



Money Whitens But Doesn't Erase A Reflective Sociology of Racism from the Middle of the American "Melting Pot"

Dima Kurin

University of Massachusetts Boston

blinelaxd27@yahoo.com

Abstract: Engaging various sociological perspectives, concepts, and literature, this paper deals with my experiences with racism and racial prejudice ever since I moved to U.S. at the age of nine. The points that are addressed deal with my experience living in Russia as a member of the white majority without any exposure to other races or ethnicities, and my experiences with race and racialization at the schools and various social circles I entered in the U.S. Another point that is discussed in depth is my family's struggle with welfare and the struggles that that system presents. The essay concludes by exploring my experience with racism in the workplace as well as in the real estate market. The essay finishes by reflecting back on the journey that my family took and where we have ended up because of it.

From an early age until recently it was always hard for me as an immigrant to this country to feel sympathetic to the minorities in this country and their struggles because my family was busy fighting its own fights and stereotypes. In this paper I will explore my views on race and racialization in the U.S. from the time when I was categorized with my parents as an immigrant to now when I am no longer classified as an immigrant.

I can see how my parents who have not **assimilated** nearly as well as I have into the white American culture are still targeted as immigrants and foreigners in different facets of their lives. Having assimilated into the American culture thoroughly, I discovered that even when I went back to Russia

only four years after coming to the U.S. I already felt like I did not belong in the country where I grew up. My realization was that while America preaches tolerance and unity, in reality it imposes penalties, both physical and emotional, on those who do not conform and fit the roles that have been designed for them during the last several hundred years. It is sad to see and grasp the idea that no matter what my parents accomplish in their lives, their language barrier and demeanor—so entrenched in their behaviors from spending the majority of their lives in another country—will follow them for the rest of their lives and mark them as **forever foreigners** no matter how accepting they become of American culture.

Dima Kurin is an undergraduate senior at UMass Boston, double-majoring in Management and Criminal Justice. He wrote this paper while enrolled in the course Soc. 321L: "Racial and Ethnic Relations," instructed by Anna Beckwith (Lecturer of Sociology at UMass Boston) during the Spring 2008 semester.

My first encounter with race was when I came to the United States in 1995. In Russia I was completely oblivious to the idea of **race** as a social construction as defined by Taylor or **racism** of any form because my community appeared to be completely homogenous, where everyone was middle class white, living in very similar apartments and earning very similar wages. No one had any reason to differentiate themselves between one another in a negative way which is what the idea of race and racism fosters. In fact, I do not remember seeing a person of a different race than me until arriving in America.

The one thing that separated me from the majority of my friends in Russia was the fact that I was Jewish. However, my parents made sure to hide that fact by giving my brother and I my mother's last name of "Kurin" instead of my father's last name which is "Movshits." This change plus my relatively young age kept me from having any early exposure to racism.

One of the first early things that I had observed when moving to America was that being white was a privilege just as being Christian was in Russia. Deviance from Christian white standing was not beneficial to an individual, which is why our Jewish background was hidden for my brother and me by our parents. My brother and I always thought of our **race as self-defined** and thought of ourselves as white because we were socially conditioned to do so (Taylor). However my grandparents always told us that we were Jewish first and white second even though we should act and assimilate into the white culture, but never forget that we are Jewish. My grandparents would tell us that we are lucky that **anti-Semitism** is not as prevalent in our generation as it was in theirs and that we would never have to live through an event such as the Holocaust.

It is as if by going through a catastrophic event such as the Holocaust the Jewish people were given **honorary white**

status similar to the status attained by Asian Americans as discussed by Min Zhou in "Are Asian Americans Becoming 'White'?", where Asian Americans gained their "white" status by becoming educated and more "American"—"American" being synonymous with being white. For all their suffering and perseverance as productive members of society, the Jewish people have gained similar status through education and entering the middle class. When people find out now that I am Jewish they tell me to be proud of that and to identify myself as such; but I have been instilled both a reason to identify as white and an internal fear of identifying myself as Jewish. However, years of adamantly calling myself white have left their mark and it feels uncomfortable now to call myself anything besides that. America was not the **melting pot** of society that I had expected it to be. Like Seattle in the novel *The Indian Killer* by Sherman Alexie, America—which would appear on the surface to be a melting pot of Native Americans and Whites—is only advertised as a melting pot of all cultures seamlessly "melting" together to form one mass. In reality, like Seattle in *The Indian Killer*, America is a country with many different groups sharing the space and waiting for the one spark to ignite a conflict between two or more racial groups.

