Racial Issues and Societal Pressures From the White, Affluent Suburb

An Argumentative Essay
Abstract

The American Dream is largely considered as the ultimate goal in terms of personal success in the United States. It posits that no matter who you are, if you work hard, you will succeed and live a fruitful life. Although some may not agree, marginalized groups have less of a shot at this dream due to lack of social capital and different life chances. This essay takes the residentially segregated suburb, Woodbridge, VA, and looks at how the suburbs, in their construction and rise after World War II as a white suburban ideal, became a symbol for the American Dream, an end goal, and how that version of the Dream continues to keep minorities at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid. The essay examines the causes of this phenomenon and argues that the suburbs can create an environment that fosters social inequality, residential segregation, and prevents socio-economic upward mobility for minorities.
Racial Issues and Societal Pressures in White, Affluent Suburbs

An Argumentative Essay

I have seen little of the world so perhaps this is biased, but Woodbridge, Virginia, has always seemed like a unique place to me. I grew up in Woodbridge: for a large part of my life, all I knew were long flat roads with store franchises that seemed to go on forever, rows of townhouses, cul-de-sacs for riding bikes around and around, and well-kept greenery. Woodbridge houses mostly families, of which a majority are well-off middle to upper class government employees due to its proximity to Washington D.C. At first glance it seems like Woodbridge is a typical suburb, the kind that would set the stage for family sitcom on TV. But as I grew up, I became more observant of my surroundings, and my view began to change.

In middle school I was always asking myself, “Why can’t we live somewhere more exciting?” All I saw was a town taking up too much space; there was a metaphorical rain cloud overhead. Then years passed, I learned how to drive, and the possibilities seemed endless. I piled friends into my car thinking that we could go anywhere, although that didn’t stop us from sitting in empty parking lots with nothing to do. Now, having moved away to Richmond, I don’t see it so soulless, or too magnificent, but I do have a new appreciation for it: a sense of nostalgia for Woodbridge that is comforting in such an uncertain stage of my life.

But with this new perspective, I now find myself looking at my hometown much more critically and in a context that isn’t so self-centered. Every city in the world has its own personality, characteristics, and culture, and this “typical suburb” is no exception. Woodbridge has a specific characteristic that I’ve come to notice from observation and experience. Ask any local, and you’ll come to know there are two parts to Woodbridge. One part very much fits the criteria for a typical suburbs: the major high school and middle school, mostly pretty large
residential homes, glorified versions of strip malls (“town centers”), and of course, the local mall where teenagers go to spend their parents money. The other part is much less spoken of. This part, which lies along Route 1, has quite different scenery. It’s home to actual strip malls, empty parking lots, car dealerships, homes that aren’t so grandiose, and most of all traffic. One could say that this part isn’t very aesthetically pleasing. But most important, a majority of this part of Woodbridge is home to Latinos.

Though my family lived in the typical suburbs section, I was never unfamiliar with this part of Woodbridge; in fact, my parents frequented it. My dad would go to one of the several Latino grocery stores for international foods and spices you couldn’t get at chain grocery stores. My mom and I would go to the Salvation Army and other thrift stores where the cashiers would talk to her in Spanish by default. As my family is Hispanic, this part of town didn’t bother me or seem odd exactly. But the phenomenon itself feels odd to me now. Why does this part of town look so drastically different? Why are there so many more Latinos here? This part of town was built before the rest was, but it’s not just old, it’s run down compared to the rest of Woodbridge and is home to a different demographic. It seems like a completely different place.

Overall, this led to a question: Why don’t I see more Latinos around me at home? Although this observation is based on personal experience, and it could be a coincidence that I just didn’t know many Latinos, it made me ask if there were actual reasons as to why this part of town was so different. More clearly: is this phenomenon of Latinos in an overall poorer/less “pleasant” looking area a coincidence or not? This issue stood out because it was odd to think that this kind of unexplained phenomenon was happening right next me, but went without notice for a very long time.
My mother and father were both immigrants who moved to the U.S. without much planning or thought, from what I know. They had their separate reasons, but whether these reasons were “traditional” or not (opportunity, wealth, escape from oppression) they both started from entry-level jobs and sleeping on couches to being suburban homeowners with a family. That was the goal for them: to make money, to get married, to have kids, and have some peace. This is often the case for many people, not just for immigrants. Who wouldn’t want these things and do what it takes to get them?

