

The new threat: 'Racism without racists'

By John Blake, CNN
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(CNN) -- In a classic study on race, psychologists staged an experiment with two photographs that produced a surprising result.

They showed people a photograph of two white men fighting, one unarmed and another holding a knife. Then they showed another photograph, this one of a white man with a knife fighting an unarmed African-American man.

When they asked people to identify the man who was armed in the first picture, most people picked the right one. Yet when they were asked the same question about the second photo, most people -- black and white -- incorrectly said the black man had the knife.

Even before the Ferguson grand jury's decision was announced, leaders were calling once again for a "national conversation on race." But here's why such conversations rarely go anywhere: Whites and racial minorities speak a different language when they talk about racism, scholars and psychologists say.



10 years of Pres. Obama discussing race

The knife fight experiment hints at the language gap. Some whites confine racism to intentional displays of racial hostility. It's the Ku Klux Klan, racial slurs in public, something "bad" that people do.



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What #Ferguson stands for

But for many racial

minorities, that type of racism doesn't matter as much anymore, some scholars say. They

talk more about the racism uncovered in the knife fight photos -- it doesn't wear a hood, but it causes unsuspecting people to see the world through a racially biased lens.

It's what one Duke University sociologist calls "racism without racists." Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, who's written a book by that title, says it's a new way of maintaining white domination in places like Ferguson.

"The main problem nowadays is not the folks with the hoods, but the folks dressed in suits," says Bonilla-Silva.

"The more we assume that the problem of racism is limited to the Klan, the birthers, the tea party or to the Republican Party, the less we understand that racial domination is a collective process and we are all in this game."

As people talk about what the grand jury's decision in Ferguson means, Bonilla-Silva and others say it's time for Americans to update their language on racism to reflect what it has become and not what it used to be.

The conversation can start, they say, by reflecting on three phrases that often crop up when whites and racial minorities talk about race.

'I don't see color'

It's a phrase some white people invoke when a conversation turns to race. Some apply it to Ferguson. They're not particularly troubled by the grand jury's decision to not issue an indictment. The racial identities of Darren Wilson, the white police officer, and Michael Brown, the black man he killed, shouldn't matter, they say. Let the legal system handle the decision without race-baiting. Justice should be colorblind.

Science has bad news, though, for anyone who claims to not see race: They're deluding themselves, say several bias experts. A body of scientific research over the past 50 years shows that people notice not only race but gender, wealth, even weight.

When babies are as young as 3 months old, research shows they start preferring to be around people of their own race, says Howard J. Ross, author of "Everyday Bias," which includes the story of the knife fight experiment.

Other studies confirm the power of racial bias, Ross says.

One study conducted by a Brigham Young University economics professor showed that white NBA referees call more fouls on black players, and black referees call more fouls on white players. Another study that was published in the American Journal of Sociology showed that newly released white felons experience better job hunting success than young black men with no criminal record, Ross says.

"Human beings are consistently, routinely and profoundly biased," Ross says.

The knife fight experiment reveals that even racial minorities are not immune to racial bias, Ross says.

"The overwhelming number of people will actually experience the black man as having the knife because we're more open to the notion of the black man having a knife than a white man," Ross says. "This is one of the most insidious things about bias. People may absorb these things without knowing them."

Another famous experiment shows how racial bias can shape a person's economic prospects.

Professors at the University of Chicago and MIT sent 5,000 fictitious resumes in response to 1,300 help wanted ads. Each resume listed identical qualifications except for one variation -- some applicants had Anglo-sounding names such as "Brendan," while others had black-sounding names such as "Jamal." Applicants with Anglo-sounding names were 50% more likely to get calls for interviews than their black-sounding counterparts.

Most of the people who didn't call "Jamal" were probably unaware that their decision was motivated by racial bias, says Daniel L. Ames, a UCLA researcher who has studied and written about bias.

"If you ask someone on the hiring committee, none of them are going to say they're racially biased," Ames says. "They're not lying. They're just wrong."

Ames says such biases are dangerous because they're often unseen.

