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The Effects of American Society's Power Imbalance on Racial Minorities

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As it is ingrained in their functioning, global societies often succumb to hierarchical structures within which people of a certain race live with greater privilege than those of other races. Beverly Tatum's "Complexity of Identity" describes American society as being made up of dominant and subordinate groups (3). Those in the dominant group possess traits attributed to historically privileged individuals, one of which is being white. Subordinate groups are made up of those whose identities, conversely, have been historically oppressed or marginalized which contributes to their lack of privilege even today. An overarching theme in Tatum's writing is that the dominant group holds the power to shape society in a way that follows their narrative— that the subordinate group is inadequate in nature, therefore devoid of the traits necessary to be granted authority within society. George Takei depicts in his autobiography, *They Called Us Enemy*, how subordinate races feel forced to submit to this narrative and assimilate into their expected roles as established by dominant society. In fact, as exemplified by Garnette Cadogan's experiences described in "Walking While Black," many individuals of racial minorities are forced to put in extra effort in their day-to-day lives to avoid becoming targets of racial prejudice. The sense of "otherness" that marginalized races are made to feel due to their difference from the established norm leads them to struggle to feel belonging in their society. These facets of modern society create a hostile environment for subordinate racial groups that has a negative impact on their perception of and existence among the dominant group. The dominant group ultimately remains in a position of influence above the subordinate races and is able to perpetuate this power imbalance indefinitely.

Charged by the inherent power afforded to them, dominant racial groups are able to set the societal standards for all other groups. Tatum is acutely aware of the influence held by dominant groups, “whether it is reflected in determining who gets the best jobs, whose history will be taught in school, or whose relationships will be validated by society” (3). Throughout their lives, racially subordinate individuals are told that their identities count for very little in the face of the dominant racial identity. By belittling their self-worth in this manner over the span of their lifetimes, the dominant group is able to box the subordinate groups into standards that the dominants have reserved for them. Newcomers, especially, are forced to acclimate to the American idea of subordinate groups. When emigrating from Jamaica, Cadogan says “I wasn’t prepared for any of this. I had come from a majority Black country in which no one was wary of me because of my skin color. Now I wasn’t sure who was afraid of me” (1). The societal differences immigrants and minority-race visitors experience in America can come as a cultural shock. The simple fact that subordinate racial groups are minorities in the United States provides dominant groups with the power to treat them as inferior and undeserving of equity. Regardless, though, of how long subordinates dedicate their lives to American society, the dominant group will continue to manipulate the public perspective of subordinate groups. Following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, “every adult Japanese citizen inside the U.S. was now an “alien enemy” and must follow strict regulations,” including Takei’s father who, despite having “lived here for twenty-five years,” had never been “allowed... to apply for citizenship. Now he was considered an enemy in a war that hadn’t even been declared yet” (275). The American government’s ability to cast a label on entire minority groups is only exemplified in its power by the fact that the majority of the government is made up of individuals who fall under the societal norm, white people. Due to their historically-granted privilege, the dominant group makes up the majority of authority organizations and has the power to affirm subordinates’ diminished position within society.

This overbearing projection of subordinates as the lesser group leads individuals of racial minorities to assimilate to their expected positions due to the pressure they feel. After moving to America, Cadogan was forced to combat bigotry by subjecting himself to a position of inferiority. When walking at

night, he would cross the street if he saw “a white woman walking toward me... to reassure her that she was safe,” and if he forgot something at home, he would “not immediately turn around if someone was behind me” because white people would feel alarmed by the “sudden backtrack” (1). The dominant group, by sustaining the idea that subordinates are somehow subservient to them, instills genuine fear in minorities of pushing back against the set societal narrative. As put by Tatum, “survival sometimes means not responding to oppressive behaviour directly. To do so could result in physical harm to oneself, even death” (4). Subordinate groups, therefore, have to navigate their lives in accordance with the stature of the dominant group. They must monitor their own actions to be sure that they are taking the superiority complex of the dominants into consideration. When Japanese citizens of the United States were targeted by racial prejudice following the Pearl Harbor attack, they were “loaded onto buses and trains headed into an unknown future,” forced to “[abandon] all possessions beyond what they could carry” (Takei 285). The dominant group’s power extends past dictating the daily motions of the subordinate group, and reaches into dictating their futures as well. Due to their monopoly over all facets of authority, the dominant group is able to subject the subordinate group to predetermined fates; meanwhile, the subordinates lack the ability to take action against them due to the risk of danger that comes with doing so.