But it very well may be that they are part of the exception. Exceptions and success stories are always more noticed, recognized, and overall easier to look at. These “exception” success stories can and have been glorified in the media, often as an indirect testament to the idea that we are living in a post-racial society. The fact of the matter is, if you’re a minority, you generally have fewer opportunities in the U.S. This does seem contradictory to the age-old saying that America is the land of the free and opportunity, but evidence suggests this ideology is not true. If you’re an immigrant looking for a better life, or even just a minority citizen trying to move up the socioeconomic ladder, you may attain a better life but not as good as others can have it. And just because the U.S. is better off than other countries does not mean that it is more equal.

According to the report published by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013), “Labor Force Characteristics by Race and Ethnicity, 2012,” the unemployment rate in 2012 for the entire nation was 8.1%. However, things change when you break it down by race. The unemployment rates for Blacks, Native people, Asians and Hispanics were 13.8%, 12.3%, 5.9% and 11.8%, respectively (p. 1). Even further, when comparing median weekly earnings, “full-time wage and salary workers were $568 for Hispanics, $621 for Blacks, $792 for Whites, and $920 for Asians” (UBS, 2013, p.8).
And according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2013), the median value of owner-occupied housing units in Woodbridge between 2009 and 2013 was $280,200. Although this is just one picture of how pricey housing can be in Woodbridge, it still represents the median, and it’s hard to imagine affording that without two high-earning incomes. If Latino people are making approximately $200 less a week than white people do, it is possible that they cannot afford housing in the more affluent part of Woodbridge. Of course, this is just an example of how minorities are disadvantaged in the United States. But on a more specific scale, this could be why Woodbridge is broken up into two. It could be a coincidence, or it could be that the construction of affluent suburbs, unintentionally or not, has created an environment that makes it so disadvantaged people (minorities) aren’t or can’t be included.

The reason that race is relevant is because the image of a suburban lifestyle is very often an end goal for people. In American Dream in the 21st Century, sociologist James W. Loewen provides a personal anecdote about this very idea. He asks a class to “fantasize about their futures” and “all but two imagine a life in suburbia, with a spouse, children, grass and a good job. And that dream was of a white suburbia” (Loewen, 2011, p. 68). This is not unlike what my own parents were striving for. It’s part of the idea that if you come here with nothing in your pockets, but work tirelessly, “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” as it’s often put, you can live a successful and fruitful life in the United States. As I said previously, this doesn’t just apply to immigrants; it applies to everyone who resides here. You could buy a house and have family with a dog and white picket fence and it may not be much, but at least you have a roof over your head. But it cannot be avoided that minorities are at the very least monetarily disadvantaged, making that dream harder to achieve. In the article “Re-Placing whiteness in spatial assimilation research,” by Richard Wright of Dartmouth College, Mark Ellis of the University of Washington,
and Virginia Parks of Chicago (2005), the authors note that considering white suburbs as “the paramount space of American cultural belonging” is especially problematic because it sets being white as the standard to achieve and assimilate to (p. 115). As I will explain later, most suburbs started off as exclusive racist communities; this is where we get the image of the white suburb. The construction of the suburbs employed racist policies against its residents in the past that we still may be experiencing today in legal but covert ways. Because suburbs are often a symbol of the American dream, it can create a societal pressure on minorities to live up to that “dream” even though they lack income and social capital needed for mobility, perpetuating a cycle of social stagnancy. This may be the cause of the segregation Woodbridge seems to exhibit. While some people may achieve success and wealth despite these disadvantages, they are in the minority and still may experience feelings of not being truly assimilated into American society.

Being born as a minority can come with a very different life as opposed being born white. This includes your life expectancy, your wages, your likeliness for higher education and so on. These things don’t always negatively affect one’s life, but they do have consequences. Max Weber, a sociologist and philosopher considered one of the three founders of the science of sociology, coined the term “life chances.” Peter J. Martin (2003), senior lecturer on sociology at the University of Manchester, notes:

> The notion of life chances is a probabilistic one: how likely is it, given a person’s condition, that certain things will happen to him or her in their life time...it is an ‘objective’ rather than ‘subjective’ fact of social life for it has nothing to do with what persons believe their class position to be. (p. 107)

In this case, it can be established that the aforementioned disadvantages are a part of one’s life chances. Just because it is more likely that, for example, people of color are less likely to be
hired for jobs does not necessarily mean that this is exclusively the case. Many draw on this to exemplify and understate the reality of race relations in the U.S. However, these things happen often enough that they are considered statistical facts and become a very big source of injustice towards minorities. In terms of geography, a more relevant example would be a child born in a low-income family in a low-income area. If the school in this area happens to be low quality, little can be done about it, therefore decreasing their chances at a good education and increasing their socio-economic status. What happens when an area like this has a majority of a certain race or ethnicity?

