

# The struggle to overcome racism

The linking of skin colour with inferiority has been one of the most powerful and destructive intellectual ideas of all time, leading directly to slavery, civil war, and, more recently, segregation and apartheid. **Nina Jablonski** tells the extraordinary and troubling story of the “colour meme”

*“The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex... all laws which discriminate on grounds of race, colour or belief shall be repealed”*

THESE uplifting and momentous sentiments come from the Freedom Charter of South Africa of 1955. They were to be echoed later in the country’s 1996 constitution. Similar phrases were enshrined in the US Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the UK Race Relations Act of 1965. By the latter half of the 20th century, discrimination on the basis of race, colour, gender, religion or national origin was considered a violation of basic human rights.

Despite this, the differential treatment of people by race and colour has persisted, especially in countries like the US and South Africa, with long histories of legalised segregation and discrimination. That such ideas continue into the 21st century is viewed with disbelief by academics and scientists, who are quick to cite evidence that biological races don’t exist and that races are “only” social constructs. Yet for many of the world’s people, the lived experience of race cannot be ignored. Despite ever more genetic evidence confirming the nonexistence of races, belief in the inherent superiority and inferiority of peoples remains a strong enough influence to make lives miserable.

Many of these ideas of innate superiority are based on a belief in a hierarchy of skin colour. When we explore the roots of this problem, we see it is based on the mistaken belief that differing intellectual capacities and potential, moral resolve and behavioural predilections are related to skin colour and

race, grading from white to black. The persistence of hidden and strong racism, then, is rooted in a deep-seated and unscientific acceptance of genetic determinism, the conviction that different groups of people are born with different inherent capacities, and that these determine a natural social order.

## Protective pigment

To make a start at unravelling the origins and persistence of this erroneous belief system, let us consider first how the diversity of human skin colouration evolved. Melanin pigment is responsible for the nearly infinite gradations of brown that characterise human skin. Melanin in its darkest form, eumelanin, is the most important and common pigment in skin and is one of the most effective sunscreens in nature because of its ability to absorb ultraviolet (UV) radiation.

All humans evolved in Africa under strong equatorial sun and had skin that was dark and rich in protective eumelanin. For more than half of the history of our species, from roughly 200,000 to 80,000 years ago, we were Africans and our pigmentation was fine-tuned as we moved and adapted to local conditions across Africa.

Small groups of darkly pigmented people began dispersing out of the continent about 80,000 years ago. Some early migrants moved along the coasts of southern Asia. Others

**“For more than half of the history of our species, we were Africans”**



penetrated the hinterland of western Asia with its considerably less sunny and more seasonal regime of UV radiation. Some of those hinterland populations eventually moved into eastern Asia, whereas others made their way into central and eventually northern Europe. The migrations brought people into places that were less and less sunny, and genetic changes – mutations – occurred to produce lightly pigmented skin.

Ultraviolet radiation is mostly harmful, but small amounts of UVB are necessary for producing vitamin D in the skin. The evolution of depigmented skin meant that people living in places with low levels of UVB could produce vitamin D. The fact that it evolved wherever UVB was scant attests to the power of natural



MARTIN PARR/MAGNUMPHOTOS

selection to produce similar phenotypes in response to similar environmental conditions. Some lightly or moderately pigmented populations moved back into strong sunlight and intense UV and, predictably, became darker again. So changes in skin pigmentation were adjustments to prevailing conditions. Because of the skin's importance as the body's primary defence against the environment, it has been under intense natural selection for most of our history.

As human populations expanded, many groups that had previously been isolated from one another began to make contact and trade: along the Nile river and the shores of the Mediterranean, people with visibly different skin colours began to have routine contact

with one another. What occurred there is instructive and salutary. From the art and historical records of ancient Egypt and Greece, we know that people recognised differences in skin colour, but that these differences did not affect their relationships or business transactions. Skin colour was noticed, but it was not equated with human worth.

We notice skin colour because it is our most visible trait and because we are highly visually oriented animals. This doesn't mean we are genetically programmed to be biased, rather that we form our impressions of others and the world primarily through what we see. We compare new perceptions to visually based memories. Our reliance on vision permeates every aspect of our lives as social beings. We

### Noticing skin colour doesn't mean we are genetically programmed to be prejudiced

observe people around us keenly, and when we don't know what to do, we often decide by watching the actions of those we know well or respect. When we are small, we observe and imitate our parents and caregivers, and pay close attention to the social nuances conveyed by body language. Heightened visual awareness and adept imitation help to ensure that we fit into our social group.

These activities are also conducive to being liked and having positive behaviours directed towards us. We not only look at how authority figures act, but we listen carefully and imitate their social categories. As small children, we ➤



learn a lot from subtle visual and verbal cues about who is in our extended family and who is not. We learn to prefer individuals or groups that adults around us have emphasised, even if the adults have never said anything explicitly good or bad about them.

So the transmission of bias starts slowly and subtly. We learn to put people into categories on the basis of similarities in the way they look or act and by how authority figures around us act around them. Our minds seem to be organised in a way that makes it easy to classify people into distinct groups and then to favour our own group, the “in-group”.

But our reactions towards members of out-groups are not automatically negative, nor are they all-or-nothing. They are determined by neural responses in the brain (especially in the amygdala) that develop as we detect fear or anxiety in those around us and begin to feel or mirror it ourselves. Brain reactions to out-groups by themselves don’t create stereotypes, but repeated reinforcement of positive or negative associations do. It is especially the verbal labels that count.

In fact, the nature of the social contacts and trading networks between the peoples living along the Nile and the shores of the Mediterranean from about 3150 BC until around AD 476 were determined by similarities and differences in culture and language, not by skin colour. Slavery existed, but the enslaved were usually captives of war regardless of colour.

