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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1rm0b711>

Journal

UC Merced Undergraduate Research Journal, 14(1)

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/M414157325

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The Role of Racial/Ethnic Pride in Relation to Racism/Ethnocentrism

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Writing 10: College Reading and Composition

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May 10, 2021

Abstract

In recent years, the idea that racial or ethnic pride can be positive has grown in popularity, even as popular sentiment has turned increasingly against racism and ethnocentrism. Being able to celebrate our differences (racial or ethnic dignity) without acting on them in a prideful, negative way (racism or ethnocentrism) seems more possible today than at any time in American history. Yet today there is also growing concern that our differences are not just cause for celebration, but grounds for separation, among other things with the goal of pursuing political agendas. From affirming the racial identities of schoolchildren to stoking the racial, cultural and religious conflicts that divide Bosnia and other nations (including the United States), racial and ethnic pride have historically been forces for both good and evil depending on how they were defined. Pride as dignity is the act of giving oneself a basic level of self-worth, which every human is allotted based on our modern concept of equality. Pride in one's race or ethnicity as superior, by contrast, challenges the modern concept of equality. Such definitions are not just semantic as racial and ethnic dignity lets us celebrate our individuality without sacrificing unity as a whole, while racial and ethnic pridefulness divides us by color, kin or creed. A large portion of this country's history has been dedicated to eliminating these divisions, most recently through things like the civil rights movement. Current trends focusing on racial identity pose a risk of undoing these efforts and returning us to a nation that is separate and unequal, this time by choice rather than by force.

Keywords: racial/ethnic pride, racial/ethnic dignity, racism, ethnocentrism, equality

The role of racial/ethnic pride in relation to racism/ethnocentrism

One would be remiss to treat racial and ethnic pride as having no relation to racism or ethnocentrism, but the question remains: Does the existence of racial and ethnic pride result in the existence of racism and ethnocentrism? To answer this question, one must make a distinction between the words pride and dignity. Merriam Webster's Dictionary defines pride as both "inordinate self-esteem" and "conceit" or as "a reasonable or justifiable self-respect, delight or elation arising from some act, possession, or relationship" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). Webster's defines dignity as the "quality or state of being worthy, honored, and or esteemed" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). This distinction is important, in that pride can be defined in a more negative connotation than the word dignity.

When being used in its positive connotation, pride can be synonymous with a feeling of accomplishment after having completed a task that justifies boastfulness (if anything does). Dignity is a feeling that does not need to be earned, rather it represents the act of giving oneself a basic level of self-worth, which every human is allotted based on our modern concept of equality. According to this distinction, it would appear strange or even irrational to take pride in something that was not earned, but assigned at random. Taking pride in one's race or ethnicity thus seems abnormal, considering that the only accomplishment involved was birth. If every human is assigned a particular race or ethnicity at random, at what point does racial and ethnic pride challenge the modern concept of equality (compared to the more justified racial and ethnic dignity)? The answer to this question will largely depend on how others define pride.

Review

Various studies examining the effects of racial and ethnic pride suggest that the word pride itself has two distinct meanings, one positive and the other negative. In a study about the results of minority groups' elicitation of pride, Ratcliff et al. (2013) suggest that the more positive connotation of pride can be described as "authentic, pride that is associated with accomplishment, self-worth, and humility," while the more negative connotation of pride can be recognized as "hubristic, pride that is associated with arrogance, superiority, and egotism" (p. 1). This distinction between definitions is also recognized by Nguyen (2013) in her study of Asian-American Hmong children's response toward their peer's display of ethnic pride, noting that the negative connotation of pride was frowned upon while the positive connotation of pride was championed by the children (p. 13). The positive connotation of pride is much more synonymous with, and almost identical to, the definition of dignity. For the sake of simplicity, it will prove useful throughout the rest of this paper to refer to the positive connotation of pride as dignity and the negative connotation of pride as the word pride itself.

One venue in which ethnic and racial pride is celebrated in an ethnocentric way is the increasingly popular world of sports, particularly the Olympic Games. The Olympics greatly benefit from many individual nations and ethnicities competing against each other, each believing they are the world's most athletically-superior group until proven otherwise. Devitt (2010) notes that while the International Olympic Committee continues to market international unity, they are simultaneously encouraging "divisive nationalism" (p. 121). This nationalism is synonymous with ethnocentrism in countries that are largely made up of one ethnicity or culture. While sporting events may seem to be harmless venues for ethnic pride, however, they offer only a milder example of ethnocentrism.

