Racial History surrounding the Lynchings in Duluth, MN

Scott Nelson, Sociology

Dr. Marshall Johnson

ABSTRACT

In relatively recent times new scientific research has found that humans have very little genetic difference. For several centuries it has been widely accepted that there is a real concept called “race” in which some “races” are superior while others are inferior. This work examined the reality and construction of “race” and the events surrounding the Duluth MN Lynchings in 1920.

Introduction

“He is from West Egg, the less fashionable of the two” is a well-known quote referring to Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby (Fitzgerald 1974). The quote is intriguing because of several factors: the mood it sets for the scene, the differentiation in location between East and West Egg, the monetary class, and the
expected behavior of the community. West Egg, in the novel, symbolized a lower social status. West Egg represented excess, glamour, and excitement. When Gatsby was placed into this category, automatic assumptions were attached. It is these assumptions that reappear in modern day society that are examined in this look at a concept called “race”. Why are people from a certain location at a certain time automatically classified in a certain way? Are these assumptions correct or are they weak in credibility? Would Gatsby have been able to live a life of excess if he were Black? The lynchings of three men in Duluth, MN in 1920 set a “stage” for this discussion of representation in the context of “race” and behavior.

“Race”

American society tends to accept that “race” exists and people can be easily classified into distinct groups by the color of their skin. Certain characteristics, such as intelligence levels, capabilities, and shared behaviors have been attached to these varying groups. These characteristics are applied to all members of the group and have positive or negative representations. The negative classifications, such as skin color, tend to be attached to the negative characteristics by social beliefs, not biological science (Marks 1996). As an example of a stereotype in modern times, it would be perceived that our current White Vice President Biden is automatically
more intelligent than our current Black President Obama with the only basis being skin color.

A common argument is the fact that Obama is half Black and half White in his heritage. Categorizing people from a mixed “race” becomes difficult -- which one would actually dominate it in this situation? According to Marks, “In algebraic terms, this would seem to describe a situation where \( x = 1/2x \), to which the only solution is \( x = 0 \)” (Marks 1994). This results in a gargantuan number of unclassifiable people.

Roy’s definition of “race” is that, “Races, among humans, is an essentially arbitrary concept based on perceived physical or behavioral differences. As a biological concept, race is no longer used by most physical anthropologists” (Roy 2001). What has been found in science is not biological difference, but clinal patterns by geographical location. Clinal means that people who are nearer in location tend to be more similar in appearance and even their genes compared to those geographically farther away (Marks 1996). These differences gradually change by the distance traveled (Marks 1996).

Are perceptions always as they appear to be and should they be taken as absolute? The concept of “race” is one that has been examined and found to be
weak in nature. Humans are not innately superior or inferior, but rather conditioned or socially constructed into a situation by situations that happened previously (Roy 2001). Marks states that “Dividing human populations into a small number of discrete groups’ results in associations of populations and divisions between populations that are arbitrary, not natural (Marks 1996). Modern scientific studies show that “race” is not biologically real, but is it a reality? A basic theory of Sociology is the Thomas Principle, in which the unreal, treated as real, becomes real.

**History Behind The Social Construction of “Race”**

Africans were not indigenous to the west and were not brought and sold here until circa 1619 by a Dutch slaver. This process of purchasing humans for needed labor is called Chattel Slavery, the capitalist version of slavery. The first 20 Africans in the colonies had to be distinguished to the English that their purpose was for work and not food. Just by their appearance, the English created the image that Africans were heathens, unclean, and dark in the sense of being evil as opposed to white being pure, innocent, and full of goodness. Although relatively few Africans were sold to the colonists for several decades, this was the very start of the slave trade (Takaki 1993).
Without the presence of many Africans for work until the middle 1600’s, colonists had looked elsewhere for labor. The American Indians were already present in the Americas, but they had their own society and defenses established and were uneasily controlled. White indentured servants were the most prevalent group of labor prior to the influx of black slaves. The downtrodden populations of England, Ireland, and Germany were criminally sentenced or indentured and shipped to the colonies for work. By definition, indentured means that they were poor and were indebted to an investor that paid their costs to get to the colonies. This population was considered expendable for they were mostly criminals, prostitutes, and cheats and were deceived through. Kidnapping and brought to work in the colonies through no choice of their own. These “surplus inhabitants” of their home countries consisted of about 75 percent of the colonists but were there to serve the elite. Slowly the purchase of African slaves was incorporated into the labor pool (Takaki 1993).