After moving to America my family was placed on welfare and in addition to having to deal with the fact that we were immigrants, we now had a stigma attached to being welfare recipients. On a daily basis I was subjected to teasing and badgering by fellow classmates about the fact that I did not speak English, and my clothing and my daily habits were different. The school system separated me from the general student body further by putting me in ESL classes with other students who did not speak English, and therefore grouped us all together as separate from the rest of the student body. The further separation from the main student body occurred with the help of

such things as reduced lunch, which alienated all of the foreign born kids further and grouped us all together as the “foreigners” even though we were all from different countries. Eventually we embraced the role of foreigner and all sat together and did not engage with the rest of the students. We were alienated and spent our lunch breaks and recess playing together, sharing stories of our home countries and different acts of racism and **prejudice** we had experienced. We discussed how we had been prejudged and labeled without doing anything to earn those labels, and the different put-downs that we had been subjected to in America. Through these daily conversations I realized that although I was an immigrant, I had **white privilege** because I had been treated a lot better than other foreign born kids who were not white, but were Indian, Black or Latino. While they were blatantly excluded from certain activities such as kickball and gym activities, I was not excluded but was picked last or teased during the activities.

It was during high school that I experienced the greatest understanding of racism and race, even though by that time I had for the most part assimilated into the American culture. It was during my high school years that I saw racial and ethnic segregation of students in the lunch room; something that I had never experienced before. Seeing the lunch room divided into African Americans, Asians, Whites, Russians and Latinos was a surreal experience and I was automatically sucked into the segregation by sitting down at the table with all the other Russian kids without ever thinking twice about it. Suddenly my whiteness became an issue when faced with a blatantly segregated environment and I assumed a racial role that everyone else has as well. Because Brookline High School was not a racially diverse school in itself, many of the African American students were part of the METCO program and were bused to the school from intercity communities.

METCO was the primary desegregation plan implemented at BHS to diversify the school. However, this did not do anything besides isolate the black and white kids further from each other because being part of the METCO program and being put into an affluent white community only made the majority of the black students look inward and create their own social circles. As described by John O’Neil in Beverly Daniel Tatum’s book “*Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together?*” since black students had a much more similar background both economically and geographically, they tended to stay together because they had formed a relationship between each other based on their economic status and they were often from the same area. The black students also found their shared experiences regarding racism as something to unite them by sharing their stories of being discriminated with each other. The white students, however, saw this as “self-segregation” based on race and never took into account the extreme disparity in economic standing, and thereby immediately racialized the reason behind the separation. The white students in the meantime separated themselves from the black students because they also saw them as “invaders” on their turf, as if they did not belong at the school in the first place. It was quite clear that the integration attempts by the school were not successful, expecting students who had grown up in different environments without much interaction with people of other races to all of a sudden intermingle with people of other races. This was foolish and further promoted apprehension on both sides.

A racially charged issue that came up in my high school that I never understood until recently was the issue of our using an American Indian as our mascot because our teams were known as the Warriors. My school had a very small minority of American Indian students and they had protested on numerous occasions that our mascot offended them and their families. Because the

Native American students were a very small minority fighting an issue that had been prevalent for a very long time, the rest of the student body did not take them seriously and thought that they were exaggerating an issue to get some attention. In fact, just as Charles Fruehling in "Playing Indian" mentions, when those who oppose the mascots make their opposition public they get threatened by those who have a lot of vested interest in sports and their school. At my school the minority of American Indian students began to get harassed by the rest of the students, especially the athletes of the various sports. During that time I did not understand why they had been so adamant about the mascots offending them, but in retrospect I had never been subject to something resembling their situation and could not understand it; on the contrary I blindly followed the masses against the minority.

One of the biggest sacrifices that my father made when we moved to America was abandoning his job as an accountant to become a pizza delivery driver to support our family while my brother and I went to school and my mom tried to pass the board exams to become a doctor. When we originally moved to America my mom was very hopeful that it would only be a matter of months before she could get a job as a doctor since she had been one in Russia for over twenty years. However, the reality of the situation was that my mom could only get minimum wage jobs because of her immigrant status and language barrier. Linda Burnham in "Welfare Reform, Family Hardship, and Women of Color" states exactly the problems and stigmas that came with being on welfare. The fact that we were on welfare and needed assistance with housing and food stamps affected my parents on a daily basis and they felt very ashamed that they could not provide for their family without government assistance. That embarrassment spread to me as I began to feel more awkward getting my

free lunches at school, and soon either brought food from home or paid full price for my lunch to avoid having those feelings. My older brother was also often forced to call and decipher different documents that my parents would receive from the welfare program; without him they would have had no idea what to sign and send back in to continue their welfare coverage.