"Racial biases can in some ways be more destructive than overt racism because they're harder to spot, and therefore harder to combat," he says.

Still, some people are suspicious of focusing on the word bias. They prefer invoking the term racism because they say it leaves bruises. People claiming bias can admit they may have acted in racially insensitive ways but were unaware of their subconscious motivations.

"The idea of calling it racial bias lessens the blow," says Crystal Moten, a history professor at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

"Do you want to lessen the blow or do you want to eradicate racism? I want to eradicate racism," she says. "Yes I want opportunity for dialogue, but the impact of racism is killing people of color. We don't have time to tend to the emotional wounds of others, not when violence against people of color is the national status quo."

'But I have black friends'

In the movie "The Godfather," the character of Michael Corleone, played by Al Pacino, hatches an audacious plan to kill a mobster and a crooked cop who tried to kill his father. Michael's elders scoff at his plans because they believe his judgment is clouded by anger. But in a line that would define his ruthless approach to wielding power, Michael tells them:

"It's not personal. It's strictly business."

When some whites talk about racism, they think it's only personal -- what one person says or does to another. But many minorities and people who study race say racism can be impersonal, calculating, devoid of malice -- such as Michael Corleone's approach to power.

"The first thing we must stop doing is making racism a personal thing and understand that it is a system of advantage based on race," says Doreen E. Lory, director of the Pan African Studies program at Arcadia University, near Philadelphia.

Lory says racism "permeates every facet of our societal pores."

"It's about more than that cop who targets a teen while 'WWB' (walking while black) but the system that makes it OK to not only stop him but to put him in a system that will target and limit his life chances for life," she says.

Racial bias is so deeply engrained in people that it can manifest itself in surprising places, says Charles Gallagher, a sociologist at La Salle University in Philadelphia. He gave a hypothetical example:

"A white police officer in Ferguson may be married to a black woman and have black and Latino friends, but that doesn't mean the officer is above racial profiling," Gallagher says.

These old and new ways of talking about racism can be seen in how some whites and blacks perceive the events in Ferguson.

Many have already looked at them as something beyond a personal interaction between a white police officer and a young black man. They point out that two-thirds of Ferguson's population is black, yet the mayor, police chief and five of six city council members are white -- as are 50 of the 53 people in its Police Department.

Ferguson is like countless multiracial communities, they say: calm on the surface but seething with racial disparities beneath.

But those disparities are invisible to many whites, who often see themselves as victims of discrimination, writes Jamelle Bouie of Slate magazine in a recent essay, "The Gulf That Divides Us."

"Median income among black Americans is roughly half that of white Americans. But a narrow majority of whites believe blacks earn as much money as whites, and just 37% believe that there's a disparity between the two groups. Likewise, while 56% of blacks believe black Americans face significant discrimination, only 16% of whites agree," he writes.

"Many whites -- including many millennials -- believe discrimination against whites is more prevalent than discrimination against blacks."

But as Nicholas Kristof recently pointed out in The New York Times, the U.S. has a greater

wealth gap between whites and blacks than South Africa had during apartheid.

Such racial inequities might seem invisible partly because segregated housing patterns mean that many middle- and upper-class whites live far from poor blacks.

It's also no longer culturally acceptable to be openly racist in the United States, says Bonilla-Silva, author of "Racism Without Racists."

Overt racism is so widely rejected in America that a white supremacist in Montana recently announced that he is creating a new inclusive Ku Klux Klan chapter that will not discriminate against people because of their color or sexual orientation. Instead, according to one report, the chapter's new mission will be to prevent a "new world order" where one government controls everything.

Another recent article revealed how white supremacists in America are facing such hostility at home that some have moved to Europe in an attempt to link up with far-right groups.

"The new racism, like God, works in mysterious ways and is quite effective in maintaining white privilege," Bonilla-Silva says. "For example, instead of saying as they used to say during the Jim Crow era that they do not want us as neighbors, they say things nowadays such as 'I am concerned about crime, property values and schools.' "

'Who you calling a racist?'

