

Richard J. Payne (Ch. 1) “Strategies for Getting Beyond Race: Reframing the Problem”

Main Point: Payne argues that in order to make progress in race relations, it is essential that we first change how we think about race. The author claims that even though race and racism do still matter in America, we are presently moving in a direction that will take us beyond race. He also cites several significant improvements in race relations throughout the last few decades, demonstrating how progress was made then and how it is possible today. This chapter offers many strategies for how to reform our perceptions of the race problem. All of the tactics introduced here share three main themes: the idea that the battle against racism starts not on a national but on an individual scale, the fact that we should focus on commonalities and not on differences, and the notion that progress can be made by implementing traditional, positive American values.

Central Issues and Concepts:

- Racism still exists, but because of a racial prism and the tendency to apply the term excessively, the power of the word has been weakened. Even though acknowledging racism can sometimes be empowering, dwelling on racism and discrimination is more likely to breed self-destructive attitudes such as hopelessness and cynicism. Similarly, even though the notion that America is divided into two camps (one black and another white) still exists, blacks are actually being incorporated more and more into the American mainstream. Accordingly, the journey towards a society that does not place value on race will not and should not be without some conflict.
- In order to move beyond race, we must first move beyond the idea that race constitutes a rigid identity. By placing emphasis on either blackness or whiteness, we are perpetuating racial boundaries, as we are ignoring the fundamental ‘American’ and ‘human’ classifications that unite us. Identity is a technique often used within groups in order to promote solidarity, but this can often cause problems such as depersonalization. Similarly, when racial identity is used to force an individual into a specific category, an individual’s uniqueness is lost and he or she is perceived as being identical to the other members of the category. Such generalizations inevitably lead to an emphasis on differences and hostile competition.
- In general, contemporary discussions focus more on the failures of the black population instead of concentrating on their numerous successes. Accordingly, black identity has become linked to the notion of victimhood. Even though African Americans have certainly been victimized over the course of American history, the concept of victimhood has been trivialized through its overuse by all races. The black population is then further alienated if

they claim to be victims, as they are designated as either unfairly privileged or disadvantaged.

- Race remains a difficult topic to discuss openly and honestly, as the concept symbolizes difference and is invested with so much anger and pain. Constructive dialogue that focuses less on race and more on universal virtues is essential for both races in the path to equality. Colin Powell has been able to transcend race; he is aware of the existence of racism, but does not let the problem of race dictate his actions. Such a reworking of the perceptual framework, or way of seeing things, is necessary to move beyond race. Ordinary human problems should no longer be seen in racial terms; such thinking reinforces stereotypes and emphasizes differences between groups.
- The civil rights movement of the 1960s was successful in inspiring people of all races in large part because it proposed an inclusive framework, emphasized universal virtues, and acknowledged the shared humanity of all Americans. In order to get all races to unite for the common purpose of eliminating racism, racial issues should be framed in terms of universal values to highlight commonalities instead of differences. Among these fundamental American values are hard work, discipline, perseverance, responsibility, honesty, justice, civility, politeness, compassion, courage, and forgiveness. Forgiveness and refraining from revenge is essential to improving racial relations.
- Acceptance of diversity is also crucial. We must remember that the American value system maintains that all individuals are of equal worth. Accordingly, all individuals deserve the same opportunity to pursue the American dream.
- In order to improve race relations, we should take a bottom-up approach, a methodology that considers each person as a unique individual that, in his or her own way, struggles everyday to get along with those people they meet, despite distinctions of skin color. This approach proposes that one has more power to incite change locally than nationally; the change in racial relations will result, then, when each person involved in everyday interactions between races begins to take responsibility for his or her share.
- It is important to identify common interests in order to unite people in coalitions for a cause. Latinos, Asians, Blacks, and Whites all share a vested interest in the problems that plague our nation. If these groups are encouraged to see themselves as partners working for the common good, emphasis is shifted away from race.
- It is unrealistic to think that all racial conflict can be resolved forever. The goal of improving race relations should not be eliminating all conflict, but rather it should be negotiating ways of learning how to manage and cope with these tensions in a better way. Instead of confrontational and coercive efforts, this will produce open and honest dialogue that encourages mutual understanding and empathy.
- Trust is central to racial relations and the development of social capital- associations between individuals that encourage cooperation. The generation of social capital through increased trust promotes economic and human capital, as people will share knowledge and skills with

each other as they work together. Accordingly, improving race relations is beneficial for society.

Two Key Quotes:

“Acknowledging that, as human beings, we share the same potential for good and evil and that, as Americans, we ultimately face a common destiny is essential to building a new framework that can help move American society beyond race. In other words, all Americans must acknowledge the humanness and ‘Americanness’ of each other.” (Page 12)

“Although change is often perceived as a top-down endeavor, most meaningful and long-lasting changes begin with the individual. One has greater power to alter one’s own behavior than to affect the behavior of others. One is likely to be more influential in one’s own neighborhood and community than nationally. Ultimately, race is a local and personal concern.” (Page 21)

Two Questions:

-- Why is it that Payne does not attach any sort of timeline or deadline to his goal of eliminating racial discrimination in the United States?

-- In his argument for a reframing of the racial problem, Payne seems to offer only idealistic strategies and no real tangible methods for accomplishing this task. How might the author respond to the claim that he is proposing nothing new, that what he is suggesting has been in place since the 1960s and has (arguably) yet to produce the expected results?