



Center for Social Development

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

| APRIL 2015 | CSD PERSPECTIVE 15-05 |

The University, the Community, and Race

By Larry E. Davis

Foreword by Michael Sherraden

In the wake of the recent tragic events in Ferguson, Missouri—only a short distance north of us—Washington University in St. Louis, the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, and the Center for Social Development are creating substantive events and discussions to shine a stronger light onto what has happened and, in particular, to ask ourselves what the university can do as part of the wider community. More clearly, what can the university do that will be of positive and enduring value?

Dr. Larry Davis is dean of and the Donald M. Henderson Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. He is the founding director of the Center on Race and Social Problems and founding editor of the journal *Race and Social Problems*, which features applied research on race, ethnicity, and color.

Before going to Pittsburgh, Dr. Davis served for over 20 years on the faculties of the George Warren Brown School of Social Work and the Department of Psychology at Washington University. He held the Desmond E. Lee Chair in Ethnic and Racial Diversity at Washington University.

Dr. Davis is a social psychologist, and a very good one. He studies interracial group dynamics; the impact of race, gender, and class on interpersonal interactions; African American family formation; and academic achievement of youth.

In his own words, Dr. Davis “loves theory.” He understands the power of theory in conveying essential social dynamics and building knowledge. Perhaps his most important intellectual contribution is the concept of “psychological majority,” which explains why one group may feel threatened by another even when the second group is a numerical minority. Potential applications of this concept are widespread in communities, work organizations, schooling, and many other categories of social relationships.

In both academic and public discourse in the United States, race is very often avoided. We talk more easily about poverty and disadvantage, sometimes as code words for race. In contrast, race has been central to Dr. Davis’s academic and applied agendas. He has always insisted on studying *race itself*—on putting race first and recognizing that race is fundamental to the American experience (indeed, maybe to most modern human experience).

In this regard, Robert Sussman, our colleague in Department of Anthropology at Washington University, has just published *The Myth of Race: The Troubling Persistence of an Unscientific Idea* (2014). Professor Sussman documents that race is entirely a social construct invented by humans, without any biological basis.

As such, the challenges of “race” as a social construct will require *direct attention* to the fundamental falsehood of that construct and to *social solutions*. This is “social work” in a larger sense. The *social work of race* can and should become a stronger focus for social work and public health—in our school and for Washington University overall.

Indeed, Dr. Davis has demonstrated that an urban university can be both scholarly and engaged on the fundamental American topic of the relationship between race and well-being. His key strategy is applied social science, which he employs to test innovations in group relations, community development and design, housing, education, youth opportunity, social services, and criminal justice.

As we at Washington University, the Brown School, and the Center for Social Development—all of us as applied scholars—consider the events in Ferguson, what these events may lead to, and whether and how we can make positive contributions, we are in need of experience, perspective, and wisdom. Larry Davis, as effectively as any applied social scholar in the nation, can help us consider “The University, the Community, and Race,” the topic of his presentation today.

If I may add a personal note, Larry and I were colleagues in graduate school at the University of Michigan, where we had some of the same mentors, and he came to Washington University in 1977, 2 years before I did. When I arrived in 1979 to give my “job talk,” he took me under his wing. I was fortunate to be hired, and we “grew up” together as academics. We have enjoyed discussions, collaborations, and a warm friendship all the way through. His insights on social issues and interpersonal relationships have been enormously beneficial in my own work and in my life overall. Good friends make us better people, and I am grateful that Larry is my good friend.

By any demographic measure, America has entered a new era. America is on a demographic trajectory to having no dominant or hegemonic racial group. The racial balance we now see—30% non-White, 70% White—will be short-lived. This year, for the first

time, newborn minorities outnumber newborn Whites (Tavernise, 2012). We all are now familiar with the census projection that non-Whites will be the majority in the country by the year 2047—a mere 34 years from now. Each of my three sons, presently ages 18, 17,

This perspective has been adapted from an address given at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work, Washington University in St. Louis, November 10, 2014, as part of the Ferguson and Beyond lecture series.

and 15, will be younger in 2047 than I am standing here today. They will be living in a very different America.

And yet, as with the talk I gave in 1977, today's talk will be about race, because race has been and remains America's defining social problem. It has been said that the only thing Americans hate talking about more than class is race. Yet race is fundamental. The facts are that nothing predicts success like wealth, and nothing predicts wealth like race.

Ferguson and Beyond

My talk today is entitled "The University, the Community, and Race." Clearly the situation in Ferguson has heightened the topic of race here at Washington University, as it has for the rest of the country. The Ferguson tragedy has taken on considerable importance for me as well, as two of my three sons live here in St. Louis. For those of us who have studied race for years, and even more so for those of us who live with the indignities of being Black in America, the angry and violent reactions of Blacks to the Michael Brown shooting come as no surprise. We are surprised that so many Whites are surprised.