In order to improve one’s life chances, one usually needs to acquire social capital. Social capital can allow someone to move up the socioeconomic scale. Xavier de Souza-Briggs (1998), faculty member at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, explains that social capital is “what we draw on when we get others, whether acquaintances, friends, or kin to help us solve problems, seize opportunities, and accomplish other aims that matter to us.” This usually has to do with how much access you have to resources, and how much support you have in these endeavors; whether it’s having friends loan you money or provide transportation (Souza-Briggs, 1998, p. 178). It is, however, important to note that sometimes those who support you can’t necessarily help you get ahead, and this becomes important when considering racial issues in suburbs. If Woodbridge is segregated by race/income, whether it’s based on preference or discrimination, it may be due to lack of “social leverage” in consequence of their race/ethnicity (Souza-Briggs, 1998, p. 178).

To accept these definitions is to accept that racism is an issue that is still relevant in American society. Since it is established that life chances are by the circumstances of your birth, that you can’t control whom you are born as, and that these probabilities can happen so often
some may consider them fact or even fate, it can be argued this is due to an ingrained, institutional form of racism\(^1\). Someone who defies all probabilities of how their life may or is “supposed” to turn out can still be discriminated against because of their race or ethnicity in direct, tangible ways. Andrew L. Barlow (2003), professor of sociology at Diablo Valley College, wrote in his book that “the conviction held by many whites (and a small number of people of color) that societal racism is dead was made possible by the development of qualitatively new system of racism in the 1950s, one that enables white people to maintain racial privileges without explicitly claiming racial superiority” (p.8). The construction of the suburbs in the 1950s play an extremely important role in this, and it is possible that we may still be dealing with its lasting Effects.

Historically, the suburbs were inherently racist. In “Between fear and hope: Globalization and race in the United States,” Barlow (2003) recounts that the expanding economy from 1930 to 1960 allowed for millions of private houses to be built after World War II. During the 1950s, mortgages with low-interest rates geared specifically towards the suburbs were offered to whites only; giving the excuse that this would ensure social stability (p. 38). This merely highlighted that white people were seen as, or saw themselves as, superior, and took advantage of that privilege. To minorities, it highlighted their stunted economic upward mobility due to the lack of access to these resources. This type of outright racism can have a devastating effect on the socioeconomic status of people of color. The suburbs, these exclusive and expensive homes, symbolized yet another branch they couldn’t reach. They could not participate in the American

\(^1\) Institutional racism can be defined as, “discrimination carried out systematically by institutions (political, economic, educational, and other) that affect all members of a group that come in contact with it’’ (Ferris, K. & Stein J., 2008, p. G-8).
lifestyle; they could not reach the American dream. Although this applies to the several other ways minorities were discriminated against during the 1950s, these specific events have a lasting effect on racism today and on current suburban racial issues.

Residential segregation can obviously still happen today, as I mentioned before with the example of my hometown. It is now, however, a question of whether it is a result of minority preference or persisting remnants of previous housing discrimination. As reported in “Minority access to white suburbs: A multiregional comparison,” John Logan, Richard Alba, and Shu-Yin Leung (1996), all of the State University of New York at Albany, conducted a study that tested two theories. One theory hypothesized that the more culturally assimilated an immigrant is into American society, the more they are expected to move out of a segregated area, or “ghetto.” The other hypothesized that this was due more to racial inequality and stratification, such as inequalities in housing markets and discriminatory loan/mortgage practices (p. 854). They found that several factors could determine segregation, such as income, education, home ownership, nativity and language, although these were not the same for different groups (Logan, Alba, Leung, 1996, p. 873). In brief, although Hispanics and Asians were not as segregated when compared to blacks, “those with the most favored backgrounds (high socioeconomic status for Asians, high socioeconomic status and good English-language ability for Hispanics) actually live in suburbs whose racial composition is comparable to whites.” This, however, does not apply to areas that are majority Hispanic, as they tend to segregate from whites much more and was a noted exception in the study (Logan, Alba, Leung, 1996, p. 875).

Further, when considering segregation solely between whites people and black people, their data support the hypothesis that the “dual-housing market” or discriminatory practices against blacks have a negative impact on integration. And regionally speaking, “the positive
relationship between group size and segregation from whites supports long-standing hypotheses…that whites use segregation to preserve their social position in the face of a threatening - that is, large, - minority advance” (Logan, Alba, Leung, 1996, p. 875). Although this is only one study, it does show that these decade-old discriminatory practices have left a considerable mark on not only suburban racial issues but also nation-wide persisting racial tensions. Residential segregation is also not exclusive to the suburbs. And interestingly, it is indeed different for immigrants. It’s important to note that while the two can overlap and be compared, ultimately they are different because of differing and integral characteristics, like language-proficiency on one hand, and the specific historical racism that African-Americans have been enduring on the other.

