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Stephen W. Cooper

*Minnesota Department of Human Rights*

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# Bias, Prejudice, and Human Rights in Minnesota

STEPHEN W. COOPER

Several hundred years ago this country embarked on a bold experiment. It was a sharp change from the norms of the world at the time; a world where if you were born into a peasant family, no matter how talented you were, you would grow up to be a peasant. A world where if you were born into royalty, no matter how incompetent you were, you would rule. It was a wasteful system that squandered the vast majority of human potential and talent, not just by failing to nurture it, but, by prohibiting much of it altogether.

Here we chose another model; pursued a different dream. The American dream was to give more people a chance to bring their talents, skills, and insights to society's table. For this to work we had to overcome deeply held biases. At first it was strange to have people of different religions or from different countries working together or to have people whose parents had been nobility working for someone of less exalted parentage, but, slowly this became commonplace and unremarkable.

This new approach, which expanded the base of people who contributed new ideas to society and allowed people to explore more diverse opportunities to find a better career, led to impressive benefits. Not only did we become a fairer and freer nation than what preceded us, but, we also became an economic, political, and moral world leader. The American experiment worked and it worked well.

Unfortunately, even though the essence of the American dream was the recognition that, by expanding opportunity and promoting equality all of society benefited, we followed it only in a piecemeal manner. Group after group has had to challenge its exclusion from the American dream. Women, African-Americans, Hispanic Americans, disabled-Americans, Native-Americans, Asian-Americans, and older Americans all have had to fight over and over just to try to get a level playing field rather than be excluded from opportunities.

Sadly we have seen a ten-year decline after 20 years of progress on issues like racism. The gaps that had been closing in the '60s and '70s in areas like median income, college admissions, unemployment rates, life expectancies, infant mortality, accumulated wealth, etc. have grown significantly during the last decade.

The reason for this is because right in the middle of a successful battle we stopped fighting. It was like taking penicillin for an infection, but stopping too early. The infection which appeared to be gone or on the decline comes back stronger and more resilient than before.

During the decade, private sector commitment waned, personal involvement in working on the problem dropped, successful government programs were terminated or cut back, and a new message was sent from Washington. After five consecutive presidents had sent the clear, tough message that the Federal government would work to eradicate discrimination, a different message was sent. It falsely stated that it was white males who were the likely victims of discrimination and that minorities, women, and other disadvantaged groups had achieved equality and we now were going too far. Even a minute's reflection on what we see around us everyday reveals the incorrectness of these comfortable falsehoods.

Minnesota continues, like all states, to be very segregated. Many neighborhoods and communities are nearly all white, while Indians, Blacks, Hispanics, or Southeast Asians are often concentrated in a few neighborhoods. Surprisingly, many of us work at jobs with all white workforces. Many of us belong to organizations, choose friends, and spend our social time and even go to churches exclusively or disproportionately with people of our own race. Opportunities here in Minnesota are disproportionately shared. Even in Minnesota unemployment rates are higher, life expectancy shorter, college admissions and medium incomes lower; in fact, nearly every measure shows a greatly diminished ability to share in the benefits of life in Minnesota for minority Minnesotans.

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Roslyn Carter put it well when asked to reflect on the Reagan years. She said, "he made us comfortable with our prejudices." That comfort level allows us to avoid examining ourselves and our behavior. A person's race or gender can cause us to immediately judge them, but we fail to admit that we are doing this, much less that it is racist or sexist. Thus race and sex-based behavior goes unchallenged.

All of us know that racism is wrong, so we assume that we are good folks and what we do cannot be racist. Our guide for what is and is not racist becomes our own behavior. Often when we hear somebody or something being accused of racism our sole thinking about the issue is, "would I do that?" If I would, then it isn't racism. Of course, what we do is not racist, but if people act worse than us, then that might be.

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*Stephen Cooper* is Commissioner of the Minnesota Department of Human Rights.