And in fact, what may be more surprising is that an uprising, such as the one taking place in Ferguson, has not happened somewhere in the country much sooner. Indeed, with the frequent shootings of Blacks throughout America by White policemen and vigilantes, and with incessant racial profiling and harassment, it is truly amazing that even more Black rebellions have not taken place.

We should be reminded that most harassment and other indignities toward Black people go unreported. I remember that my good friend Gerald Early, a faculty member here at Washington University—and with us in this room today—was a victim of police harassment in 1991. Had he not been such a highly recognized college professor, that incident most likely never would have come to light nor been written up in the *New York Times* (Fletcher, 1991). Instead, Professor Early would have been just another insulted and angered Black man.

Foremost, the point I want to make today is that the acts and problems of racism are not limited to Ferguson, nor to just poor and working-class Black people. The racism enacted upon Black people is ubiquitous and virtually impossible for a Black person to avoid, even if that person should happen to be Oprah Winfrey.

Moreover, the problem of race in America is, for sure, not limited to unfair treatment of Blacks by White policeman and others. The problem of race in our society is much more pernicious and pervasive. It affects all aspects of American life: cultural, political, economic, educational, and social. It impacts all of us.

Race and its influence in our society are all that I have ever studied as a scholar and what I think about all of the time. I remember, as a very young boy about 7 years old, asking myself a question: If we were slaves, why are Whites angry with us?

I was well into my doctoral studies before I found a reasonable answer to this question.

But what did come from such ruminations is that I wanted my scholarly work to be useful. While I wanted to be a scholar, I was equally interested in using the information I and others discovered to make our society more racially equitable and just.

Universities have a unique opportunity and responsibility to be involved in addressing America's legacy of racism. Indeed, Washington University, because of its stature, wealth, and physical location, has a unique opportunity. The university can make tremendous contributions to America becoming a better place.

Like most academics, I thought early on that if we just developed information, then society would, without further input from us, use it. Our strategy has been to

- » create some new knowledge
- » and write about it in a journal or book
- » so that some faculty could teach it to their students,
- » hoping that those students would go out somewhere and apply it.

In fairness, all of the above does sometimes happen, but far less often and at a much slower pace than we as academics would like to acknowledge.

We also seemed to have the idea that the information we created would be used to influence the society at large. That is, we were obliged to think nationally (we wanted to be perceived as having national impact) rather than locally. We rarely thought, how can my work be used in my own backyard?

I am reminded of the famous words of Booker T. Washington in his 1895 Atlanta Compromise

Speech, when he admonished Blacks to “Cast down your bucket where you are”—cast it down in making friends ... [with] people of all races by whom we are surrounded” (Washington 1974, p. 584). We might want to think along these lines and examine how our scholarship can impact those closest to us. Indeed, failing to do so could result in the greatest missed opportunity of the 21st century.

More than any other message, this is the takeaway I want this group to leave with: *Our universities have tremendous capacity to do good in the communities around them.* I am not suggesting that we cease to be scholars and researchers but that, along with our scholarship, we think more earnestly about proximal problems and about how we, and our work, might be more useful in addressing the racial problems nearest us.

Our goal should be to make more contributions that have an impact—not just in a high-impact journal, but a more immediate impact in the lives of others around us. Universities, like all of us, might do better with incentives. There might be value in a metric that documents how much of a favorable impact universities have on their immediate communities. For example, the St. Louis region struggles with many of the societal disparities that we see throughout the United States:

- » In Missouri, there is a 19% gap between Black and White high-school graduation rates (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2015).
- » St. Louis has a 20% gap in the unemployment rate between Blacks and Whites—the largest of any city in America (Bump, 2014; Niklaus, 2014).
- » Blacks in St. Louis have a poverty rate that is almost 30% higher than the White poverty rate.

These are devastating statistics. They represent not just social injustice but also stress, ill health, and pain. They represent lost and lower productivity. “Black lives matter,” yet we go along day after day, year after year, as if these deep disparities are just “the way things are” and therefore somehow acceptable.

Washington University can, by the greater utilization of all of its departments and schools, assist in the reduction of these travesties. I am happy to say that some work here at the university is already addressing local problems. For example, the work of Professor Jason Purnell on racial health disparities in the region has shown that the health issues that affect Blacks affect all of us.

Race, the University, and Insights from the Center on Race and Social Problems

The university should be an oasis of useful information and strategies. Communities should wish to cluster around us as we provide valuable information to aid in the amelioration of their many problems.

