

Are Different Races Incompatible? Far From It.

The narrative of racial relational pessimism is not only inaccurate, but erodes the trust essential for a democratic society



MICHAEL STRAMBLER

OCT 26, 2023



Share



White cat, black cat. Are we all so different that we should give up trying to understand each other? Image Credit: VeravanOudheusden/Getty Images

Our family has two cats, and I've often found myself wondering what it's like to be them. I imagined them driven by a host of competing innate instincts—desire for food, affection, sleep, etc.—and ultimately following the ones that are the strongest in the moment. Humans, on the other hand, can intentionally regulate and suppress instincts that we find unproductive or harmful. But in the end, I've concluded that humans and cats are so deeply different that I can't accurately imagine their experience, so I've given up trying.

Are white and Black people like this? That is, are they so different that they should give up trying to understand each other? If this question sounds absurd to you, we're on the same page. Still, this is a question worth asking because unfortunately it is a relatively common sentiment that Black and white people are so fundamentally different that it's futile for the two to even *try* to genuinely relate to each other. And it feels a lot like racial groups are being treated like different species—as if there's little shared ground that can be identified. The negative implications of adopting such an outlook are severe for the relationships that hold society together. But the good news is that we can do something about it if we take this seriously enough.

Are Interracial Connections Futile?

The most recent example of the bleak racial relational outlook I've seen involved an [interview](#) with Kehinde Andrews about his new book, "[The Psychosis of Whiteness](#)." In fairness, Andrews says his intent is not to generalize psychosis to *all* white people and that whiteness has less to do with skin color than an acceptance of a Eurocentric worldview. But it's worth noting that psychosis is a condition [characterized by a break from reality](#), and at its worst, it literally renders people suffering from it unrelatable. So to the extent that people hold this view, he argues, they're impossible to reason and connect with. And it stands to reason that most of these people would be white.

This view of the futility of meaningful interracial relationships is becoming more mainstream and is well-represented in several top-selling books on race. For example, in his bestselling "[Between the World and Me](#)," Ta-Nehisi Coates said he "will teach [his] boys to have profound doubts that friendship with white people is possible." In her bestselling "[White Fragility](#)," Robin DiAngelo famously recommended that white women should not cry in front of Black people because it triggers traumatic historical memories of distressed white women as the cause for many Black men's torture and

murder. I contend that if you feel forbidden to cry in front of someone, you do not and cannot have a close relationship with that person.

I'm also reminded of one psychiatrist's [talk](#) at the Yale Child Study Center a couple of years back. Her lecture, entitled "The Psychopathic Problem of the White Mind," consisted of a litany of opinions about the deep dysfunction of white people (not whiteness as a concept). Her expressed fantasy of shooting white people captured [headlines](#). But as disturbing as this was, what concerned me even more was something she did. Claiming that when it came to white people, there were "no good apples," she said she had "ghosted" her white friends a few years earlier.

Now, I'm Black, and most of my closest friends are also Black, but I couldn't imagine thinking about or treating my white friends in that way because to me friendship means a connection that is deep, durable and very personal, not group- or identity-based. The thought that "I need to purge my white/Black friends" is inconceivable, especially when the characteristic under consideration is an immutable physical characteristic, not something any of us choose.

A Race-Based 'Relational Pessimism'

What all these examples reflect is what I think of as a race-specific case of relational pessimism. This is the idea that forming genuine, mutually caring relationships across the color line is hopeless, either because white and Black experiences are too different from each other or because white people are too attached to the advantages of their whiteness to care enough for Black people. Admittedly, sometimes relational pessimism is warranted: For example, a relationship between a Christian fundamentalist and a staunch atheist is not likely to work out. The same is true for a relationship between an ardent follower of Black Lives Matter and a vehement supporter of Donald Trump. But these represent extremes, not the norm, and one's race is certainly not a viewpoint.

The central claim of this type of relational pessimism is obviously false. To be true, it would mean that the countless interracial friendships and romantic relationships are dysfunctional or fake, despite the fact that such relationships have experienced [rapid growth](#) in the U.S. over the last 50 years. But more importantly, it pollutes and cheapens interpersonal dynamics by reducing individuals in "other" groups to group

representatives you can only relate to by way of cultural brokers or [allyship](#)—never as true colleagues, friends or life partners.

In the worst of cases, race-based relational pessimism encourages some white people to acquire and flaunt vanity interracial “friendships,” where the goal is to convince themselves and their social groups of their good progressive values. Under these circumstances, interracial relationships become a means for self-congratulation or boosting social status—tokenism on steroids. When some white people on the right take race-based relational pessimism seriously, it can result in what we’ve seen from the likes of [Scott Adams](#), the “Dilbert” comic strip creator, who implored other white people “to get the hell away from Black people” after learning that 47% of Black people indicated that they either disagreed or were unsure in response to the statement “It’s OK to be white.”

For Black people, race-based relational pessimism encourages attributing all unpleasant interracial interactions to white people’s whiteness, like the “[Victoria’s Secret Karen](#)” incident, where a white woman aggressively asked a Black woman to give her space in line at Victoria’s Secret during the pandemic. When the offended Black woman started recording her, the white woman had an emotional outburst—a “Karen” moment—that seems more realistically explained by her developmental disability than her race.

Additionally, this kind of race-based relational pessimism can pervert group cohesiveness in ways that lead to supporting others with superficial similarities even when they commit acts of inhumanity. This happened when Chicago’s [Black Lives Matter](#) chapter celebrated, and then backtracked from, Hamas’ slaughter of innocent people.