Thus, just about everybody considers themselves unbiased no matter how biased they actually are. We fail to be self-critical of our own actions and those of our community, preferring instead to believe that obvious inequities that exist in society are not the result of treating people differently because of their race, but because of some other reason. Often our biases become part of our common sense and thus even more difficult to root out. Just 10 or 15 years ago our common sense would have told us there were all kinds of things women could not do which now we take for granted they can and do do.

The defense mechanism which protects our racial biases is as crafty, stubborn, and destructive as those of a person with a drinking problem who has not come to grips with it. It's never their behavior and certainly not their drinking which causes problems; it's always something else. Similarly, it's never us and certainly not our biases which cause or contribute to an unfair society. A recent study which observed the frequency with which people would stop and assist a person in distress on a city street found that if the person in distress were European-American, the first person to come upon them would stop and help about two-thirds of the time; but, if the person in distress were African-American, only one-third of the time. What was particularly telling about this study is that when asked why they did or did not stop, not one person of the hundreds asked indicated race had been a factor in their behavior despite the very different outcomes described above. We, as a society, unlike the person with a drinking problem, cannot afford to hit rock bottom. Throughout the world there are disparate situations (Northern Ireland, the Middle East, Sri Lanka, to name but a few) where racial or religious bigotry has led to a complete breakdown between groups who do not trust each other, will not work together, and continue to inflict tremendous damage on each other because the sense of unity, common destiny, shared values, and mutual respect that all societies require to be successful have been shattered. Realizing strong human rights laws are a possible way to make a torn society come back together, Northern Ireland has recently passed equal rights laws similar to our own.

Some of us either openly or secretly think the racial differences in society are neither the result of past or present racism and are not the result of societal bias, but some sort of defect in the victims of this unfair play. However, when objective data is reviewed it dramatically documents the devastating impact of prejudicial behavior in our society, whether it be the Atlanta Constitution newspaper's nationwide study of lending practices for home mortgages by banks and lending institutions, which found Minnesota among the most likely states to deny an African-American's application, when a similarly-situated European-American's application would be approved, or our Department's own investigations.

We have witnessed a 400 percent increase in the number of proven cases of race discrimination in Minnesota over the last five years. These cases include apartment owners in St. Paul and Minneapolis refusing to rent to minorities; a depressing 70 percent of employment agencies we tested accepting discriminatory job referral requests; police officers using racist insults; stores denying service to minorities; attacks on children and adults alike because of their race (according to hate crime reporting statistics last year, Minnesota experienced more race-related hate crimes than Washington, Oregon, Idaho, and Wyoming combined and

since that time our hate crime level has significantly increased) and a stunning emergence of racist jokes as acceptable humor. There has been significant increase in the Metropolitan area in anti-Black sentiment and behavior. Greater Minnesota has experienced similar increases in anti-Hispanic behavior and sentiment.

These feelings seemed to have been triggered by a small increase in the number of minorities living in the area. In both the Metropolitan areas and in Greater Minnesota, the percentage of the population that is minority is well under 10 percent of the total population. This is significantly less than one-half the nation-wide average percentage, but even these small numbers have caused the surfacing of race-based fears, feelings, and, sadly, behavior.

We have seen the creation of new code words for racial feelings. Terms like the "Gary Syndrome" or "The Underclass" are often used to vent race-based feelings and misinformation while pretending to be non-racist. The "Gary Syndrome" was popular a year or so ago and was used as a label for the theory that everything from crime to welfare cost was a result of African Americans moving here from Gary, Indiana. Gary quickly became expansively defined as including Chicago, then St. Louis, and finally in a Herculean leap, Los Angeles — in essence, anybody who was African-American. European-American residents moving here from any of these four cities were never considered as part of the "Syndrome."