I did not always think so provincially. I was trained at the University of Michigan, where our mantra was to change the world, not necessarily the community. In 2002, I founded the Center on Race and Social Problems at the University of Pittsburgh. The center is multidisciplinary in its approach and multiracial in its focus. It provides a place for people, both from the university and the community, to discuss what is usually a taboo topic. In 2010, the center hosted the three-day conference on *Race in America*. It was the largest conference on race ever held in the United States.

The center has been of great benefit to the university, the immediate community, and others throughout the country. Because of the success of the center, I would like to talk with you today about some of its accomplishments. I believe that these examples can be of value to Washington University and the St. Louis community. They may be particularly relevant as the events in Ferguson prompt reconsideration of the university’s role in the community.

Founding the center was something I had longed to do for some time, and again my foremost goal was to build something that would be useful. The center focuses on race-related social problems in the following seven areas:

- » criminal justice
- » economic disparities
- » educational disparities
- » families, youth, and the elderly
- » health
- » interracial group relations
- » mental health

And while the center supports many different activities, from mentoring to scholarship, there are three aspects I’d like to discuss with you today: the Speaker Series, the Summer Institutes, and the Race Research Online Directory.

The Speaker Series

The Center on Race and Social Problems Speaker Series has had national speakers from all over the country. They speak across the seven areas on which the center's work focuses. We have had experts such as Alice Goffman from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, who talks about Black males on the run in America; Elijah Anderson from Yale, who talks about street life; and Gary Orfield from Harvard, who focuses on educational disparities. We've also had speakers from Washington University. These have included Michael Sherraden, who talks about differential wealth accumulation; Gerald Early, who talks about culture; and Mark Rank, who talks about poverty. Over 100 speakers have given addresses at the center. Each lecture is recorded—they can all now be seen by anyone without fees—they are a public resource. We believe that we have, at present, the most comprehensive collection of lectures on race in the country.

What makes this lecture series most beneficial and useful is that we have a diverse audience. It is made up not only of faculty and students but also of dozens of community members, who, in turn, pass along this knowledge to their fellow workers and colleagues across the region. Important to us is the fact that we provide for the region a forum to discuss race and possible solutions to problems that accompany it.

The Summer Institutes

The Summer Institutes were created in part as a response to the traditionally long process by which academic findings get into the hands of individuals engaged in some kind of practice. As we all know, social problems do not wait on publication dates. The ultimate goal of the Summer Institutes is to translate research into relevant and practical information for immediate use by civic leaders, policymakers, and practitioners. Topics can fall within any of the seven areas on which the center's work focuses. However, unlike the Speaker Series, which is open to the public, the Summer Institutes are by invitation only. Usually, about 50 people with an immediate connection to the topic at hand are asked to attend.

For example, in the summer of 2008, we held an institute on criminal justice. We invited experts in the field, including professionals from the Center for Crime Prevention and Control at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice; the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections; the National Center for Juvenile Justice; the Urban Institute; and

the School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. They spoke to an audience that included caseworkers from Allegheny County's Office of Children, Youth, and Families; rehabilitation counselors; Pittsburgh's chief of police and police officers; probation and parole officers; foundation leaders; health care workers; and others. We believe that, through this process, attendees gain the most up-to-date thinking on a topic, and the information is put immediately into the hands of those who can use it—thereby shortening a potentially long-term educational process.

The Race Research Online Directory

Our latest project has, I believe, the potential to achieve the broadest impacts. It is the Race Research Online Directory. For more than 10 years, we have gathered work on race, color, and ethnicity from the country's top scholars. The directory makes all of this scholarly information available at the touch of a button:

- » More than 100 videos of lectures from the Speaker Series, Summer Institutes, and the Race in America conference
- » Documents from pilot studies and other research projects at the center
- » Hundreds of publications, including the center's journal, *Race and Social Problems*
- » Educational resources such as graduate course listings and award-winning student papers
- » A calendar and a list of all center activities

The directory realizes our goal of offering this information to the widest possible audience. And because it provides users with easy access to some of the very best race-related research, it can serve as a valuable resource for social change.

Who can use the Race Research Online Directory? The answer is *everyone*. The directory is not just for researchers and scholars. It has the potential to reach wide audiences. Foremost, it allows for timely information to be viewed by local, grassroots, and community groups—churches, poverty centers, and others—groups that may lack the resources to bring in speakers or that are unable to visit a nearby university. Now all they need is access to the Internet. In short, the directory enables us to expand our reach into the communities around us and across the country. The Race Research Online Directory can become a powerful tool in providing useful information to the community, but we also need a better way to let community groups know about the resources that are available.

