
Critical Demography and Racism: The Case of African Americans

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Racism continues to be a major force in the lives of African Americans today. Whether one cites the recent examples of police brutality in the forms of the Louima and Diallo cases in New York, or persistent patterns of housing discrimination throughout the United States (Yinger 1995), American racism persists (Wilson 1973; Daymont 1980; Farley and Allen 1987; Feagin and Vera 1995). Surprisingly, despite the omnipresence of this phenomenon demographers have failed to utilize racism as a concept of analysis (Horton 1998). This omission is particularly intriguing given that as a primary component of the social structure, racism continues to be an explanation for population growth and development in the United States (Anderson 1988; Butler 1991; Horton forthcoming). Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how a new paradigm, *critical demography*, can be employed to facilitate the use of racism as a concept of analysis in the demography of African Americans. Specifically, the paper has the following objectives: 1) to provide an elaboration of the critical demography paradigm; 2) to present examples of how this paradigm can be applied to the study of African Americans; and 3) to discuss the implications of critical demography for social policy relative to the African American community.

An Elaboration on Critical Demography

Critical demography is a new paradigm introduced by Horton (forthcoming) to facilitate the development and application of ideas, theories and methods that do not fit within the confines of mainstream demography. Unlike what Horton (1998) has termed *conventional demography*, critical demography articulates the manner in which the social structure differentiates dominant and subordinate populations. Moreover, critical demography necessitates explicit discussions and examinations of the nature of *power* and how it perpetuates the existing social order. Hence, in the case of racial and ethnic demography it is imperative that *racism* is central to the analysis. Racism elucidates that which often goes ignored or unexplained by conventional demography. Consequently, this new paradigm fills an important void in the study of population. Critical demography is distinguished from conventional demography in four important ways: 1) critical demography is explanatory and predictive while conventional demography is descriptive (albeit often multivariate); 2) it is theory driven while its counterpart is data driven; 3) critical demography challenges the status quo while conventional demography tacitly accepts and supports it; and 4) critical demography is reflexive while conventional demography is assumptive (Horton 1999).

Critical Demography and Research on African Americans

Critical demography becomes a particularly useful approach in the study of the African American population (Horton 1999). The most poignant example of how critical demography is better suited than conventional demography in this regard is how the latter ignored the most important demographic phenomenon to occur in the 20th century because to do so would require an acknowledgment of American racism: the *Civil Rights Movement*. While sociologists have noted the significance of the Civil Rights Movement as a sociological event (Morris 1984), its demographic implications have been all but ignored (Horton 1999). Yet, no other event changed the *demographic* landscape in America more. Its relevancy of course to research on African Americans is that the movement had its roots in the African American community (Morris 1984). However, the Civil Rights Movement's significance does not end there. No other singular phenomenon has had a comparable impact on the social structure of this society than the movement (Horton 1999). Not only has the growth and development of the African American population been altered by this event, but it has changed the course of history by facilitating the inclusion of other significant populations (white women, other racial/ethnic minorities) into the labor force, politics and every other segment of American society.

Critical demography facilitates the development of explanations of how racism has adapted to reflect the changes that have resulted from the Civil Rights Movement (Steinberg 1995). One theory that has emerged from the paradigm in this regard is *the population and structural change thesis* (Horton 1995). The population and structural change thesis holds that changes in the minority population and the social structure interact to produce changes in the nature of racial inequality in society (Lieberson 1980; Tomaskovic-Devey and Roscigno 1996). In the case of African Americans, the change that occurred was not simply overall growth since the 1960s, but specifically growth in the middle class of this population. This is the very segment of the African American population that competes with the white middle class (Horton 1995).

Hence, racism in the form of policy changes to maintain white privilege (i.e., attacks on affirmative action) is a direct response to population and structural change. One of the primary advantages that the population and structural change thesis provides is it facilitates a distinction between three often confused concepts: race, racism and racial inequality (Horton 1998). Not only can the differences in the concepts be acknowledged, but they can be employed simultaneously in the study of African Americans. Once again, this new approach to examining racism and its impact on African Americans is made possible by the critical demography paradigm.

Critical Demography and Social Policy on African Americans

Critical demography provides insight into the future prospects of the African American community. Most of the research on African Americans has focused on the issue of social class within the black community (Wilson 1980, 1987, 1996; Horton and Thomas 1998). However, relatively little discussion has been given to the idea that over time class differences become ethnic differences (Horton 1992). In short, how can the African American population continue to be considered in a singular sense when two segments have dramatically distinct life-styles and life chances (Wilson 1980)? Perhaps more importantly, what do leaders of the African American community do to address many of the internal problems and conflicts that are likely to result from these class, and ultimately ethnic differences?

African American ethnicity has another important dimension that is best addressed by critical demography: the emergence of a *neo-mulatto* population (Spickard 1989; Horton forthcoming). This group is increasingly self-identifying as "mixed race" and tends to distance itself from the rest of the African American population. At present there are efforts by this group to change its racial designation in the next census. Such a change will have serious implications for estimates of the size and nature of the black population. Once again, this circumstance begs the question: "How will African American community leaders respond?"

It is important to note that the emergence of the neo-mulatto population does not imply that racism is less important in the United States (Horton forthcoming). To the contrary, racism becomes a more potent explanatory factor. Critical demography allows for the consideration of the manner in which racism mutates to compensate for new racial and demographic realities. In turn, these realities are likely to have dramatic consequences for the African American community (Horton 1995).

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to elaborate on how the critical demography paradigm facilitates research on the impact of racism on the African American population. However, it is important to note that this presentation does not exhaust the potential of the critical demography paradigm. For instance, issues relative to the emergence of the Latino population in the United States and its impact on African Americans fit within the purview of the paradigm. If Latinos should exceed African Americans in size as expected, then the issue is not likely to be "blacks or Hispanics" as demographers and pundits imply. Rather, the story is likely to be "blacks and Hispanics" as both populations negotiate the problems and potential of their new demographic reality.

Issues on the future of the African American family are likewise appropriate for the paradigm. The fact that for the first time in America's history the majority of African American children are raised in female headed households demonstrates a need for new approaches to understanding and addressing the issue. Once again, conventional demography is ill-equipped to deal with this problem because it entails asking questions that challenge the nature of the social order. Critical demography can facilitate change because it will address these questions head-on.

Critical demography certainly has potential that transcends the issues of either race or African Americans. However, on these topics it provides a powerful approach in addressing those issues that are central to African American life. It is hoped that other scholars will consider this new paradigm in future studies of African Americans in the new millennium.

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