But all this changed after the Middle Ages as long-distance sea travel became faster, safer and more common, making it possible for people to come into contact with distant “others” abruptly, often without previous knowledge of each other’s existence, and being mutually startled by each other’s appearance. Such meetings were rarely on equal social or military grounds. European explorers travelling by sea were looking for plunder and were hardly egalitarian in their attitudes. Darkly pigmented skin astonished most Europeans and their travelogues of the time described the colour of distant peoples in lurid and often pejorative terms.

## PROFILE

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The first scientific taxonomy of humans was created by Carl Linnaeus in the first edition of his *Systema Naturae* in 1735, when he separated humans into four varieties by skin colour and continent. By 1758, Linnaeus had further defined these groups by temperament – sanguine for Europeans, melancholic for Asians, choleric for Native Americas and phlegmatic for Africans.

The combining of folk beliefs about aptitudes and character with physical traits in an authoritative classification created the intellectual foundation for racism as we know it. From this point, demeaning associations of character, culture and physiognomy could be included in treatises on human variation and be considered scientific rather than as personal and emotional expressions of disgust, discomfort and prejudice.

## “Lightly pigmented or ‘white’ skin became the norm from which others deviated”

Less than 30 years after Linnaeus’s revised taxonomy, Immanuel Kant published his own influential ruminations on human variation in 1785, in which he named, for the first time, the “races” of humanity (*Rassen* in German) that were defined by skin colour and place of origin. For Kant, races were fixed and immutable. He graded according to his ideas of their talents, with Europeans on top, “yellow Indians” possessing meagre talent, “Negroes” being far below them, and at the lowest point, “Americans”. Although Kant was challenged by powerful critics from among his contemporaries, including philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder and naturalist and anatomist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, he remained wedded to his definitions.

For Kant and most theorists that followed, the equation of skin colour with character signified that lighter coloured races were superior and darker coloured ones inferior, and that members of the latter were destined to serve the former. Kant’s ideas about colour and character achieved wide and lasting acceptance because his writings were widely circulated, his stature as a philosopher and scholar was great and, for the most part, his audience was naive and had no personal experience with the darkly coloured – mostly African – people whom he disparaged in his writings. And so the “colour meme” was born.

The linking of blackness with otherness is one of the most powerful and destructive intellectual constructs of all time. Views on



the inherent superiority and inferiority of races were readily embraced by the intelligentsia of western Europe and eventually by the general populace because they supported existing stereotypes. For those who subscribed to the belief that originally light people turned black because of exposure to extreme heat, the transformation from light to dark was a form of degeneration and a departure from the norm.

The negative association of dark skin with human worth became profitable with the development of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Industrial-scale enslavement of Africans was made socially tolerable by the idea that those being enslaved were considered fit only for servitude. Belief in the inferiority of the dark-



1968: civil rights activists march for black equality on Beale Street in Memphis, Tennessee

of natural law, and to have silenced the reproofs of conscience. They are strangers to every sentiment of compassion, and are an awful example of the corruption of man when left to himself.”

By the early 19th century, darkly pigmented skin signified inferiority and the prospect of profit through slavery, and the possession of lightly pigmented or “white” skin became the norm from which others deviated. The domination of white Europeans over the darker races was “justified” because of the unshakeable but incorrect belief that skin colour was inextricably linked to morality, economy, aesthetics and language.

## Collective reinforcement

The rise of social Darwinism in the late 19th century further reinforced the notion that the superiority of the white race was part of the natural order because certain “stocks” were more highly evolved and culturally superior because of their “fitness” and “adaptations”. The notion of colour had taken on full scientific trappings.

In the US and South Africa, where the subjugation and exploitation of dark-skinned labour was the cornerstone of economic growth, hierarchies of colour were maintained by legal institutions and rhetorical traditions of superiority and inferiority. Over many generations, ideologies of colour-based race became rigid as they were collectively reinforced by stereotypes and multiple cultural traditions. Races persisted along with the implicit hierarchies they imposed.

Race labels associated with negative depictions and narratives have powerful effects both on members of out-groups and of in-groups by planting the idea that their own group is superior, inferior, smarter, stupider, stronger or weaker than another. The label itself becomes determinative of personality and individual experience, and is itself a destination.

Knowing all this means that the colour meme need not direct our destiny. Human attitudes are constantly subject to revision through experience and, more importantly, conscious choice. Biases can be modified and eradicated on the basis of experience and motivation, and stereotypes can be changed when people are motivated to think about someone, in any way, as a member of their own group. We are all one people. ▢

skinned peoples of Africa intensified with the growth of the slave trade.

The dramatic and negative shift in rhetoric toward darkly pigmented Africans is vividly illustrated by comparing two entries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. This one comes from the first, 1771, edition: “NEGROES, properly the inhabitants of Nigritia in Africa, also called blacks and moors; but this name is now given to all the blacks.

“The origin of the negroes, and the cause of this remarkable difference from the rest of the human species, has much perplexed the naturalists. Mr. Boyle has observed, that it cannot be produced by the heat of the climate: for though the heat of the sun may darken the colour of the skin, yet experience does not

shew that it is sufficient to produce a new blackness like that of the negroes.”

By 1823, however, the entry was suffused with pejorative “descriptions” and poisonous invective: “NEGRO, *Homo pelli nigra*, a name given to a variety of the human species, who are entirely black, and are found in the torrid zone, especially in that part of Africa which lies within the tropics. In the complexion of Negroes, we meet with many various shades; but they likewise differ far from other men in all the features of their face... Vices the most notorious seem to be the portion of this unhappy race; idleness, treachery, revenge, cruelty, impudence, stealing, lying, profanity, debauchery, nastiness, and intemperance, are said to have extinguished the principles