As time progressed, this “New World” of colonies was changed from a subsistence economy to a market economy by the English newcomers. The purpose of this was to gain resources for accumulating capital. The land and indigenous people were already inhabitants so it was a “New World” only to the Europeans. The newcomers came and called the indigenous people “Indians”. The
American Indians had their own society and subsistence economy system already established. They produced the food and goods as needed with little surplus. When Europeans came, their ideas were of surplus goods for sale, the land having value, and money as being a measure of value for the exchange of goods and services similar to the home country. This drastic switch from a subsistence economy to commodity economy created the need for an increasing labor force to produce goods and to make profits (Takaki 1993).

Virginia became a large tobacco-producing colony with much need for labor. Most of their labor in the middle 1600's consisted of White indentured servants despite the fact that Black slaves were much more inexpensive. The colonists in the New World had intentions of making their homes in these new colonies and had great concern about the inhabitants of their new home. In this period, there were distinct differences created between English Christians and African slaves. Conversion to Christianity by Africans created a problem with the distinct separation of classes. Laws were then created in Virginia to resolve this problem (Takaki 1993). In 1667, one law was passed that “…baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom." (Takaki 59 1993). And in 1670, “no negro or Indian, though baptized and free, should be allowed to purchase Christians" (Takaki 59 1993). These laws progressively limited freedom by the basis of “race" in which
American Indians were now included in a population that was subjugated. Gradually laws were separating people into smaller distinct groups (Takaki 1993).

Another consideration for limiting the number of African slaves in the colonies was collective rebellion. The African slaves were purchased and at the mercy of their master. The Indians were not easily controlled, had their own defense, and knew the territory for easier escape. Most White servants were indentured and only slightly higher in class and position than slaves. Beatings, whippings, and rapes were common against White servants similar to the Black slaves. Sex, marriage, and intermixing were controlled by the master with disapproval. Misery, distress, and even suicide became the commonality between all these groups of people (Zinn 1980).

As the population of servants and slaves increased, the proportional population of elite declined dramatically. The fear of the time was of a collective rebellion where the American Indians, White servants, and Black slaves would unite against the White elite. This “giddy multitude” of people would be the vast majority and could easily defeat the few elites. Every measure was taken to distinctly separate the groups (Takaki 1993). Laws passed in Virginia stated “That whatsoever English, or other white man or woman, being free, shall intermarry with a Negro or mulatto man or woman, bond or free, shall, by judgment of the county court, be
committed to prison, and there remain, during the space of six months, without bail or mainprize; and shall forfeit and pay ten pounds current money of Virginia, to the use of the parish…” (Russell D 2009). Another law in 1705 compounded this separation by stating: “[A]ll Negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves, in all courts of judicature, and other places, within this dominion shall be held, taken, and adjudged, to be real estate…” (Russell D 2009). These laws put Blacks, American Indians, and their descendants in different groups, but were similarly subjugated.

The progression of these laws was gradual, but all had the same purpose. The English wanted to accumulate wealth by acquiring land and producing goods on the land to sell for profit. For this, they needed a labor force that would be inexpensive and productive at the same time. White indentured servants were predominantly used as labor at first, but with the realization that Black slaves were less expensive, the plantation owners incorporated them. The laws were created to keep order in the colonies and protect the inexpensive labor force.

The Continuation of “Race”

“Race” was distinctly legislated by 1705 (Russell D 2009). Problems of labor, freedom, and justice still existed past the Revolutionary War that was deeply rooted in race. The Civil War in America started in 1861, dividing states between free and
slave states, classifying slaves as being of African descent. Slavery was brutal. Every aspect of their lives was controlled by the plantation owners, and when they disobeyed, they were beaten, whipped, and abused. The females were mistreated and even raped. Their children were sold as young slaves like cattle (Takaki 1993). President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation which took effect on January 1, 1863 stating that all men, including slaves, were free (Congress). This was simply a proclamation, meaning that it was an official public statement, not an absolute law of the land or to be held an absolute truth. Slaves were proclaimed to be free, but the fight had just begun.