When economic conditions were rough in the Dakotas or Iowa or on the Range, naturally nobody used terms like the "Des Moines Syndrome," the "Range Syndrome," or the "Minot Migration" to capture negative stereotypes and community concern about people from those areas. The "Gary Syndrome" became such a convenient scapegoat to ignore problems facing the Metropolitan area that Hennepin County did an in-depth study to document it. Not surprisingly, the study found that there was no validity to the concept. Our crime problems, welfare pressures, and other social service needs were not created by the make-believe "Gary Syndrome," but, by Minnesotans. Other studies also debunked the "Gary Syndrome," but, for some the perception that our problems are caused by the increasing diversification of our population persists. Bias or animus against people of color remains.

In Greater Minnesota numerous similar exaggerated claims have been made blaming problems on Hispanic citizens. Often increases in non-minority populations are viewed positively while increases in minority population are viewed hostilely with a readiness to believe the worst. It is interesting to remember that each spring a large number of people migrate to Minnesota from Texas and each fall return to Texas. These are the Minnesota snowbirds (retired folks avoiding our cold weather) and farm workers. We regard the two groups very differently. In numerous communities throughout the state erroneous and even absurd claims are quickly believed and passed on as fact about minority residents. This forms support for discriminatory beliefs and decision-making. Too often people allow a negative filter to slip in place when thinking about or reacting to minorities. A sort of fly paper, teflon dichotomy takes over, anything negative we hear about minorities we retain, but, non-minorities we forget. So if one annoying incident in ten is with a minority person that's the one we remember and the nine non-minority incidents are quickly forgotten.

In some quarters a justification for our non-response as a society to growing social problems has been to just accept it as inevitable.

Thus, a willingness to accept failure has crept into our political national view. Increases in racism, poverty, and homelessness are ignored with a shrug and a statement about it's too bad, but nothing much can be done about it. That's scary. One of our great strengths has always been our faith in our ability to solve problems. We have always been the can do society. It has powered us through many crisis. Remember when the Soviet Union put Sputnik in orbit and the United States had no meaningful space program. We were startled, embarrassed, and concerned. So, what did we do? President Kennedy announced that in 10 years we would put a person on the Moon. A crazy claim. Within ten years we put a person on the Moon. That is because we had the resolve and confidence to do it. We lose something very precious if we lose our resolve and confidence that we can solve basic social problems. Usually we can solve them if we maintain the resolve to do so.

If we weaken our commitment to keeping the base of opportunity a broad one, not only is increased racism a danger, but also classism. For about five years commentators have been warning about the demise of the middle class and the growing chasm between rich and poor. Let us recall what the middle class is. The middle class is those people who have been well-rewarded (by world standards) for their skills and talents as opposed to their capital. In the United States a person has been able to maintain a comfortable life based on the work they did. It has not been necessary to have large amounts of money to invest in order to live a decent life.

This is changing. Slowly the American economy is starting to mimic that of a third world country. Where wealth is concentrated at the top and salaries, even for highly talented

individuals are not substantial, the buying power of people is low and hence the economy is not geared to creating goods or services for the vast majority of people. Innovation, creativity, and inventions are not the hallmark of such economics. Neither is the ability to assure a decent living for very many of its citizens.

The genius of America has been the concept that everyone would be empowered to use their skills and gifts and be fairly judged and rewarded for them. This encouraged people to strive for excellence. The American dream has been that in America you could grow up to be whatever your talents would allow you to be. You were not locked into a class structure like most the world was and you were able to contribute your unique talents even if they happened to be outside the role society pre ordained for you.

However, America never really did bring everybody to the table. We did make a huge improvement and a fundamental change in outlook. Many countries have long since adopted similar approaches. It is now time to bring the American Dream to all Americans regardless of race or age or sex or disability or any other reason. It is time not only because fairness demands it, but because if we don't, we will quickly lose our competitive edge. We have a tremendous advantage as the world changes into a global economy. Unlike any other country, people from all over the world make up our diverse population. Thus, if we treat each other fairly, we are uniquely poised to be successful in such a world market.

To succeed we must start challenging ourselves, our neighbors, and our state to insist on fairness. We all must look inside ourselves and at the decisions we make to eradicate race based decision making. If we do, Minnesota will succeed as it never has before in this increasingly complex world.