

Arthur Camins
 Director, Center for
 Education, Science &
 Technology

1

Like

Posted: 12/10/2014

0

10

0

0

Share

Tweet

Comment



The Identity and Empathy Gap



As a nation, the United States is infected with racial and socio-economic myopia. Sadly, the malignant biases that support the empowered also undermine the ability of the disempowered to identify and empathize with one another.

Once again, this time in New York City -- a grand jury has declined not to indict a white police officer for killing an unarmed young black man. Strikingly, there was a videotape of the victim, Eric Garner, being choked to death and held face down against the pavement. However, where some are outraged to see the murder of yet another non-threatening black man, others see a white defender of the law responding defensively to their conjured negative stereotype. As a society we have refused to deal substantively with perceptual difference. As a result, black men keep dying and people grow even further apart. Too many politicians, afraid of being accused of apologizing for criminals (sometimes, even when the victim has not committed a crime), run from substantive solutions that cut to the core of how racism scars everyday lives.

Divergent race and class perceptions do not just shape ideas about justice and police behavior. They also shape debate about how to improve educational outcomes for students of color in poor neighborhoods. Billionaires and their political allies see low levels of performance of students of color through their presumptive lens of unmotivated teachers with low expectations. They ascribe causation to poor kids who have not learned what they imagine are the success-driving behaviors of their privileged children. Alternatively, others see teachers with too few resources and too little support to educate students whose lives are extraordinarily challenged. They ascribe causation to a society in which racism and inequality are endemic and pervasive. Here too, politicians run from tackling the role of racism and poverty in order to avoid a newly fabricated charge: making excuses for bad teachers and student behavior.

interact with one another daily, their lived experiences are markedly different. As many have vividly recounted, the stuff of daily life -- a walk down the street, a visit to a department store, feeding one's fam and sending the kids off to school each day -- is mediated by race and class.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the achievement gap was the common referent for disparate education outcome related to race and class differences. Later, trying to shift attention from test results to causation, some b to speak about an opportunity gap. That made sense to me because it focused attention on the inequitab distributed educational and community resources that framed widely divergent opportunities to learn.

Now, however, the United States has a far deeper problem. We have a profoundly endogenous identity a empathy gap. What the exoneration of the police in Ferguson and Staten Island and the market competi and no-excuses behavioral prescriptions for school improvement have in common, is a failure to imagin life experience of another. It is particularly difficult for the empowered to visualize what it is like to be disempowered, especially without social pressure to do so. And, without forging common cause, even sm differences in relative powerlessness lead to a failure to identify and empathize. In the last three decades ability as a nation to engage in multiple-perspective taking appears to have deteriorated.

This deterioration has many parents.

First, it is the result of vast and growing structural inequality and the erosion of democracy. The rules an processes that govern day-to-day life are increasingly influenced by a tiny percentage of unfathomably wealthy individuals. They live in a rarified environment. Even when they advocate for others, it is within context of maintaining, if not increasing, their power and influence. Their education remedies are for otl people's children. The empowered treat police brutality as if it is a problem of others' (the victims) behav pathology, rather than a systemic problem to which extreme wealth and poverty contribute.

Second, hardening patterns of residential racial and economic segregation and divergent employment opportunities mean that the rest of us interact less often. We fail not just to interact across perceptions, temporally and spatially. As a result, it is more difficult to identify common problems and easier for divisiveness to plant seeds, grow roots and thrive. In tough times, people often come to see their survival contingent on the diminishment of others.

Finally, public schools -- the one place where young people might engage in planned early experiences w perspective taking across differences -- are becoming more balkanized in the name of choice and more focused on narrowing academic outcomes in the name of better test results. In addition, the test-driven concentration on reading and mathematics has diminished attention to science and social studies, the tv areas of study that might engage students in discussions of controversial issues, evidence-based thinking examination of bias in reaching conclusions, and reasoned argumentation.

I am searching for hope. However, hope will not be found in the next charismatic leader, at least not with an emerging mass movement for which average citizens do the building. I do see a ray of light in courage people who continue to defy negative community norms to make a moral and strategic case for common ground. I see it in relentless researchers and writers who expose the hypocrisy of the powerful who seek benefit from division. I see it in parents and teachers who push back against their schools being taken ov and turned into testing factories. I see it in the diversity of citizens who demonstrate their outrage and c for unbiased justice.

Now is the time to close the identity and empathy gap.

Arthur H. Camins is the Director of the Center for Innovation in Engineering and Science Education at Stevens Institute of Technology. He has taught and been an administrator in New York City, Massachusetts and Louisville, Kentucky. The views expressed in this article are his alone