War-torn countries that are not particularly diverse have found many reasons to resent each other. One example can be seen in the aftermath of the Bosnian War. There were many areas in Bosnia where Bosnian Serbs held great resentment toward Bosniaks (Muslim Bosnians) and vice-versa. As the Bosnian War itself was largely motivated by ethnocentrism, it made sense that people would continue to hold their ethnocentric views even after the war. Page and Whitt (2018) suggested that in an attempt to reduce this ethnocentrism, the United Nations would deploy peacekeepers in areas of Bosnia that were considered to be hot spots for ethnocentrism; they concluded that the mere presence of the UN's peacekeepers would prove vital in reducing ethnocentrism in Bosnia and would leave a lasting impact after the peacekeepers departed (pp. 28-29).

While not every country has had to address a similar amount of ethnocentrism as that in post-war Bosnia, others have found ways to reduce it in their own right. In 2017, a thirteen-article draft for preventing racial, ethnic and gender discrimination was proposed to the Shura Council of Saudi Arabia. Mohammed Faheem, professor of comparative education at Umm Al-Qura University in Makkah, stated in a 2018 interview with *Arab News* regarding the draft:

When one person believes that the group of people he belongs to is superior to others, and that belief is translated into an action against others, that is where discrimination begins. Ideas cannot be harmful until they become actions ... People must feel that they belong to one homeland, equal in rights and duties (paras. 10-11).

This ideology has the potential to unite a people within a given nation, both reducing ethnic discrimination within differing groups, and raising the collective pride of a population in their national identity . However, in the end it will likely only result in nationalism, trading pride in

one's race or ethnicity for pride in one's "homeland." This commonly resulting in the view of one's nation as superior.

Such a prideful catch-22 may be expected, as Clark (2019) has suggested in a study on political divisiveness, noting that tribalism is human nature:

"They [humans] were not 'designed' to reason dispassionately about the world; rather, they were 'designed' to reason in ways that promote the interests of their coalition (and hence, themselves). It would therefore be surprising if a particular group of individuals did not display such tendencies" (p. 4).

This idea is echoed in the social-Darwinist worldview; Bizumic and Duckitt (2021) suggest in a study on the word ethnocentrism that under social-Darwinist belief, the concept of ethnocentrism is essential for in-group prosperity and is equally complemented by out-group negativity (Bizumic & Duckitt, pp. 888-889).

Such views are starkly in contrast with the Judeo-Christian concept of equality, which derives from religion as opposed to an ethnocentric worldview. That said, in the West (and particularly in the racially and ethnically diverse United States), this concept of equality has sometimes been at odds with the realities faced by specific racial or ethnic groups. Often, this concept of equality has been ignored or set aside by those claiming to be in support of the manuscript it is derived from. In a paper on the relationship between ethnicity and racism and the Christian church, Sanou (2015) observes that:

"[R]ather than standing up against slavery, the church helped perpetuate the practice, with a number of theologians writing extensive treatises endeavoring to support slavery on biblical grounds. ... The supporters of slavery, including Christians, thus violated the

fundamental biblical teaching that all human beings are created in the image of God and are therefore equal” (p. 98).

Such departures from equality undermine the principles on which it is based and complicate discussions of race and ethnicity.

It stands to reason that unity under nationalism might serve to achieve equality in isolated areas, but this would not push humanity closer to global equality, in the U.S. or elsewhere. In fact, it would make this goal more difficult to accomplish. Recognizing the inconsistencies between the principle and practice of equality in America, while essential, also need not result in abandoning the former due to failures in the latter. It would appear that the only realistic way to achieve the modern concept of equality on a global level would be to take pride in a trait that every human has, thus leaving race and ethnicity out of the picture.

Discussion

It is a popular assumption that eradicating racism and ethnocentrism may be the largest step toward establishing global equality. While many people in the U.S. today champion the modern concept of equality, it appears that not everyone understands its origin or how it was intended to be achieved. In order to discuss ways in which the modern concept of equality can be achieved in the presence or absence of racial/ethnic pride, one must examine the history of equality.

Capaldi (2002) suggests the origin of the modern concept of equality can be traced back to the original writings of the biblical New Testament, and were widely accepted in the 1500's after the Protestant Reformation (pp. 1-11). In his letter to the Galatians, the apostle Paul wrote, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). This concept can also be traced to the biblical

Old Testament, in verses such as Genesis 1:27 (“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them”).

