

Is racial prejudice the cause?

The Cranky Professor

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Writing in the *Herald* back on 2 September (“Labour Day reflections: Our prejudice is showing”), Judy Haiven, a professor in the management department at Saint Mary's University, drew attention to the provincial government's finding that the rate of unemployment for black people in Nova Scotia is 15 per cent higher than the rate for whites. Haiven also noted that university-educated black Nova Scotians earn considerably less than the average university-educated Nova Scotian.

Through her own research, Haiven discovered that while four per cent of people in the Halifax Regional Municipality are black, blacks made up only 2.3 per cent of the front-of-the-shop personnel in the 300 or so metro stores she surveyed.

One would expect that rates of employment and pay for a large group of people within a society would be right around the society-wide average. That Nova Scotians who are black fare less well than average, then, is strong evidence that something is amiss.

What, then, is responsible for blacks doing worse on average in employment and earnings than Nova Scotians as a whole? Answering that question should take us some distance toward discovering what to do to fix things.

Haiven thinks that most of the problem is that employers and co-workers discriminate against blacks. Out of prejudice, white employers often treat blacks who seek jobs or promotions badly; likewise, white workers often treat black co-workers badly.

In Haiven's words, “a look through scores of newspaper articles strongly suggests a reason for this gross disparity: good, old fashioned discrimination.”

It seems unlikely that Haiven is right about this. First, there's just the size of the disparity. A 15 per cent difference in unemployment rates is too high to attribute to the attitudes of the particular individuals province-wide who are responsible for staffing stores, businesses, offices, schools, and the rest.

Second, there's the implausibility of the implication that a great many Nova Scotians harbour prejudices against black people.

That's not to say that only a few Nova Scotians are bigots, or to say that only a few blacks experience their bigotry, or even to say that the effects of occasional bigotry are minor. It is to say, though, that the burden of proof rests on those who would explain disparities between blacks and whites in Nova Scotia by claiming widespread and effective prejudice and discrimination in this province.

Does Haiven meet this burden of proof? The findings she gives do not themselves indicate an explanation. In fact, they raise more questions than they answer. We would need to know whether blacks on average are as well educated as whites if we are to be clear that the 15 per cent difference in unemployment has to do with race rather than, say, education. We would need to know whether black university graduates are earning degrees in the same fields of study as university graduates generally. We would need to know whether four per cent of the applications to stores were from blacks.

Haiven cites as evidence of wide and effective prejudice the number and nature of complaints of racist discrimination blacks have brought to the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission, specifically against the Halifax Regional Municipality.

Certainly Haiven is right to be concerned about the unfair, unfriendly, or demeaning treatment the complainants allege. Any individual complaint of unfairness or a foul work environment needs to be taken seriously, and any such complaint found to have merit needs to be resolved and its lessons learnt.

But what the cases Haiven cites add up to is far from clear. Few of them are settled, and some of them, from Haiven's descriptions, seem not to be about discrimination at all but, rather, about insensitive or offensive behaviour by co-workers.

That the inequalities in employment and income between white and black Nova Scotians are to a great extent due to racial prejudice on the part of employers is implausible on the surface, and Haiven has failed to make a compelling case that nonetheless prejudice is the cause. Well, then, why are black Nova Scotians faring poorly compared to whites?

I have no idea. I'd like to hear from the sociologists and economists who are studying the issue.

My own guess is education and training. Employers care that workers have the skills they need. All things considered, they will hire the applicant with more or better schooling, even if only because staying in school and doing well indicates to them perseverance and determination. If black Nova Scotians have on average less schooling, or lower grades for the same schooling, than other Nova Scotians, then that might explain the discrepancies in employment and earnings.

Of course, if that's right, the real problem remains. Why are black Nova Scotians less well trained or educated than whites? Whatever the correct answer to that question, I doubt it is racial prejudice toward black children among teachers and administrators.

Haiven concludes her article by suggesting that what she calls the "derision and anger" with which the "mere idea of a designated seat on HRM for an African Nova Scotian councillor has been met" is another indication of our prejudice. Derision, though, if not anger, seems a fine way to respond to any proposal as pointless and pernicious as that one.