have played a role in reinforcing these stereotypes or notions of the kinds of people who have the expertise to address particular subjects.

The assumption of who is qualified to teach particular courses is often based on stereotypes—stereotypes that present some people as limited in their academic or professional abilities or having expertise in a particular area. For instance, sometimes there are assumptions that because I am a racial minority, I have experienced racism. On this basis I am considered "qualified" to talk about prejudice, race relations, racism, discrimination etc. This has particular consequences. People who operate on this assumption often give little credit to positions taken or comments made on these issues by racial minorities. They dismiss the person or the comments and may suggest that they are "emotional reactions" based largely on personal experiences. As minorities in this area of work, we have the challenge to show that our interpretations and analyses of issues are not only based on personal or political interest, but have a legitimate standing in any academic discourse.

I find your class very biased

As a Black teacher, how I raise certain topics in class, or the kinds of topics I discuss will take on particular meanings. Many times, my actions or comments are labeled as "prejudiced," "biased" or "racist." For example, in a race relations class of about 30 White students (28 males and two females), during a discussion about employment equity, I argued that employment equity does not promote the hiring of "less than qualified" minorities and women. Most of the students disagreed with me because they claimed to have "evidence" or "knew of someone who got hired" into a company because they are Black (Blacks were usually the ones that were most often identified). In addition, their parents and other instructors had confirmed the "correctness" of their position. To give credence to their arguments, the males would point out that I should note that the females were talking in support of the same position. The females were also pointing out that "people should be hired for their qualification." These discussions are always heated and I seemed to be the only person, or rather identified as the only person who has "a bias." I wonder why. How is it that the 30 other people in the room do not have biases? Is it possible that if one's analysis does not con-

As immigrants we are perceived to be unlikely to have the necessary credentials.

form to the "norm," then one of the first charges against it, is that it is biased?

Given that what I say is perceived as biased, students are likely to dismiss my comments as "a matter of opinion." This can be interpreted not only as a challenge to my credibility as an educator or the legitimacy of my argument, but as part of their resistance to the information. Instead of challenging their own knowledge and worldview, individuals end up questioning my authority to challenge their previously unexamined perspective. As an educator, I must challenge students to examine their "own lenses" through which they interpret what I say as biased. My experience has shown that it is when students are unwilling to accept alternative explanations that they dismiss other viewpoints as unacceptable. It seems to me that my race, rather than the content of my comments, and the students' unwillingness and/or fear of confronting issues are at the root of their suggestion that I am biased.

My challenges are seen as reflective of my "oversensitivity" to issues of racism.

It seems pointless, therefore, to engage in any discussion to dispel the notion of bias. Shouldn't students be shown that there is a relationship between their perceptions and their socialization, gender, race and social class? How can we truly educate or become educated without being critical and challenging ourselves intellectually, culturally, socially, and emotionally? Am I biased in raising these questions? Is my role as an educator to reinforce the status quo? Or is it to challenge students and to present alternative viewpoints so that we may become critical participants in our educational process, and in society as a whole?

If students become uncomfortable or angry as they learn about the mechanisms in our society that have privileged and/or disadvantaged them, and about their role in maintaining this situation, this may well be the very crucial starting point of a self-reflective journey.

You are intimidating, you make me feel uncomfortable

The topic areas I often deal with in my courses include inequality in relation to social class, gender, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation. Class discussions about these issues often stir deeply felt emotions as students struggle to understand how we are implicated in the structures of our society that have maintained inequality, and how mechanisms such as sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, and anti-semitism have operated to maintain the status quo. Sometimes students claim that these issues taught by a Black man contribute to their discomfort, fear, defensiveness, and guilty feelings. As one person said it: "Carl is the first Black teacher I ever had which also made me feel uncomfortable. This discomfort, I believe was more a fear of what to expect." Another said: "In class with a number of minorities, including the teacher, my immediate reaction was to feel defensive about my WASP background. "

In challenging students to critically analyze a situation or examine alternative explanations for social issues, I am sometimes seen as "stirring up trouble." In some cases, my challenges are seen as a deliberate attempt to "bring out individuals' prejudices," as inappropriate, and/or reflective of my "militancy" and "oversensitivity" to issues of prejudice or racism. Some students even go further to suggest that I am "taking out my anger on them" because of my "experience with racism;" or that I "want them to feel guilty." One student once asked me: "As a child did someone ever persecute you? You seem so touchy."

That I am a male also has a significant role to play in individuals' perceptions of me as "intimidating" and making them "feel uncomfortable." This has to do, not only with their inexperience "with a Black teacher," as some people put it, but also their own socialization and the gender role stereotypes and expectations of me as a Black person that they bring to their interactions with me.

As a Black male educator, therefore, not only am I responsible for organizing and structuring courses which challenge students intellectually, but also I am expected to anticipate and be extra sensitive to their feelings. While sensitivity is an important requirement for any educator, this prerequisite seems to be more significant in this case because of how my race and gender are factored into both my interactions with students and the course content.