The context of the above verses was one where the people of Israel were expecting a savior to free them from the bondage of the Roman Empire and restore the power they believed they were born to inherit (Acts 1:6). What they received instead was a man claiming to be their savior performing what they believed were demonic tricks and exclaiming that they were of no more value than any other humans, including their captors (Matthew 22:21). This man would be remembered as the infamous Jesus of Nazareth. The message that would be derived from these writings was that every human is equally valuable yet powerless under the rule of a creator. This is the underlying justification for what many consider to be the modern concept of equality.

Over time, these writings would be misrepresented, perhaps most severely in the Middle Ages. Medieval Christianity misrepresented biblical teachings of equality through its hierarchical church system, which suggested that some Christians (not all) deserved superior religious and economic status (priest, pope, monk, etc.). This was, in a sense, a religious and economic form of tribalism or pride. As Capaldi (2002) notes, the modern American concept of equality derives from the Protestant Reformation, which occurred after Martin Luther confronted with his “one hundred theses” the hierarchical church system that held religious, political and economic power (pp. 1-11).

Other misrepresentations of the roots of American equality have also occurred. In fact, given the human tendency toward tribalism and racial and ethnic pride, it is important to distinguish between the above writings themselves and the actions of many people who have claimed to be followers of the writings, particularly Christians. Sanou (2015) observes that:

Tribalism and racism have negatively influenced quite a number of people in the Christian church, leaving their faith and professional ethics compromised. This phenomenon is not only corrupting, it is also eroding the authenticity and mission of the church. Tribalism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are divisive elements to the body of Christ. As a result of the selfish propensities of human nature, tribalism and racism are incompatible with the Christian faith (p. 102).

These realities are ironic and almost comedic in their presentation. One would expect the followers or rather perpetuators of these beliefs to practice them in everyday life. Unfortunately, as Sanou describes, this has scarcely been the case throughout the history of both Catholicism and Protestantism.

Secular misinterpretations of equality have also been a key aspect in the history and creation of the United States. Friedman (1990) states that:

Thomas Jefferson ... wrote ‘all men are created equal’ ... in the ... Declaration [of Independence, adding that they are] ‘endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.’ ... Yet the Declaration he drafted had either to be blatantly violated by the nation he did so much to create and form or slavery had to be abolished. Little wonder that the early decades of the Republic saw a rising tide of controversy about the institution of slavery. That controversy ended in a Civil War (pp. 129-131).

Of course, this controversy would continue through Jim Crow, segregation and the concept of “separate but equal,” all of which sought to justify and rationalize tribalism and racial and ethnic pride as not inconsistent with equality. Yet as U.S. history before and since the Civil War (including events like the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King, Jr.) suggests, the American tendency has been to correct those misinterpretations and to work toward equality.

Being able to celebrate our differences (racial or ethnic dignity) without acting on them in a prideful, negative way (racism or ethnocentrism) seems more possible today than at any time in American history. Yet today there is a growing concern that our differences are not just cause for celebration, but grounds for separation, among other things with the goal of pursuing political agendas. When U.S. political parties begin to depend on and appeal to the votes of separate racial and ethnic groups, as the Pew Research Center (2016) suggests they have recently done, the concept of “separate but equal” seems ready to make a comeback.

If the modern concept of equality is to be accomplished, it cannot be misinterpreted in any way. More than anything else, this means that racial and ethnic pride cannot coexist with what many people believe to be equality. If we are to live in (or return to) a world where people can place unjustifiable amounts of value on their race or ethnicity while simultaneously claiming to believe that every human is created equal, we will need to create a term other than equality to address this abnormality.

Conclusion

Racial or ethnic pride are traits that many groups hold dear. While it may seem to be an irrational and even insurmountable task to ask anyone to diminish such pride, Americans must strive to do this. In order for the widely-championed modern concept of equality to be accomplished, humanity must drastically decrease if not eradicate any value they would otherwise give to their racial or ethnic heritage. The first step is becoming clear on the difference between pride and dignity. Racial and ethnic dignity lets us celebrate our individuality without sacrificing unity as whole; racial and ethnic pridefulness, by contrast, divides us by color, kin or creed. A large portion of this country’s history has been dedicated to eliminating these divisions, most recently through things like the civil rights movement. Current trends focusing on racial identity pose a

risk of undoing these efforts and returning us to a nation that is separate and unequal, this time by choice rather than by force.

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