After the assassination of President Lincoln in 1863, the process of reconstruction continued between the north and the south. The 13th Amendment abolished chattel slavery in December of 1865. The 14th Amendment to the constitution guaranteed the issues of “life, liberty, and property” to “all citizens” born in the United States, or who were naturalized. These amendments by themselves should have guaranteed freedom for all Americans. This was the first Civil Rights Act ratified by Congress in 1868 without the approval of President Andrew Johnson (Congress).

Over the years, problems of labor and family accumulated. To continue the subjugation, laws across the states were incrementally being formed by creating a
“separate but equal” status for people. These were gradual but created defined and clear lines between “races“. Blacks could not use the same toilets, apply for the same jobs, or associate with others freely. These laws tended to appease the equal part of the proclamation, but were separatist in every detail. The Plessy vs. Ferguson Supreme Court ruling in 1896 (Court 1896) endorsed that “separate but equal” laws were permissible under the Fourteenth Amendment because they did not restrict persons for and did not endorse involuntary servitude. This allowed nearly six decades of laws by individual states to keep and create new mandates of distinct lines between races. These laws tended to be across the southern states, since that is where most of the labor was needed, which included laws concerning schools, transportation, marriage, and hospitals. One law in Texas provided two schools – one for white and another for black. Mississippi law mandated that convicts had to have separate eating and sleeping facilities by race while incarcerated. These laws progressed into daily practice as dictated, leading to the detrimental stereotypes of the early 20th Century. Popular culture created demeaning caricatures of “Mammy“, “Zip Coon“, “Sambo”, and “Uncle” which enhanced and supported the subjugation of people of African descent. “Mammy” was always the large, happy Black woman that was pleased to serve her master. “Zip Coon” represented the failure of rebellion. “Sambo” was the large, happy Black man that justified slavery by his false contentment. “Uncle” was the older worker from slavery years that had to
do manual work, but seemed content (Ethnic Notions Transcript). These images were intended for subjugating the black culture from advancing into competition for jobs, family, and status. These conditions produce “rules” and “regulations” on what certain people could and could not do. This is not a governmentally controlled law: it was a part of our habitus.

The representation of the “Zip Coon” is especially important to expand upon. There was a new hope for freedom after reconstruction and many Blacks were inspired to act on that freedom. The “Zip Coon” caricature had work, some money, dressed flashy, and acted arrogant. This was designed to make the character out to be a brutal force. In Minstrel shows, it was said that “Brute Negros, played by Whites in blackface, pursued white virgins” (Ethnic Notions Transcript). This created fear of Black persons capabilities and intentions by Whites and enhanced the notion of White supremacy.

1919 -- Signs of the Time

Problems of labor occurred in this time across the United States. WWI had just ended and soldiers were establishing their lives back home. Industry was growing, but was labor? Strikes occurred in the industrial corporations across the Great Lakes. There was an abundance of work, with a shortage of cheap labor.
“Negro’s” at the time were sought after to supply the work force (Alanen 2007).

With the demand for labor shifting to the Great Lakes, Blacks moved north.

Competition and the rights of workers were heated debates at this time. Although Duluth, Minnesota and Birmingham, Alabama were the only two major cities that had not participated in the strikes, debates across the Great Lakes and the whole country were rampant. Duluth is a port city where people from across the country and the world who worked in the shipping industry associated closely with each other.

The strikes were over the fair treatment of workers, and with the influx of Black migrant workers, the issue of labor was an important topic at that time. With the veterans coming home from WWI, there were more workers and people were fearful of their employment stability. These issues were discussed in their neighborhoods, workplaces, and in social gathering spaces including where these strikes were happening. The workers of African descent were migrants, or travelers, in these cases for employment and had associations across the labor lines. These community spaces included hotels, taverns, and even brothels among the port towns across the Great Lakes. People had to protect their jobs and families at this time (Hudelson & Ross 2006).

Drawing upon perceived “race”, social formation, and the attitudes of the time, this work will now examine the Duluth Lynchings. First, there will be a brief
historical account and second, a look into the social attitudes that surrounded the event.