Conclusion

Race, like age, gender, and social class, influence our perceptions of the world, as well as how individuals see and interact with each other. In Canada, race does matter; and insofar as we live here we operate with the meaning ascribed to race by the society. For example, in the United States, a Black person might not be immediately classified as an immigrant given their numbers and their history in the United States. On the other hand, in Canada, given the small number, and their recent immigration to Canada, Blacks are often identified as immigrants. This is all part of the social construction of Blacks.

Generally, the social construction of race and gender informs our views, structures our perceptions, formulates our attitudes and programs our behaviours. Thus, what informs individuals' behaviour with regard to race is not only their experiences, but how our society has educated us about the various ethnic and racial groups that live here.

That "I do not look like a professor" is based on the individuals' experiences, and what has been presented to them over the years. They have not seen racial minorities on college and university campuses as professors, and their education has not told them why this is so—that because of the inequalities in our society which have been maintained by mechanisms such as stereotyping, sexism, racism,

classism, and discrimination, racial minorities have not been able to gain access and opportunities to some occupational positions. I am not referring simply to individual attitudes *(à la identified bigots)*, but to the institutional, systemic, and cultural ideologies and policies (viz: classism, sexism, racism, heterosexism etc.) that have operated over the years as barriers to access and opportunities.

Growing up and living in a society such as ours, therefore, has inculcated in us those ideologies that have resulted in us interpreting the world in relation to our position in the society; and adhering to the dominant cultural values which we have learned. All of us are affected in one way or another by the same social forces. That is why a Ukrainian who is fourth generation Canadian is just as likely to identify a first generation English Canadian as "Canadian," and unknowingly identify a fifth generation African-Canadian as an "immigrant," Jamaican probably, and herself as a "Ukrainian."

Race does matter and we operate with the meaning ascribed to race by the society.

Talking about identifying people by ethnicity, I have always found it ironic that some Canadians object to people calling themselves "Jamaican," "Maltese," "Portuguese," or "Jewish-Canadian," "African-Canadian," "Japanese-Canadian," "Chinese-Canadian." The question is always posed: "Why can't they be Canadians?" Nevertheless, the same people will see Canadians as Whites with last names such as Johnson, Smith, McDonald, Milne, etc.

My race helps to define me. I cannot escape the media, the magazine and book images and information, etc., neither will my twelve year old son who has already begun to experience the hidden injuries of race. And whether or not I wish to represent the population of Blacks in Toronto, I am assigned that task. Isn't it interesting that I represent an entire population of people despite our diversity? How is it that majority group Canadians seem not to represent their entire group?

That I am a professor does not make me immune to the stereotypes and concomitant issues and problems that go along with being a racial minority, and a Black person in particular, in this society. It is what I regard as one of those "paradoxes" that we must confront as racial minorities.

Evidently, I bring to my interactions, my own socialization as a male cultivated in our male oriented Canadian society, just like the students and individuals with whom I interact bring their own gender role socialization. I have found that while White females are more likely to talk of being intimidated and feeling uncomfortable, males accuse me of being biased, defensive—"a chip on your shoulder"—having a personal agenda, and that what I am trying to communicate is merely my "opinion." It seems that males, White males in particular, are quite clear about the power and privilege accorded to them by race. They understand that as a minority my power and privileges as a male is not the *same* as theirs. Females, on the other hand, understand that in our male oriented society, while I might have male privilege they have race privilege. All of this helps to explain the paradox of power and privilege with regard to race and gender. For while I do have privilege as a male, it must be understood in the context of my status as a racial minority in Canadian society. In other words my power and privilege as a Black male educator must be seen in relation to how Black males are socially constructed in today's Canada.

There is a final point that is worth mentioning. Racism, discrimination, and racial or cultural intolerance is not necessarily based on ignorance, lack of information or exposure, they are ideologies rooted in the social, economic, political and cultural structures of society. Hence, at the post-secondary level of education, it is understandable that we would find attitudes and behaviours based on the social construction race exhibited in the interactions of instructors and students.

Carl E. James teaches in the Faculty of Education at York University. He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology. He is the author and co-author of several books and articles including: Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Culture *(1989);* Making It: Black Youth, Racism and Career Aspirations in a Big City *(1990).*

LYN LIFSHIN

German SS Officer in the Ghetto

He said after
the war he
published mountain
climbing books
he loved the sun
the pure air
he never knew
about death
camps the ghetto.
It was to main
tain a work force.
I had no idea
you over estimate
my power it
worked for three
years, two and
a half maybe yes
the conditions
were terrible but
I didn't know was
a small part the
extermination
wasn't clear they
worked for self
preservation self
management it
wasn't death it
wasn't clear to me

Lyn Lifshin's poems, Marilyn Monroe *(Quiet Press) will be published this spring.*