Eventually my mom gave up on finding a job and began a four year long process of studying and preparing for the medical board exams in hopes of becoming a doctor and not having to work minimum wage jobs. To continue our welfare coverage my dad had to work long hours and my brother had to pitch in as well so that we had enough working hours to continue to receive aide. My mom would always hesitate to tell people outside her circle of friends that she did not work and studied because she faced scrutiny from Americans as well as other immigrants for not holding a job while she prepared for her exams. I would find her upset numerous times over comments made to her about her being a slacker and just leeching off the system and not contributing back. This racist attitude towards my mom based on her being an immigrant and not seeking immediate minimum-wage work took an emotional toll on both of my parents and built a resentment in them towards the average American individual that is still present today. This is a very real **"cost" of racism** that is very often overlooked because it is very hard to measure.

Racism is more often hidden behind economic terms or by how much property or work mobility someone has. Emotional tolls that people experience are something that has to be seen first hand and not something that can be quantified by a survey or a study. Furthermore, looking back at the welfare system and its effect on my family it is hard not to recognize that the system is designed to hold people down while still

allowing them to engage in secondary sector jobs that support the economy, yet provide no upward mobility. While the **welfare reform** on the surface appears to support the immigrants and the needy of America, it has many safeguards that people are not aware of, that aim to prevent people from reaching the middle class and beyond. Some of these mechanisms are the inability of those on welfare to pursue educational opportunities as I had discussed previously; some others are that those on welfare are not allowed to have over a certain amount of money in the bank, which in turn prevents them from ever buying their own house, which is a major stepping stone in securing financial wellbeing in the future. Had my brother and I been younger and unable to help the family and had my mom not been educated enough to eventually become a doctor, our family would have been further mired in the welfare program without ever having the ability to escape into the middle class.

In addition to facing discrimination because of our dependency on welfare and associated programs, my parents also faced scrutiny because of their dual citizenship status. When my parents got their citizenship from America in 2002 they decide to keep their citizenship with Russia because they had pension benefits that they wanted to collect while still feeling some loyalty to their country. Peggy Levitt describes in "Salsa and Ketchup" the issues that my family faced because they embraced being **transnational**. For a long time my parents tried to hide the fact that we participated in elections back in Russia as well as sending money back to help out my grandparents who were living in the Ukraine. When our neighbors found out about my parents' involvement with politics as well as the economy back in Russia, they started making derogatory comments to my parents about our being communists and whether we had any loyalty to America, or whether we were just here to exploit the system so that we

could pump the money back into the Russian economy. In reality that could not have been further from the truth because we had supported my grandparents while we lived in Russia, and we continued to have that duty when we moved to America. In fact, in the grand scheme of things it was very hypocritical for people to treat us poorly because we were sending money back to Russia to help our family, when they went every day to the store to buy products that were foreign made by foreign companies, essentially pumping money into the Japanese, German or another countries economy.

One of the most misinformed issues that I have had to deal with was the difference between my **nationality** and my **ethnicity**. It is always extremely frustrating to tell someone that I am both Russian which is my nationality and Jewish which is my ethnicity because many people do not understand that I can be both. Another problem that I faced is illustrated well by Michael Omi in "Racial Formation," which is that even by self-defining myself I was open to interpretation by other people, such as when I told people that I was a U.S. citizen they were further confused because I had also said that I was a Russian immigrant. I believe that the biggest reason behind this confusion is the intertwining of race, ethnicity and nationality. Whenever I have had to fill out any important forms I am still obligated to put down my place of birth which is Moscow. This falls right in line with the ideas of Michael Omi which is that no matter that the government decided that I am a U.S. citizen I will always be classified as a past immigrant—something that I will never be able to relinquish.

Where high school opened my eyes to the world of racism, my college years and work experiences kept my eyes open to the many faces of racism in education, work, and family. One of the first impressions made on me in the corporate world was the idea of accelerated or **forced assimilation**.

While this was not as brutal or intrusive as the forced assimilation of the Native American children—as described in Christine Lesiak’s PBS documentary *In the White Mans Image* by where they were specifically shipped to boarding schools and isolated while being forced to live as a white person—my forced assimilation was equally intrusive because it emphasized that to succeed I needed to assimilate at a faster pace. While in high school I felt that I could assimilate into the American culture at my own pace, once I entered the corporate world as an auditor and night manager of a hotel I realized that I had no choice but to completely immerse myself in the white culture and leave all remnants of my Russian heritage behind. What I realized when I entered my management position was that all the departments at my company were highly racialized. All the management personnel were not only white, but euro-white so immediately I was forced to accelerate my assimilation so that I could fit into my new role. It is important to note here that Russia has for centuries been seen by the West as an outsider or on its margins.