**The Duluth Lynchings**

Michael Fedo had done the primary research leading to the publication of *They Were Just Niggers* in 1979, but he had agreed not to use the real names of the people involved in order to get the research printed. The Minnesota Historical Society has then expanded Fedo’s research to include the actual names. The names used here are the actual names of the individuals.

The Duluth Lynchings began with James Sullivan and Irene Tusken, 18- and 19-years-old respectively, reportedly going to the John Robinson's Circus on June 14th, 1920. Little is known about the actual events of the evening until the small hours of the morning of June 15th. The Duluth Police then received a call from Sullivan's father stating that his son and Tusken had been attacked by six Black circus workers at gunpoint and the incident ended in the rape of Irene Tusken. Later that morning, Miss. Tusken was seen by the family doctor and showed no physical signs of her being assaulted or raped; however six Black men were arrested for assault and rape (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).
Rumors flew around the city about the rape and Miss. Tusken’s welfare. Outrage and a crowd mounted throughout the day. The Duluth Police, as ordered, did little. Instigated by some, a mob collectively broke into the jail, performed a mock trial, removed three Black men that they deemed guilty, and proceeded to bring them to First Street. There they hung, the three men with only one appeal by two religious leaders to stop the violence. The appeal failed and Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Issac McGhie were lynched by hanging on June 15th, 1920 (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).

Three out of the thirty-seven White mob members were indicted for the incident and were convicted of rioting. They were Louis Dondino, Carl Hammerburg, and Gilbert Stephenson. One of seven Blacks was indicted for rape, Max Mason, was convicted despite sketchy evidence (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).

**Social Formations Surrounding the Lynchings**

The history of the Duluth Lynchings is interesting and evokes inquiry. In examining the timeline, it displays gaps in time that are unquestionable. On the 14th of June in 1920, Miss. Tusken and Mr. Sullivan supposedly met on Vernon Street, but there is an unknown lapse of time. It was assumed that they were going to the Robinson Circus, but that was several blocks away. There is no hard evidence that
they were even in attendance there. If they did attend, there were Black workers at the circus, but how long did they stay? There has been no hard evidence of any actions from Vernon Street to the telephone call by Sullivan's father in the early morning hours of the morning of the 15th of June in 1920. So little is known about this period of time -- whether there was a tiff, a fleeing from their parents, a third party causing difficulties, or an alternative scenario; it is all speculation. This timeline has been filled in by assumptions and gossip until that phone call to the Duluth Police Department.

The second period of time that is questionable at is the time from the phone call until the Family Doctor's report the next morning. An accusation of rape is serious. An opinion was made amongst the relatively small group of people forming to protect Miss Tusken's welfare before there was a formal diagnosis from her Doctor; it was all speculation. The group had been noted to have pronounced that she was on her death bed, severely injured from the rape and attack, and even already dead. The only concrete knowledge so far is that there was an accusation (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).

Even after the almost certain results from the doctor that morning that there were no signs or rape or attack, the people moved on. The momentum and inertia of the social forces of gossip were in place to the effect that the truth could not change.
it, unless it was legitimated. Miss. Tusken herself could have done this. Her immediate family could have also supported the Doctor's findings (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).

This third period of time must be examined more closely. It is the time between Miss. Tusken's doctor's report and the actual event of the lynching of the men. There were community members who believed that she was severely injured. They spread the word and influenced others to seek justice. The momentum was rolling, even close by the Tusken home in West Duluth. In either hearing or witnessing an unusual amount of people, noise, and shouting, fear is a possible reaction. Possibly neighbors were pounding on the Tusken home to see if Irene was well, or dead as rumor would have it. Social pressures and fear may have kept the Tuskens from taking any action (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).

In Downtown Duluth there may have been a different feel in the air. The crowd of between one and ten thousand people that gathered downtown had heard of the incident about a White woman being assaulted and raped by Black men from Louis Dondino and others spreading the word. The thought was that so many people had gathered, how could they all be wrong? Besides, there were only a few that challenged the guilt of the prisoners, so the majority must truly be correct (Fedo 1979; Society 2012).
After the lynchings, the truth was spoken of in more detail. The doctor verified Irene was fine. However, the lynching of three Black men happened. They could only be innocent by the health of Miss. Tusken, not by their own voices. The mob of people who were gathered may have felt a feeling of shame, for societal norms do not support lynching in the North. Gossip could no longer be gossip; it would have to contain truth. This wound would be encompassed with shame for decades; never openly discussed in Duluth until Michael Fedo published his book in 1979.