In his book *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities and Future Reparations*, Joe R. Feagin (2000), sociologist and Distinguished Professor at Texas A&M University, touches more heavily on the white vs. black spatial relationship:

Research has shown that, when a predominantly white residential area becomes more than about eight percent black, some whites will consider moving out. As the percentage reaches about 20 percent in what was once an all-white or nearly all-white residential neighborhood, many whites will not consider moving into such an area, and it will often become a mostly black or nonwhite community. It is estimated that just one in twenty U.S. neighborhoods is both racially diverse and stable. (p. 155)

These numbers incorporate both preference and discrimination; moving out would be a discriminatory practice, but wanting to be with people like yourself, adding perhaps that you are concerned of potential racial hostility, can incorporate a bit of both. Overall, it seems it is both preference and covert discrimination that determines where someone resides. But these
preferences and discrimination arise from your life chances and outside sources as well.

Souza-Brigg’s social capital classifications again provide insight on how someone may internally deal with these issues (1998, p. 178). Regardless of whether you’re an immigrant or not, you might rely more on social support to retain a sense of familiarity and identity, though this may not give you the social leverage needed for upward mobility. But if you have more social leverage, you lack strong personal ties that provide social support. Having put that aside for upward social mobility, one could forgo one’s cultural identity for full assimilation in order to achieve a high SES. This can result in certain consequences: one might personally feel like a failure (“not working hard enough”) for not being able to reach this idea of success. On the other hand, it could result in a lack of personal ties and therefore a lack of social support that can have a heavy impact on not only success but on personal life satisfaction. These are just a couple of societal consequences the idea of the American dream has on minorities.

In the context of residential segregation specifically, it could be beneficial to weigh its effects as this might say something about the prospect of integration. Residential segregation based on discriminatory practices from the 1950s that we continue to see lasting effects of is not only problematic but also unacceptable. There is simply no other reason for it other than simple and willful ignorance. This is something for which a solution is needed. However, in Woodbridge’s case, for example, it is hard to say whether this happens because of discrimination, preference, or both. And without defining what might be the cause, there seems to be a fine line between racial integration and cultural assimilation. Assimilation can easily turn into cultural erasure. Someone shouldn’t have to feel as if they need to fit in at the expense of their own identity and history.

However, that’s just the ideal, and research is finding quite the opposite. Professors
Amon Emeka and Jody Aguis Vallejo (2011), from the University of Southern California, studied how Latinos identify themselves on the census or otherwise and found “substantial population losses that cannot be explained by mortality or migration” and that “substantial numbers of respondents who identified themselves and Mexican-American on the 1980 failed to do so in 1990” (p. 155). This not only leads to viewing different racial groups as being mutually exclusive (another issue entirely) but also can indicate that because second-generation Latinos usually are fluent in English and can pass as white, they begin to identify as “American” as a path towards socioeconomic advancement (Emeka & Vallejo, 2011, p. 1562). It looks like that all of these factors could apply to Woodbridge, in theory. Although data isn’t available on how residents of the racially segregated area feel about this phenomenon, it can be assumed indirectly that it is due to discrimination or preference. People may want to forego their cultural identity (immigrant or not) in order to advance and achieve the goal of the white suburb. The American Dream is indeed powerful, and not necessarily in the inspirational sense.

It can be established from the above information that assimilation is a huge part of being accepted and successful in the U.S. Why? As stated before, the suburbs are “the paramount space of American cultural belonging.” Through assimilation, increasing your SES becomes more possible and your image of the American Dream becomes closer. Everyone wants to fit in, but at what cost? Emeka and Aguis Vallejo (2011) even note that because U.S. citizens tend to use the words “white” and “American” interchangeably, some second generation Latinos may opt to identify with just being white, as opposed to the “hyphenated American” (p. 1552). As I noted before, Latinos, African-Americans, etc. may experience discrimination differently, but this sort of “white-washing” is not just prevalent to Latinos and especially is not exclusive to the United States. Can we truly call the United States a “melting pot” or “salad bowl” if people still think
these measures are necessary?

