

American Racism in the ‘White Frame’

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This is the next installment in a series of interviews on race that I am conducting for The Stone. This week’s conversation is with Joe Feagin, a sociologist, and a leading researcher of racism in the United States for more than 40 years. He teaches at Texas A & M University and is the author of more than 60 books, including the forthcoming “How Blacks Built America: Labor, Culture, Freedom, and Democracy.”

George Yancy: To what extent does your work as a sociologist overlap or pertain to what we might concern ourselves with as philosophers?

Photo



Joe Feagin

Credit

Joe Feagin: I have been deeply concerned with issues of social and moral philosophy since college. I majored in philosophy as an undergraduate and then went to Harvard Divinity School, where I worked with philosopher-theologians in social ethics, European theology and comparative religions. I studied with Paul Tillich, Richard R. Niebuhr, Arthur Darby Nock and others. When I switched to doctoral work in sociology at Harvard, I studied with the theoreticians Talcott Parsons, George Homans, Robert Bellah, Charles Tilly and Gordon Allport. Allport and his young colleague Tom Pettigrew got me seriously interested in studying racial-ethnic theory in social science as well as the empirical reality of racism in the United States. During this decade (the 1960s) I was also greatly influenced by major African-American social analysts of racism, like W.E.B. Du Bois, Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton. More recently, my work has been used by

philosophers of race including Lewis Gordon, Charles Mills, Linda Alcoff, Tommy Curry — and yourself.

To understand well the realities of American racism, one must adopt an analytical perspective focused on the systemic white racism that is central and foundational to this society.

G. Y.: In your book “The White Racial Frame,” you argue for a new paradigm that will help to explain the nature of racism. What is that new paradigm and what does it reveal about race in America?

J.F.: To understand well the realities of American racism, one must adopt an analytical perspective focused on the what, why and who of the systemic white racism that is central and foundational to this society. Most mainstream social scientists dealing with racism issues have relied heavily on inadequate analytical concepts like prejudice, bias, stereotyping and intolerance. Such concepts are often useful, but were long ago crafted by white social scientists focusing on individual racial and ethnic issues, not on society’s systemic racism. To fully understand racism in the United States, one has to go to the centuries-old counter-system tradition of African-American analysts and other analysts of color who have done the most sustained and penetrating analyses of institutional and systemic racism.

G.Y.: So, are you suggesting that racial prejudices are only half the story? Does the question of the systemic nature of racism make white people complicit regardless of racial prejudices?

J.F.: Prejudice is much less than half the story. Because prejudice is only one part of the larger white racial frame that is central to rationalizing and maintaining systemic racism, one can be less racially prejudiced and still operate out of many other aspects of that dominant frame. That white racial frame includes not only racist prejudices and stereotypes of conventional analyses, but also racist ideologies, narratives, images and emotions, as well as individual and group inclinations to discriminate shaped by the

other features. Additionally, all whites, no matter what their racial prejudices and other racial framings entail, benefit from many racial privileges routinely granted by this country's major institutions to whites.

G.Y.: The N.A.A.C.P. called the murder of nine African-Americans in the historic Emanuel A.M.E. Baptist Church in Charleston, S.C., an "act of racial terrorism"? Do you think that definition is correct?

J.F.: According to media reports, the alleged murderer Dylann Roof has aggressively expressed numerous ideas, narratives, symbols and emotions from an openly white supremacist version of that old white racial frame. The N.A.A.C.P. terminology is justified, given that the oldest terrorist group still active on the planet is the Ku Klux Klan. We must also emphasize the larger societal context of recurring white supremacist actions, which implicates white Americans more generally. Mainstream media commentators and politicians have mostly missed the critical point that much serious anti-black and pro-white framing proclaimed by supremacist groups is still shared, publicly or privately, by many other whites. The latter include many whites horrified at what these white terrorist groups have recently done.

G.Y.: I realize that this question would take more space than we have here, but what specific insights about race can you share after four decades of research?

J.F.: Let me mention just two. First, I have learned much about how this country's racial oppression became well institutionalized and thoroughly systemic over many generations, including how it has been rationalized and maintained for centuries by the broad white racist framing just mentioned. Another key insight is about how long this country's timeline of racial oppression actually is. Most whites, and many others, do not understand that about 80 percent of this country's four centuries have involved extreme racialized slavery and extreme Jim Crow legal segregation. As a result, major racial inequalities have been deeply institutionalized over about 20 generations. One key feature of

systemic racism is how it has been socially reproduced by individuals, groups and institutions for generations. Most whites think racial inequalities reflect differences they see as real — superior work ethic, greater intelligence, or other meritorious abilities of whites. Social science research is clear that white-black inequalities today are substantially the result of a majority of whites socially inheriting unjust enrichments (money, land, home equities, social capital, etc.) from numerous previous white generations — the majority of whom benefited from the racialized slavery system and/or the de jure (Jim Crow) and de facto overt racial oppression that followed slavery for nearly a century, indeed until the late 1960s.