The intensity of maltreatment subordinate groups face continuously requires them to dedicate extra effort in avoiding being targets of racial prejudice. Cadogan, who could be viewed as a threat even when completing an action as simple as going for a walk, had “survival tactics [which] began well before I left my dorm. I got out of the shower with the police in my head, assembling a cop-proof wardrobe” (1). When even the nuances of the clothing one wears has the potential to put one in harm’s way at the hands of the dominant group, it is evident that there is a problem rooted within the societal structure. This excerpt also shines a light on how strategically subordinate individuals are forced to go about their daily lives, whereas the dominant group does not experience any of this additional exhaustion of mental energy. The stakes for subordinate groups are also extremely high such as the threat for Japanese citizens in America of being “treated as wartime saboteurs” following Pearl Harbor if they failed to “maintain their crops until relocation” (Takei 287). Subordinate groups are persistently held to higher, sometimes

impossible, standards while those in the dominant group turn a blind eye to counterparts of their own stature. This stress of trying to maintain peace in their lives effectively takes away any chance of tranquility from subordinates. “The fact is that dealing with oppressive systems from the underside, regardless of the strategy, is physically and psychologically taxing” (Tatum 5). This disproportion in daily effort required from the subordinate versus the dominant group bolsters the power imbalance ingrained in American society.

By shepherding subordinate groups into places of inferiority within society and isolating them from receiving just treatment, the dominant group effectively “others” the subordinates. Marginalized individuals struggle to find a sense of belonging in American society because of how they are looked upon by those with social authority. Earl Warren, California’s Attorney General during Pearl Harbor’s aftermath, “knew that he was talking about a hundred thousand people who had not been charged with any crime” when he spoke of locking away the Japanese citizens of America, but claimed the government should “lock them up before they do anything,” because, “you don't know what they're thinking” (Takei 282-283). The dominant group within American society has always viewed subordinate groups as people who must be tamed or dealt with, never as societal peers who deserve equal conduct. Dominants often twist the social narrative in their favor to depict harmless marginalized groups as threats and themselves as victims often when the dominant group is the one perpetuating ill treatment in the first place. Cadogan even makes the hyperbolic remark that “the last time a cop was happy to see a Black male walking was when that male was a baby taking his first steps” (1). This insinuation that the first and last time a Black person can have equal grounding in society amongst white people is when they are an infant showcases the extent to which marginalized groups are excluded from the equality promised to American citizens by their country. Subordinates spend their entire lives, beginning from childhood, being made to feel lesser than their peers of the dominant group. Tatum notes that however much “those in the target group internalize the images that the dominant group reflects back to them, they may find it difficult to believe in their own ability” (3). Not only must subordinates accept the unjust hand they are dealt, they may also succumb to feelings of worthlessness or inferiority stemming from a belief that they do not belong within

their society. The mental duress that subordinates are put under simply due to their racial identities is an unforgivable factor of the dominant group's malicious acts of superiority.

The narratives of marginalized individuals in America, such as those of Garnette Cadogan or George Takei, epitomize, in relation with the philosophy of minority voices such as Beverly Tatum's, the underprivileged experiences of the everyday racial minority in the United States. Through the power imbalance historically bestowed upon the nation's dominant racial group, subordinate groups are pressured to assimilate to their subservient roles within society, the roles assigned to them by the dominant group. These minority individuals, who are not afforded a sense of belonging in their own country, are also forced to go the extra mile in attempts to fend off the bigotry they face due to the dominant group's upholding of racist ideology. The mistreatment of marginalized groups is normalized within American society and will remain that way so long as the dominant group maintains its control over the shaping of social and political culture in the United States.

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