A comfortable living wage, stability, a house, time for recreation and healthy familial relationships are not just noble goals, but resources should be accessible to all. However, this is not the definition of the Dream anymore—it’s not something tangible you can grasp at, it’s an ideal more tied to individual success rather than material attainment. It is ideal to those who maintain the most power in this society. A certain characteristic of the American Dream is its tendency to reiterate that everyone is created equal; everyone has a chance at success, and if you fail, it’s your fault. This places blame and incredible societal pressure on minorities who simply are not born with the social/cultural capital, money, or education that allows them to advance farther up the social ladder (Ferris, K. & Stein, J., 2014, p. 209). By placing this blame on people of color, the societal pressure they feel can fuse with their personal identity and self-esteem, effectively making it less likely that they even try to advance. If you’re told all your life that you’re causing your own failure, even if you’re not, you’re going to carry that with you and perhaps not even live up to your greatest potential because you were taught you were incapable. Maybe Woodbridge’s suburban environment gave way to residential segregation, but maybe the suburbs were just a natural re-creation of the U.S. racial dichotomy that has existed for centuries. Whether due to discrimination or preference, its root cause and ultimate consequence is a lack of social mobility that results from our history and of racism, and it continues to render the American Dream an often unattainable dream for minorities.

Of course, there are people who don’t agree with this reasoning. Yet, those who contest the fact that minorities are disadvantaged in this country are usually those who benefit the most from being advantaged. While empathy is certainly isn’t impossible, the privileges afforded those who come from a higher socio-economic environment make it hard for them to empathize
with others less privileged. This also counters the frequently made argument that racism no longer exists, that it is an outdated concept. Feagin (2003) notes a 1990s study in Pennsylvania: “Respondents were asked whether the quality of life for black Americans had gotten better in the last decade. Nearly six in ten whites said it had gotten better, compared to less than a third of blacks…Several recent surveys have found that many whites think blacks are as well off as or are better off than whites in regard to education, health care, and jobs” (p. 123, p. 124). White people may just not be as observant because it’s not an issue that they feel pertains to them, but a color blind, everybody’s equal solution to racism ignores our nation’s cultural, ideological, and institutional reality. As I’ve said before, it would be counterproductive to advocate assimilation as opposed to acceptance. Just because minorities live in the same area, that doesn’t mean they’re equal.

There’s also the issue of the lack of white accountability. Many whites generally consider themselves less racist or not racist at all when compared to someone else if that person were to do something extreme. This makes them think they are above racism and that it is a non-issue (Feagin, 2003, p. 124). Because we are socialized to be racist and those ideologies are deeply ingrained in our institutions, it’s very possible to be racist and not even know it. This white apologist attitude toward racism could very well contribute to the issues mentioned above. Excuses are constantly made for clearly racist attitudes coming from whites, such as early 1900s housing discrimination citing that was supposedly meant to ensure “social stability” (Barlow, 2003, pg. 38). Would it really be a surprise that residential segregation is in part due to people of color not wanting to be around these kinds of attitudes? This may seem like a reasonable way of looking at it, but the fact of the matter is that it’s not really a choice. Whereas white people never have to think about the consequences of where they live, job opportunities, and other factors,
people of color have to carry it consciously on their shoulders everyday, all in effort to attain individual success. Here lies the privilege of the American Dream. White people know that it’s there for them when they want to put the work in, and in some cases they might not even have to. In the context of suburbia, for example, white people may think that there is no issue because they themselves did not experience any issues when deciding where to live.

I believe ultimately, we need to shift our focus from the American Dream to something more realistic as a solution. The unattainable nature of the American Dream has proved problematic and with consequence. In order to accomplish this, the American people must realize that not everyone is born with the same opportunities and, therefore, cannot all reach the white suburban goal. In fact, we shouldn’t be looking at the suburbs as a goal at all. Although this environment may suit some, and given that it’s not realistic or possible to abolish all suburbs, efforts should be made to educate the people on persisting racial issues and create ways to ensure equal outcome for minorities, not just opportunity. This includes not only blatant discrimination, but also the recognition of personal privilege and micro-aggressive racist behavior that would not be apparent to many. As a small step, further efforts should be made to include cultural competency and tolerance classes in schools and the workplace to educate the American people in order to create a more culturally accepting society. Perhaps through this, minorities will not feel so much societal pressure to assimilate and others would be more open to integration. This could slowly change the nature of the American Dream over time. If we start to become aware of institutional and structural racist attitudes and defend minorities, we may see more integrated neighborhoods due to a decrease in discrimination.

This of course is only an ideal and would take strong efforts and openness from American society. Are we as a country prepared for that? I don’t know if I can say that this will
happen to Woodbridge any time soon. Every time I return, I see more new developments on the wealthier side, and the other side continues to deteriorate. The way we build our environments can be indicative of what we want and believe. Both racial discrimination and preference can lead to residential segregation, as I see in Woodbridge; however, this separation of people by race isn’t unique. This cyclical process needs to be broken to ensure equal opportunity and sound cultural identity for minorities.
References


http://books.google.com/books?id=2gJhgr0BrooC&printsec=frontcover&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false