The only departments in the company which were completely white were the management and the security department. At the beginning I was constantly asked about my name in a rather straight forward manner. This was also the first time that I had become aware of the behind the scenes job discrimination that was present in my workplace as illustrated by Cedric Herring in “Is Job Discrimination Dead?”—which was that black applicants to the security department were being called back at a much slower rate, usually when all white applicant choices were exhausted. While I was hired with no prior security experience and at a much younger age than is general present in the high end security field, even qualified African American applicants who worked on a part time basis were not offered a full time position. Their part time status also left the African American em-

ployees open to termination when downsizing during the slow times was implemented.

My immigrant status excluded me for the most part from the dating scene in high school. The only limited dating exposure that I had in high school was with girls who were Russian like me. It was sad to see that despite the fact that I wanted to date girls of all backgrounds I was stuck, and more so expected exclusively to date girls of a Russian background. There was a certain amount of **border patrolling** done by my parents as well as my friends to ensure that we were all dating the same people from the same circles without allowing any outsiders in. Another reason for the insignificant amount of interracial dating in my high school was that everyone always thought the same thing when there was a party. This was put best by Mark Chesler in “Blinded by Whiteness”

My black friend invited me to a party with her. And the first thing I could think of was how many white people are usually there. I remembered thinking, this is probably going to be uncomfortable, and I would rather go out with my white friends.

This mentality was rampant in every racially divided circle in my high school and because of it everyone continued to stay separate, and without engaging with someone of another race outside of school in a social setting it was impossible to get to know them on a more personal level. It was through my dating that I finally saw my parents for the **fair weather liberals** that they were. While never openly speaking out against people of a different race, nationality or ethnicity than us, they were not shy about showing their dissatisfaction when my first serious relationship was with a girl who was part German. Even though they had always preached toler-

ance to my brother and me and always said that all that they cared about was our happiness, once it came to light that my girlfriend had German heritage there would not be a day that I would not hear some sort of comment about it. The constant barrage of comments ranged from the need to keep our Jewish heritage pure, to the idea that my girlfriend's grandparents were the ones who killed my relatives in World War II.

My second full time job exposed me to a larger world of racism and race prejudice. A year ago I got a job as a loss prevention specialist at Star Market. My primary responsibilities were to apprehend shoplifters and keep an eye on employees to make sure there was no employee theft. In essence I was expected to stereotype people based on their appearance and demeanor. This basis of my job opened up a whole new world of racism and stereotyping that is very prevalent in the loss prevention field. Herbert Blumer describes in "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position" the feelings of **race prejudice** as:

(1) A feeling of superiority, (2) a feeling that the subordinate race is intrinsically different and alien, (3) a feeling of proprietary claim to certain areas of privilege and advantage, and (4) a fear and suspicion that the subordinate race harbors designs on the prerogatives of the dominant race. (170)

Each of those feelings and ideas was prevalent with everyone in my department as well as all management associated with my department. The majority of the employees in the loss prevention department were not intrinsically racist on an individual level, but were prejudiced on a basis of **group position**. Many of my coworkers felt that all of those who used EBT cards to get their welfare benefits were automatically leeching off the government and that we were the "suckers" and that those who

worked for a living should be entitled to more benefits than those who do not work. My coworkers also made a habit of pointing out that those who used welfare money tended to buy expensive products and drove nice cars, when in reality it was a very small percentage of those who used food stamps. These comments and the disdain that they projected made for a very uncomfortable work environment where I felt that I could not talk about my past for fear of being scrutinized by my coworkers.

Systematic racism was very prevalent in my department as we were often instructed to follow or observe black customers and watch black employees even though statistics showed time and time again that white customers and employees were stealing at a higher rate. The figures were kept close, however, by the simple fact that through **racial profiling** we were simply following and observing a disproportionate number of black individuals even when we had no reason to do so. Just as Ellen M. Barry describes in "Parents in Prison, Children in Crisis," that the system is designed to single out minorities such as African Americans, our system in my department was designed to do the same thing. We were instructed to follow those with bubble jackets and loose clothing as well as those who wore baggy jeans, and it appeared that this was the kind of apparel worn by African Americans. A very popular observation that my coworkers always brought up was that on shows such as "cops" there were mostly black people committing crimes and that it was a good example of our society where people of color and minorities were committing all the crimes; so they also used this as a justification for our targeting of minority groups. One of the observations by Farai Chideya in "A Nation of Minorities" is:

One study that tracked a year's worth of network news coverage found that sixty percent of images

of blacks were negative, portraying victims, welfare dependents and criminals. This is a far cry from the reality of the black community.