Societal Consequences

Commitment to race-based relational pessimism also has big societal implications. A functional democracy depends on its people having some trust in their ability to find common ground. But this can’t happen if we believe that entire groups of individuals can’t relate to each other at all. This is a disaster in the making, as a natural consequence of this is for people to harden their in-group boundaries and position themselves against out-groups. It perfectly sets the stage for intense culture wars and

potentially *real* wars, consisting of allies and enemies—and that’s essentially where we find ourselves today.

Before we can start cleaning up this mess, we must first become clear on one of the big drivers of the problem. It’s common for movements attempting to correct an injustice to go too far, and this is what’s happening now. In a reasonable and well-intentioned effort to correct racism and appreciate diversity, we’ve gone to the extreme of overemphasizing difference and identity to the point that we’ve lost sight of our deeper common humanity. Yascha Mounk does an excellent job of tracing the ideological roots of this overcorrection in [his new book](#), “The Identity Trap.”

I point to these liberal failures precisely because I *am* a liberal. Certainly, the far right has contributed in its own ways to the race-based relational pessimism we see in America. For example, some on the right would rather resort to censorship than doing the hard work of changing hearts and minds. But as a liberal myself, I’m especially concerned about liberals abandoning liberalism—in particular, abandoning values of tolerance and individualism. Furthermore, there is no shortage of critiques from liberals against the far right, but there is a shortage of liberal self-reflection.

What to Do?

Although there are good reasons for us to be pessimistic about relationships between races, it’s not the end of the road yet. There are some things we can all do to improve the situation, and schools and parents play crucial roles.

Teach dialogue and debate. It certainly seems that our ability to engage people with different viewpoints has atrophied over the past decade or so. Anecdotal evidence is everywhere, from polarized politics to increased racial and gender tensions to social media mobbing, doxxing and other forms of cyberbullying. If the adults are too far gone, the least we can do is endow our youth with the necessary skills to engage others with different views and to learn something in the process. This can happen through actively incorporating skill development in dialogue and debate in schools. Organizations like [The Mill Institute](#) and [Braver Angels](#) are doing fantastic work in this area, and aspects of [social and emotional learning](#) programs are also relevant for developing these abilities.

Improve civics and history education. With interpersonal alienation and political polarization increasing at such a fast clip, I’ve often wondered about the possibility of

another U.S. civil war. But a recent conversation with Paul Carrese, director of the [School of Civic and Economic Thought and Leadership](#) at Arizona State University, convinced me that a much more likely scenario is societal disintegration. That is, we become so cynical, disillusioned and, yes, pessimistic about the American project and our fellow citizens that we just give up trying to forge a society together and it collapses as a result.

This may not sound as tragic as a civil war. But in such a state, who is going to care enough to help the vulnerable, to improve and sustain our many institutions, and to protect us from foreign and domestic enemies? Why give so much of yourself to these projects when you feel that the out-groups are alien to you or unworthy of your effort?

Strengthening our civics and history education would not only help create a more civics- and history-literate citizenry, but it would help diminish relational pessimism by emphasizing our shared responsibilities to each other. It also reminds us of the many times we and other societies have successfully bridged bigger divides than the ones we're experiencing now. And of course, it's essential that the teaching of civics and history be honest and reflective of all the diverse people and perspectives of our country. "[Educating for American Democracy](#)," a report developed by politically diverse scholars, educators and practitioners, including Harvard's Danielle Allen, has done a great job of this and provides a solid roadmap for what our schools can do to get us there.

Shape values and principles. When figuring out how to relate to others and their ideas, it helps to have a core set of principles and values. Otherwise, you're more susceptible to following the next popular set of social rules that emerge, especially in the powerfully influential world of social media. Parents can play a central role in this process by shaping and guiding these value systems. For example, we use two strategies in our household to support this. To promote open-mindedness and critical thinking when relating to others, we encourage our son to respectfully ask, "How do you know?" when a claim is made to him that doesn't make sense. This conveys that just because something doesn't make sense, it doesn't mean it's wrong. So request the reasoning and hear it out. But if the person can't offer it, you shouldn't blindly accept that idea.

And to remind our son to be compassionate and tolerant to others, we encourage him to remember that "everyone is working on something." This includes him, Mom and Dad, and we're open with him about where we're trying to grow. To maximize kids' ability to

relate to the widest range of people, the instilled values should not be overly specific to one's identity group. That is, they need to include **universal** values—values like respect for diversity and curiosity about others' views and cultures. This doesn't require discarding culture-specific values: It just means that when it comes to navigating a diverse social world, culture-specific values aren't sufficient by themselves unless they're connected to broader ones.

Foster relational optimism. I want a world where people evaluate the substance of ideas, individuals and relationships, not the physical or ideological markers of them. It's possible but requires a kind of relational *optimism*—a belief that it's not only possible but desirable to form real relationships with others who are different in appearance, thought and behavior. It also requires a very different kind of “doing the work” from interrogating and acknowledging one's group-level privilege and power and calling out microaggressions.

It means developing an ability to see an individual in front of you, rather than an abstract racial representation. Seeing a person as an individual first and foremost will enable you to engage with them as such rather than using a set of artificial predetermined rules of engagement defined by race gurus. One key civic virtue recommended by the “Educating for American Democracy” report I mentioned above is “civic friendship”—the idea that we are “in this together” and that we can respect our philosophical and partisan differences because we have a deeper respect for each other as fellow Americans. But for this to work, we need enough people committed to the idea.

At the end of the day, the health of our society depends on the strength of our social compacts. So it's the social fabric of our society that's at stake for us as we actively drive away from each other. We should treat this with the seriousness it deserves by committing to be weavers of a more connected social fabric.



A guest post by

Michael Strambler

I'm a psychologist who cares about finding non-divisive ways of expanding educational & self-development opportunities that meaningfully improve the lives of children and their families.

© 2023 The Mercatus Center · [Privacy](#) · [Terms](#) · [Collection notice](#)
[Substack](#) is the home for great writing