

If We're Having a Real Conversation About Race, Let's Make Sure It's the Right One

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Just over a week after thousands took to the streets in protest and outrage following a Ferguson grand jury's decision not to indict a white police officer for fatally shooting an unarmed black teenager, we are faced with the reality that a New York grand jury -- tasked with determining whether to hold a white police officer accountable for placing an illegal chokehold on an unarmed black man -- reached the same decision: no indictment.

We are faced with the reality of a [recent study of federally collected data](#) that found that our young black males are at 21 times greater risk of being shot dead by police than their white counterparts.

We are faced with the reality of our criminalization of poverty, severely anemic political participation, geographically segregated neighborhoods, unprecedented levels of economic and wealth inequality, and a heavily militarized police force entrusted with public safety over communities who are met with not only brutality, but with a justice system that is indifferent, neglectful and even hostile in bringing justice for abuses suffered.

While these realities have forced much of this country into a conversation about race, is the conversation sufficient?

If we having a real conversation then we must have one that examines the deep racial anxiety in this country, an anxiety not only stoked by strategic political manipulation, but by fear of rapidly changing demographics, and a rapidly changing world.

It's important to note that this fear is highly racial in nature. Numerous studies have shown how racial bias -- both implicit and explicit -- can have deep and lasting effects on black individuals, especially within the spheres of law enforcement and criminal justice. One study by my friend Jennifer Eberhardt - [who was just awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant to continue her groundbreaking work](#) -- found that black defendants who have what are considered "stereotypically black" features serve up to eight months longer and receive more death sentences than their white counterparts.

As [a recent book](#) by Doug McAdam and Karina Kloos cohesively examines, our "deeply divided" country is facing political and economic divisions that threaten to reverse any advancements made during the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s.

More than 50 years after the Kerner Commission issued its report, a serious, bi-partisan effort that examined the underlying issues that gave birth to the movement and unrest of that era, we are still living in a deeply unequal society. No leader today has suggested anything as comprehensive as the Kerner

Commission and in today's polarized political environment, it is extremely unlikely that there will be a politically-led constructive look at the current state of our society.

Brown and Garner are but two names in a long list of black men and women who have perished at the hands of police. These are not personal issues or isolated incidents: they are tragic reflections of a deeply broken system.

But [as some have suggested](#), is the system actually broken? Or is it working just as it is designed? Whether intentional or not, as currently structured, our systems are dehumanizing and containing the racial Other. The long list of people killed at the hands of police were not just failed by individual police officers, they were failed, [as I wrote last week](#), by a systemic failure at all levels.

We must demand that communities have a voice in their own safety and protection. All communities care about safety, including black and brown ones. But we must structure a society where their protection is the priority of local police departments. This is not a radical idea, but part of the bedrock of a truly democratic system. Communities should have agency in terms of reviewing and evaluating the systems that are put in place to protect them. Police should be part of this conversation, too, but they should not dominate the conversation.

While I am supportive of President Obama's [plan to authorize millions](#) for communities to purchase body cameras for police, it's important to remember that this is only an intervention. After all, Eric Garner's death was videotaped. So was the brutal beating of Rodney King. Even with visible proof, too many in our society are hesitant to see people of color as deserving of full human concern. And it is not enough to follow the law if the laws do not respect all lives. In fact, laws like Stand Your Ground and Stop and Frisk are deeply problematic.

Although victim-blaming has a storied tradition, parsing apart the differences between the cases of Eric Garner and Michael Brown and trying to determine which victim is more "deserving" of our collective outcry is a detraction from the real questions we should be asking ourselves.

We need to go deeper. I believe we are in the midst of a major transformation, with much of it centered on who we are individually and who we are collectively. Nothing has shaped the convulsive developments of the past six years so much as America's ongoing struggle with race and the by now familiar tug-of-war between movements, parties, and governmental institutions.

It is important to understand that the continued debasement and dehumanization of all those who are "othered" is not just to the detriment of individual communities, it is unhealthy for the health and well-being of our entire society at large.

What we are witnessing today calls for more than a conversation. It demands a deep transformational movement. Change will happen. We can build and [support this movement](#) in one direction over another. Let's move beyond a conversation into real action.