It is clearly obvious that these images are playing a major role in continuing the prejudiced attitudes that transfer over into the workplace and when paired with people in position to target African Americans, it continues to perpetuate the problem by feeding the system.

The last facet of my life that has contributed to my understanding of racism and prejudice around me is my experience with my parents buying a condominium as well as my mom becoming a doctor in about the same time frame. The building complex where we chose our condominium was a rather exclusive space and there were and still aren't many minorities living in that area. My parents noticed a very prominent way of **gate keeping** and **steering** as referred to in the documentary *Race: The Power of an Illusion, Part III*; my parents were shown apartments facing the ocean which were not only bigger but much more desirable because of that. My parents also observed that African Americans and other minority potential buyers were steered toward the apartments facing the parking lot which were smaller and had a much less desirable view. My mom also commented on the fact that she had overheard the realtor agents telling minority buyers about other opportunities in my town where the living spaces were much more affordable and were in a "better" area where they would like them more. It was very sad to understand that the realtor was concerned with keeping these people out of the building even though he could make more money doing business with them. This goes to show that racism and prejudice goes beyond even the economic forces that drive our economy.

My whitening was not complete, however, until my mom became a doctor and in

essence we had achieved the American dream of a good job, a good house and both kids in college. When word had gotten around that my mom was now a doctor and that we owned a condominium in a prestigious community it was suddenly as if the floodgates of communication had opened from American whites from management as well as all white collar positions. While my mother, my brother and my having good jobs and owning property put us in better position to interact and secure some of the things that affluent white Americans had around us, we still understood an important trend that is illustrated by Melvin L. Oliver in "Wealth and Racial Stratification" which is that because we were the first generation in America we had not had the time to amass the wealth that those around us had. Even though on the outside we seemed equal to those around us, in reality it was not so since we did not have the stocks or multiple paid off properties to our name. After all the struggles through hard economic times and enduring racism, we had realized that although we had reached close to a pinnacle of what my parents could accomplish in this country, we still trailed by a large margin those who lived side by side with us but had hundreds of years of family wealth passed down to them.

In conclusion, I think that it is important to reflect on one's past armed with the knowledge one gets throughout all the experiences that are gathered over the course of a lifetime. By reflecting on where I came from and the path that I took to get to where my family and I are now, I came to understand that we had navigated many hurdles the system poses for immigrants. We escaped the welfare system and succeeded in putting ourselves in a position to pass our income and wealth first to me and from my parents and from me to my children in order to gain equal footing with those who have lived in this country for generations.

The American dream is not something that is attained when someone comes here from another country looking for a better life; it is a battlefield of structural constraints. This "melting pot" that is America sees immigrants not for the benefit they bring to the nation, but as parasites that must be kept down and under control. In reality money truly does whiten but it does not erase, and it shouldn't because we should always remember where we came from in a positive light no matter how many people want us to be ashamed or forget.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexie, Sherman. *Indian Killer* (Warner Books, 1996).
- Barry, Ellen. "Parents in Prison, Children in Crisis," in Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin, *Outsiders Within* (South End Press, 2006), pp. 59-74.
- Blumer, Herbert, "Race Prejudice as a Sense of Group Position" in Charles A. Gallagher (ed.), *Rethinking the Color Line, Third Edition* (McGraw Hill, 2007), Pg. 169-175.
- Brodkin, Karen. "How Did Jews Become White Folks?" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 59-66.
- Burnham, Linda. "Welfare Reform, Family Hardship, and Women of Color" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 314-319.
- Chesler, Mark A. "Blinded by Whiteness" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 156-165.
- Chideya, Farai. "A Nation of Minorities" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 11-16.
- Frankenberg, Erica. "Race in American Public Schools" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 347-353.
- Fruehling, Charles. "Playing Indian" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 115-119.
- Herring, Cedric. "Is Job Discrimination Dead?" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 277-284.
- Levitt, Peggy. "Salsa and Ketchup" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 334-341.
- Oliver, Melvin L. "Wealth and Racial Stratification" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 240-246.
- Omi, Michael. "Racial Formation" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 74-80.
- Tatum, Beverley Daniel. *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (Basic Books, 1997)
- Taylor, Howard F. "Defining Race" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 47-54.
- Zhou, Min. "Are Asian Americans Becoming 'White'?" in Elizabeth Higginbotham & Margaret L. Andersen (eds.), *Race and Ethnicity in Society: The Changing Landscape* (Thomson Wadsworth, 2006), pp. 233-239.
- Films:
- In the White Man's Image*. PBS American Experience (1992).
- Race: The Power of an Illusion*. California Newsreel (2003)