Summary and Direction

I hope the above example illustrates that universities can have a major role in addressing and resolving racial difficulties in America. Universities can have perhaps their greatest impact on those individuals and communities nearest them. For this to occur, three things must be present.

The first is *need*. The need for addressing racial problems is clear:

- » High-school dropout rates hover around 50% for many African American communities.
- » Year after year, the African American unemployment rate is double that of Whites (Weller and Fields, 2011).
- » During the past 10 years, one in six Black men has been incarcerated.
- » Homicide is the primary cause of death for Black males between the ages of 15 and 34 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2014).
- » In fact, 40% of the African American males who died in that age group (15-34 years) were murdered; that was the cause of death for under 4% of White males in the same age group.
- » Black Americans earn only 60% of the income of Whites, and they hold approximately one-twentieth of the net worth of Whites (Luhby, 2014; Taylor, Kochhar, Fry, Velasco, & Motel, 2011).
- » Even more shockingly, about 35% of Black households have zero or negative net worth, compared with 15% of White households (Taylor et al., 2011, p. 16).

Having established need, the second element is *capacity*. A university must have the capacity to help. Big universities such as ours have the resources and the talent to be transformative in almost any community. For example, we have a wealth of faculty in business, education, law, economics, and social work. Each of these disciplines could be incredibly useful in addressing the problems of racism in America. Most universities also possess endowments that give them substantial financial capacities and flexibility to reach out to surrounding communities.

Finally, the third element—perhaps the most important one of all—is *will*. Universities must have the will to engage in fighting racism. This is something that each university, its faculty and staff, and its students must determine for themselves.

References

- Bump, P. (2014, August 18). How Ferguson happened. *Washington Post*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/the-fix/wp/2014/08/18/how-ferguson-happened/>
- Fletcher, T. M. (1991, November 24). Action by Missouri police raises questions of racism. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/11/24/us/action-by-missouri-police-raises-questions-of-racism.html>
- Luhby, T. (2014, August 21). 5 disturbing stats on Black-White inequality. *CNN Money*. Retrieved from <http://money.cnn.com/2014/08/21/news/economy/black-white-inequality/>
- National Center for Health Statistics. (2014, December 31). Deaths, percent of total deaths, and death rates for the 15 leading causes of death in 5-year age groups, by race and sex: United States, 1999-2013 (National Vital Statistics System Table LCWK1). Retrieved from http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/LCWK1_2013.pdf
- Niklaus, D. (2014, August 17). Frustration in North County has deep economic roots. *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. Retrieved from http://m.stltoday.com/business/columns/david-nicklaus/nicklaus-frustration-in-north-county-has-deep-economic-roots/article_3e54262d-59b5-5e2a-beac-349d0f63a1e8.html?mobile_touch=true
- Schott Foundation for Public Education. (2015). *Black lives matter: The Schott 50 state report on public education and Black males* (Report). Cambridge, MA: Author. Retrieved from <http://blackboysreport.org/bbreport2015.pdf>
- Sussman, R. W. (2014). *The myth of race: The troubling persistence of an unscientific idea*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Tavernise, S. (2012, May 17). Whites account for under half of births in U.S. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/17/us/whites-account-for-under-half-of-births-in-us.html>
- Taylor, P., Kochhar, R., Fry, R., Velasco, G., & Motel, S. (2011). *Twenty-to-one: Wealth gaps rise to record highs between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics* (Social and Demographic Trends Report). Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/07/SDT-Wealth-Report_7-26-11_FINAL.pdf
- Washington, B. T. (1974). The standard printed version of the Atlanta Exposition Address. In Louis R. Harlan (Ed.), *The Booker T. Washington Papers*:

Vol. 3. 1889-95 (pp. 583-587). Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Weller, C. E., & Fields, J. (2011). The Black and White labor gap in America: Why African Americans struggle to find jobs and remain employed compared to Whites (Report). Washington, DC: Center for American Progress. Retrieved from https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/07/pdf/black_unemployment.pdf

Author

Larry E. Davis, PhD, is dean and Donald M. Henderson Professor in the School of Social Work, and founding director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, University of Pittsburgh.

Suggested citation

Davis, L. E. (2015). *The university, the community, and race* (CSD Perspective 15-05). St. Louis, MO: Washington University in St. Louis.



Washington University in St. Louis

GEORGE WARREN BROWN SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

CENTER FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

George Warren Brown School of Social Work

Campus Box 1196

One Brookings Drive

St. Louis, Missouri 63130-4899

csd@wustl.edu

csd.wustl.edu