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Profiles of Racial Profiling: Current Trends

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Abstract. This article describes very different meanings of the construct racial profiling that are often not adequately identified and parsed in political dialogue.

A recent investigative report by the United States (US) Department of Energy (DOE) concludes that scientists of "Asian descent" were not subject to racial profiling when involved in adjudicative processes that might grant, deny, or revoke DOE security clearances for work in the US national laboratories. Here the criterion for racial profiling appears to be "unfair treatment" that is race-based. Unfair treatment does not seem to be related to how many scientists of Asian descent have a sense of being unfairly treated--e.g., subject to very strong bias or discrimination--or have actually made formal allegations of unfair treatment. "Unfair treatment" does seem to be related to a "respective and productive environment free of profiling, discrimination, and fear." The DOE investigative report, then, seems to focus on a peculiar constellation of cognitions, perceptions, and apperceptions experienced by alleged perpetrators and victims of whatever racial profiling may be.

A lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) terms racial profiling (of African Americans) an example of police abuse with the abuse a legacy of enslavement, repression, and legal inequality. Here racial profiling is the stopping by the police (of African Americans) without "obvious basis." The "obvious basis" is extremely ambiguous. On the one hand, both perpetrator and victim know that there is an obvious basis--viz., that the victim looks like an African American. On the other hand, the obviousness of the obvious basis may or may not be obvious. For example, the perpetrator may view it as obvious that a certain crime has been committed in a certain geographical area and that African Americans in that area are more likely to have committed said crime. Or the perpetrator may view it as obvious that the victim is highly unlikely to have committed the crime but through various social cognition vehicles may believe that the victim is fair game to be exploited under the guise of law enforcement. The victim may view it as obvious that a certain crime has been committed in a certain geographical area, that African Americans in that area are more likely to have committed the crime, and that (although innocent of the crime) s/he is in the wrong place at the wrong time leading to the activation of an obvious basis by the perpetrator. Or the victim has, indeed, committed the crime and views the obvious basis of the racial profiling perpetrator as a detriment to successful criminal behavior irrespective of the victim's belief in an obvious basis that would allow the perpetrator to stop the victim. The necessary and not even sufficient convolutedness of this analysis only begins to describe the psychologies at play.

Polling data by The Gallup Organization provide indirect data supporting racial profiling of minority groups by contrasting responses of a majority--viz., "white"--and a minority--viz., "black"--group. Seventy-seven percent of blacks report that racial profiling is widespread, while only 56% of whites do. Forty-two percent of blacks report that they have been subject to racial profiling, while only 6% of whites do. Blacks also report much less favorable opinions of police to variously worded questions than whites. Although racial profiling is not being defined by or through the polls, some sense of ontological validity is being supported through the apparently easy usage of the term by poll respondents.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

When the heat of the political battle rises, most racial profiling controversies revert to a definition based on statistical comparisons among various groups subject to security clearance revocation, traffic stops, or some other event. A "more-than-expected" criterion is then used as empirical support for the racial profiling phenomenon. But given that this criterion is based on the assumption that all groups should have similar rates and that there are no data to support this assumption save for the ideological, even the statistical case can be found wanting.

Are individuals and members of various groups unfairly treated by political authority and its representatives? Yes. Is this state of affairs necessarily racist? IBPP would argue that a more significant and deeply rooted phenomenon than racism--viz., social discrimination--is at work. Insisting on a racism perspective may give off more heat than light. (See Friedman, G.H. (April 3, 2001). Special Review of Profiling Concerns at the Department of Energy.

http://www.fas.org/sgp/othergov/doe/ig_profiling.html; Harris, D.A. (June 1999). Driving while black: Racial profiling on our nation's highways. An American Civil Liberties Union Special Report.

<http://www.aclu.org/profiling/report/index.html>; Hill, J.H. (1998). Language, race, and White public space. *American Anthropologist*, 100, 680-689; Newport, F. (December 9, 1999). Racial profiling is seen as widespread, particularly among young black men. Poll Releases: The Gallup Organization, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr991209.asp>.) (Keywords: Department of Energy, Racial Profiling.)