

## Decoding Racism: On Fear, Genetics, and the Duality of Human Nature

Racism has long been a painful part of the human experience, from slavery and genocides throughout history, to the institutionalized caste system in India. Today, many desire to live in a post-racial society, but we face heavy histories and shame and confusion about our own natures.

Before we begin decoding racism, let's start with a working definition. In the individual human, it's a snap judgment based on race leading to violence. In a society, it can become institutionalized into segregation and in the extreme, race-based slavery; not only just denial of resources, but denial of freedom and life.

It is the epitome of non-compassion, a deadness to the suffering of others. How do we go from innocent children to taking pleasure in violently lashing and killing another human being?

### On Duality: Scarcity and Collaboration

Taking many steps back from the present, life was once a collection of barely multi-cellular organisms swarming around seeking energy to complete metabolic functions. These organisms are the precursors of our own DNA. Without energy, these organisms would die.

This scarcity has been the backbone of our evolution into a human species. We compete for survival, against other animals, working both with our fellow man and against him. We love, and we murder. We share, and we steal. We welcome, and we shun.

As humans, we exist on this earth in duality. A mixing of yin and yang, dark and light, of hot and cold. Denying the existence of either extreme is a denial of ourselves, a seesaw without the other end. We can't exist.

### On Fear: Racism Begins Underneath Awareness

Why would a police officer mistakenly shoot an unarmed black man? If you ask the officer he might not even know. In seeking answers, science comes to our aide, showing that racism is deeply rooted in our minds beyond our own awareness.

In a 2004 study, 13 white students who were proven to be consciously unprejudiced were subliminally shown black faces, quickly flashed for under 0.3 seconds, underneath conscious awareness. The part of their brains that control fear, the amygdala was activated. However, when shown

the image for 0.525 seconds, barely long enough to be aware, the fear response was inhibited.

In the case of police actions, where life and death decisions are made in under a second, the slightest presence of racism may be enough to tip the scales so that 5x more unarmed black men are killed than unarmed white men. The study shows, though, that just because we experience race-based fear, doesn't mean that we must act on it. It begs the question, where does this fear come from?

### On Confirmation Bias: Racism Has Inertia

Our genes code for survival against scarcity using pleasure to encourage reproduction and pain to discourage life-ending behavior. With the dichotomy of pleasure and pain, our bodies experience pain; our emotions react with fear; our minds react to fear with memory and bias.

Our memories become heavy over time with inertia, grooved into our minds like a deep river. We have well-documented confirmation bias: once our minds are set they are hard to change.

We form thoughts and biases in two ways: the first from direct experience, the second from storytelling and culture. This means that just by hearing one story from Donald Trump about how Mexicans are rapists, an initial bias is set. The more I hear the story, the heavier the bias - the harder it is to change my mind. This means that a fear can spread from generation to generation, with no direct experience, only through stories, advertising, and art - the things that make up culture.

### Cultural Genetics and DNA

Through culture, stories propagate themselves like genes do. They mutate and spread from generation to generation, and they feed off of emotion, a social energy, the same way that DNA feeds off of energy for survival and replication.

Where our genes end and our culture begins is an age-old question, one that has not yet been answered by science. As we enter an era of genetic engineering, it's important to consider what effects this will have.

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Olivia Jeffers

Thoughts?

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hear what they listen for."  
- Judge Taylor, 'To Kill a Mockingbird'