G.Y.: What then are we to make of the concept of American meritocracy and the Horatio Alger narrative — the rags to riches narrative?

J.F.: These are often just convenient social fictions, not societal realities. For centuries they have been circulated to justify why whites as a group have superior socioeconomic and power positions in American society. In the white frame's pro-white subframe whites are said to be the hardest-working and most meritorious group. Yet the sociologist Nancy DiTomaso has found in many interviews with whites that a substantial majority have used networks of white acquaintances, friends and family to find most jobs over their lifetimes. They have mostly avoided real market competition and secured good jobs using racially segregated networks, not just on their "merit." Not one interviewee [out of approximately 150 to 200] expressed seeing anything wrong with their use of this widespread system of white favoritism, which involves "social capital" passed along numerous white generations.

G.Y.: Can we talk about race in America without inevitably talking about racism?

J.F.: No, we cannot. In its modern racialized sense the term "race" was created by white American and European analysts in the 17th and 18th centuries in order to explain how they, as "good

Christians,” could so extensively and brutally oppress, initially, indigenous and African Americans. There was no well-developed American hierarchy of “races,” a key feature of systemic racism, before white Europeans and white Americans made that the societal reality in the Americas by means of the Atlantic slave trade and the genocidal theft of indigenous peoples’ lands. Whites were soon framed as the virtuous and “superior race,” while those oppressed were dehumanized as the “inferior races.”

G.Y.: There are some who argue that slavery existed in Africa before the arrival of Europeans. Assuming that this is true, was it different or similar to forms of slavery in the Americas?

J.F.: Many white analysts, and some analysts of color operating out of the white frame, like to immediately bring up this subject of slavery somewhere else when U.S. slavery should be at issue. In such cases, it is usually an argument designed to avoid dealing forthrightly with the subject of this country’s economic and political foundation on one of the worst types of slavery systems ever created in any society.

My answer is this: Let us first fully confront and understand the horrific reality of two-plus centuries of our extreme enslavement system, its great immorality and its many horrific legacies persisting through the Jim Crow era and still operative in the present day, and then we can deal with the issue of comparative slavery systems. By no means have we as scholars and citizens accomplished this first and far more important task. Indeed, relatively few whites today know or care about the terrible legacies of our slavery and Jim Crow systems, including the fact that we still live under an undemocratic Constitution undemocratically made, and early implemented, by leading white slaveholders.

G.Y.: What implications does the white racial frame have for blacks, Asians, Latinos and those from the Middle East in our contemporary moment?

J.F.: That white frame is made up of two key types of subframes: The most-noted and most-researched are those negatively targeting people of color. In addition, the most central subframe,

often the hardest to “see,” especially by whites, is that reinforcing the idea of white virtuousness in myriad ways, including superior white values and institutions, the white work ethic, and white intelligence. This white-virtue framing is so strong that it affects the thinking not only of whites, but also of many people of color here and overseas. Good examples are the dominant American culture’s standard of “female beauty,” and the attempts of many people of color to look, speak, or act as “white” as they can so as to do better in our white-dominated institutions.

G.Y.: In your book “The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism” (co-authored with Debra Van Ausdale), there is a section on children and how they learn about race and racism, and examples of children exhibiting explicit racist behavior at very young ages. What did you learn about how young children learn ways of racial framing?

J.F.: One major discovery from nearly a year of field observations that Debra did in that multiracial day care center was that white children learn major elements of the dominant white racial frame at an earlier age than many previous researchers had recognized. Backed up now by much other social science research, we know that many white children as young as 2- to 4-years-old have already learned and used key features of the white racist frame. Our research shows that these children have learned not only elements of the anti-others subframes, but also the strong white-virtue subframe.

One example of this latter subframe involved a white child confronting an Asian child who was starting to pull a school wagon. She put her hands on her hips and arrogantly made the assertion that “only white Americans can pull this wagon.” In these field observations we also found that young children of all backgrounds gain knowledge of racial framing from peers in classrooms and play settings, not just from relatives in home settings. Moreover, in everyday interactions they frequently did much more than imitate what they had heard or seen from others.

They regularly acted on their racist framing in their own creative ways.

G.Y.: You've mentioned images and emotions and how they are linked to the racial frame. There have been studies that demonstrate a strong relationship between ape images of black people that are emotion-laden for those who project such images. Say a bit about these findings.