**Combating The Social Norm**

Despite the attitudes of many that Blacks were inferior, there were many that opposed this. Not all Whites supported lynching or the notion of inferiority by skin color. The talents and abilities of Blacks were undeniable to some, and they risked their popular careers as shown in the following examples. The mainstream entertainment business has the opportunity to reach millions of people and therefore can greatly influence popular culture. Featuring Black people in a superior role changed the attitudes of many. These examples are how individuals, albeit famous, influenced society simply by doing what they felt was right.
Benny Goodman, the swing musician from the big band era, was one of the first, and profound supporters of the time. In 1938, when given the opportunity to play the very first non-classical concert at the prestigious Carnegie Hall, he offered undeniable support to human rights in a social stance. He had told the managers of the renowned Hall that he hired “musicians” for his band, and when Black musicians like Lionel Hampton, Teddy Wilson, and Freddy Green were not accepted in the concert hall, Goodman refused to perform without his musicians. This was an issue of the color of their skin, and had nothing to do with musicianship. The managers wanted the Goodman Orchestra, and Benny won in his little known fight for human and civil rights. It was monumental in the sense that it was not only the first “non-classical” concert at Carnegie Hall, but also the first “mixed”, meaning that Blacks and Whites played on the same stage, concert ever. This is long before it would have been socially acceptable. Lionel Hampton, who went on to lead his own orchestra, was later noted to say that Benny Goodman sped up the “second” Civil Rights Act - by decades. Benny was called the “King of Swing” in the world of Big Band Jazz, while his African counterparts had lesser, but complimentary, titles. “Duke” Ellington and “Count” Basie were two great African Big Band Jazz leaders at that time (Burns 2001).
Eddie Anderson was also an early show business and movie actor. He was a comedic actor, and received his break as a renowned comedian when another comedic actor, Benjamin Kubelsky, decided to take a chance and hire Eddie for a one-time appearance on a show that broadcasted on Easter Day of 1937. It was a hit. Kubelsky wisely hired on Anderson to be part of his show. There was little opposition in the performances, despite the fact that Anderson was of African descent. Anderson did, although, play parts that were “lesser than” average comedic actors. His roles were of butler, servant, and chauffer. It was more acceptable to society to have him in a lower working class. Their association lasted almost five decades. Their comedic style and international recognition is still known today. Anderson had a nic-name of “Rochester“, and his boss, Kubelsky, had a nic-name of Jack Benny of the Jack Benny Program on both radio and television. With much controversy, Eddie Anderson had the second home in Beverly Hills that was owned by an American of African descent. The first was the infamous singer, Nat “King” Cole (Benny & Benny 1990).

In more recent times, with television becoming ever more popular, there was another White man who had the courage to challenge the societal norm. In the early 70's, a man by the name of Norman Lear discussed many controversial issues along with his partner Bud Yorkin, including gender, sexuality, and most notably the
concept of race. One television show that Lear created, *All In The Family* brought up all of these issues and more. The word controversy by definition means a public debate. It tends to offer an opinion that has opposing sides, for or against. In any business, including television, it is wisest to present ideas that would be considered “popular“, “mainstream“, or “conventional”. Discussing people of African descent created talk, or gossip, and surprisingly also created a wider audience of viewers. *The Jeffersons* was a direct “spin-off” of this work, resulting in the first prime time television series to have people of African descent that featured main characters that owned a business, had an upper class apartment, and had their own maid. --Lear’s pioneering courage to challenge the “norm” representations was unmatched at that time (Macdonald 2009).

**Conclusion**

Appearance and behavior matters greatly as to what opportunities a person has. This account is relevant in the discussion of “race” especially considering the relatively new scientific studies that show little biological difference in humans. Social construction separates people into distinct groups create monetary class, social status, expected behavior, and opportunities. For example, today it is
unimaginable to think of the Elmer Jackson Circus with John Robinson as one of the lynched? That scenario would not fit the social construct of this era. Further efforts of courageous individuals seeking the truth will help deconstruct the social norms that are currently in place. In an ideal world, Integrity and Respect will prevail.

**Bibliography**


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