When protests erupted in Ferguson after the shooting this summer, various white and black residents tried to talk about race, but such discussions didn't bear fruit because of another reason:

People refuse to admit their biases, research has consistently shown.

Ross, author of "Everyday Bias," cited a Dartmouth College survey where misinformed voters were presented with factual information that contradicted their political biases.

There were voters, for example, who were disappointed with President Obama's economic record and believed he hadn't added any jobs during his presidency. They were shown a graph of nonfarm employment over the prior year that included a rising line indicating about a million jobs had been added.

"They were asked whether the number of people with jobs had gone up, down, or stayed about the same," Ross wrote. "Many, looking straight at the graph, said down."

Ross says it's even more difficult to get smart people to admit bias.

"The smarter we are, the more self-confident we are, and the more successful we are, the less likely we're going to question our own thinking," Ross says.

Some of the nation's smartest legal minds aren't big believers in racial bias either, and that

could complicate efforts in Ferguson to reduce racial tensions.

Some say they could be eased by hiring more officers of color in Ferguson's police force.

But the conservative majority on the U.S. Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John Roberts, has been suspicious of efforts to achieve diversity in workforces, believing that they amount to reverse racism or racial preferences, legal observers say.

Some fear the court is about to get rid of one of the most effective legal tools for addressing racial bias.

The court recently took up a fair housing case in Texas where the conservative majority could very well rule against the concept of "disparate impact," a legal approach that doesn't try to plumb the racist intentions of individuals or businesses but looks at the racial impact of their decisions.

Disparate impact is built on the belief that most people aren't stupid enough to openly announce they're racists but instead cloak their racism in seemingly race-neutral language. It also recognizes that some ostensibly race-neutral policies could reflect unintentional bias. A disparate impact lawsuit, for instance, wouldn't have to prove that a police department's white leaders are racist -- it would only have to show the impact of having all white officers in an almost all-black town.

Roberts distilled his approach to race in one of the court's most controversial cases in 2007. The court ruled 5-4 along ideological lines that a public school district in Seattle couldn't consider race when assigning students to schools, even for the purposes of integration.

"The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race," Roberts said in what is arguably his most famous quote.

Roberts has equated affirmative action programs with Jim Crow laws, says Erwin Chemerinsky, author of "The Case Against the Supreme Court."

"Chief Justice Roberts has expressly said that the Constitution and the government should be colorblind," Chemerinsky says. "He sees no difference between government action that discriminates against minorities and one that benefits minorities."

What that means for Ferguson is that any aggressive attempt to integrate the police force could be struck down in court, says Mark D. Naison, an African-American Studies professor at Fordham University in New York City.

Unless a lawyer can find smoking-gun evidence of some police department official saying he won't hire blacks, people won't have much legal leverage to make the police department diverse, he says.

"Once the doctrine of disparate impact is weakened, you have to prove discriminatory intent in order to declare a practice discriminatory," Naison says. "Huge racial disparities in law

enforcement can be tolerated if they are the result of policies which are race-neutral in how they are written in the law even through the implementation is anything but."

The courts may ignore colorblind racism, but ordinary people ought to be aware of it when they talk about racism, others say. Ross, author of "Everyday Bias," says being biased doesn't make people bad, just human.

He says people are hardwired to be biased because it helped keep our ancestors alive. They survived, in part, by having to make quick assumptions about strangers who might prove threatening.

"We need to reduce the level of guilt but increase the level of responsibility we take for it," he says. "I didn't choose to internalize these messages, but it's inside of me and I have to be careful."

Part of being careful is expanding our definition of racism, says Bonilla-Silva, author of "Racism Without Racists."

Racism has evolved, but our language for describing it hasn't, he says.

"Colorblind racism is the new racial music most people dance to," he says. "The 'new racism' is subtle, institutionalized and seemingly nonracial."

How long before another Ferguson erupts is anyone's guess. But if and when it does, the knife fight experiment suggests that before people look at videotapes, read police reports and listen to radio talk shows to form their opinions, they should do something else first:

Look within themselves.

Complete coverage of what's happening in Ferguson

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