J.F.: That commonplace ape framing involves vicious stereotyping, narratives and emotion-laden imagery. That complexity is why we need a broader white racial frame concept. Only a little research and theorizing have been done on the emotions of that white frame, but in my research they clearly include at least white anger, hostility, disgust, fear, envy and greed. There is research linking ape imagery to white reactions to black faces and white attributions of black criminality. For more than two centuries that blacks-as-apes imagery has been part of the dehumanizing process enabling whites, who see themselves as "good people," to engage in extensive racial oppression. Our most famous white "founder," Thomas Jefferson, in his major book, "Notes on the State of Virginia," even suggested that Africans had sex with apes.

G.Y.: Has there been similar research that shows racist images that are emotion-laden when it comes to images of Asian-Americans, Latinos, and others?

J.F.: Much research on Asian-Americans, Latinos, and other groups shows there are numerous racist images of these groups as well, although the white-racist emotions that are unmistakably attached to them have again been little studied. One good example of this emotionally laden framing that has some research is the extraordinarily racist sexualization that white men often direct at Asian women, Asian-American women, and U.S. and other Latinas, such as on the Internet websites exoticizing these women for white male sexual and related purposes.

G.Y.: Has research revealed that black people also have such racist images and value-laden frames when it comes to their perception of white people?

J.F.: The research explicitly on such black framing of whites is less extensive, but the substantial research interviewing of black Americans that my colleagues and I have done over recent decades strongly suggests that black framing of whites is usually different and generally more direct-experience-related. There are very few generic jokes stereotyping whites in our interviews with blacks, and what pained joking there is, is mostly about the actual discrimination black interviewees have experienced from whites. Analyzing white and black college student diaries about racial events in everyday life, Leslie Houts Picca and I found that the white students mostly described racist conversations and other racist actions of white acquaintances, friends and relatives that targeted people of color, such as whites telling N-word jokes or racially taunting black people in public settings. In significant contrast, most black and other student-of-color diaries from students at these same colleges recorded white racist actions targeting the diarists themselves or acquaintances and relatives. Black understandings of whites are typically based on much negative and discriminatory experience with whites. The reverse rarely seems to be the case in our extensive field interviewing.

G.Y.: Briefly distinguish between what you call backstage racism and front-stage racism. What does backstage racism tell us about the insidious nature of racism?

J.F.: The in-depth data my colleagues and I have collected over the last few decades strongly indicate that the anti-black and pro-white framing of most whites has changed much less than is often asserted, including by researchers depending on brief attitudinal measures and opinion polls. The appearance of major change in white racist framing is created by the fact that many whites have learned to suppress a front-stage expression of some or much of their overtly racist framing — such as in public settings where there are people present who are unknown to

them. However, data such as that noted previously for white college students reveal that a great many whites still assert and perform a blatantly racist framing of people of color in backstage settings — that is, where only whites such as friends and relatives are present.

G.Y.: Given your emphasis upon racial frames, in what ways can people begin to undo those racial frames?

J.F.: That is the difficult question for the social health and democratic future of this country. We have a modest research literature dealing with successful deframing and reframing of people's racist views, one much smaller than that measuring racial stereotyping and prejudice. One reason is that we have been handicapped by the narrow and individualistic concepts of stereotyping and prejudice, and few researchers have adopted a perspective problematizing a broader and dominant white racial framing. Getting rid of a few racial stereotypes is hard enough, and there has been some success at that, but when they are connected to hundreds of other "bits" of racist stereotyping, ideology, imagery, emotions and narratives of that white racial frame, it is even harder to begin a successful process of substantial deframing and reframing toward an authentic liberty-and-justice framing. Such reframing takes great effort and a long period of time in my experience. Nonetheless, some social science research is encouraging in regard to changing at least limited aspects of that dominant white frame.

G.Y.: Lastly, what does social science have to teach philosophers when it comes to thinking about the reality of race and racism?

J.F.: We all have a lot to learn from the best social science dealing empirically and theoretically with the centuries-old reality of this country's white racism, especially that revealing well its systemic and foundational character and how it has been routinely reproduced over 20 generations. Also, in my view the best philosophers on such white racism matters, among them you and my colleague Tommy Curry, are ahead of most social scientists on

such critical societal issues. So, social scientists, indeed all of us, have much to learn from the best philosophical analysts as well! *This interview was conducted by email and edited. Previous interviews in this series (with Linda Martin Alcoff, Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Charles Mills, Falguni A. Sheth, Peter Singer and others) can be found [here](#).*



George Yancy is a professor of philosophy at Emory University. He has written, edited and co-edited numerous books, including “Black Bodies, White Gazes,” “Look, a White!” and “Pursuing Trayvon Martin,” co-edited with Janine Jones.