

Grandfathered In?

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Occasionally a phrase in our common language catches my attention. Over time, I have become skeptical about using any words, phrases, or idioms for which I don't understand the history, as they may infer unintended meanings for someone from a different perspective. Some expressions are obvious, like "slave driver," but others less so. Take "gaslighting," a recently more common expression, as an example. It took me some time to figure out what that really means and where it originated. I learned the term "gaslighting" comes from a 1944 film, *Gas Light*, about a manipulative husband who undermines a woman's sanity.¹ It's not actually about lighting a match to gas, as I had naively assumed. To further complicate our communication, the present-day meaning of a phrase may differ from its historical meaning, which could be insulting, toxic, or even traumatic.

I have heard and used the phrase "grandfathered in" throughout my life. It has meant, in my understanding, that someone who had a privilege got to keep it when the process for achieving that privilege or recognition changed. The very founders of the discipline of family medicine were "grandfathered in." They were practicing general medicine before family medicine was a specialty and sought board certification when it came along to continue as respected physicians in the field. These physicians were granted the privilege of board certification based on their experience and were exempted from the newly-required three-year residency program. That makes sense still today, and I'm grateful to the founders of the discipline, especially since they built a certification system that required ongoing assessment of competence. So maybe I don't need to think any more about it.

But if I were to stop and really consider the phrase and not just the commonly understood meaning, I might ask, what does any of this have to do with their grandfathers? Most likely they didn't have grandfathers who had practiced medicine; they had earned the privilege through their own experience. Further, if the founder was a woman does that mean she was "grandmothered in"?* Or does it still somehow involve her grandfather? So beyond some curiosity about this gendered term, I might not have looked any further, until a reading for my book club uncovered the surprising history of the term.²

Now that I understand the phrase's origins, I can barely focus on the rest of the statement when someone uses it in casual conversation. Because, of course, once we notice something, it's hard to not notice it, and it seems all around us. I am disappointed that this phrase has become part of our common language and since it came from events from over a century ago, most of us would never even think twice when we hear it, or use it. But now I do. My general skepticism of idioms continues to grow, and because of that distrust I find myself using plain language to avoid unintended reactions.

Perhaps because my mother grew up in a bilingual household, or because neither of my parents went to college, I have always felt that my language doesn't meet the standards of those around me. I am often concerned I will slip and reveal my ignorance. Now, my insecurity grows as even the common phrases I thought I understood betray me.

As with so many things in our society, the phrase "grandfathering in" has its roots in America's racial history. In the early 20th century, statutes were instituted in seven southern states allowing legislatures to proceed with restricting Black men's right to vote. It is remarkable to think of the political stunts performed to work this out. Basically, White** men didn't want Black men beside them in politics, or making decisions for their shared communities. At first, literacy tests and poll taxes were put in place to restrict Black

men from voting, but this strategy posed a problem for many southern White politicians as it also excluded many of the lower-class White men whose votes they needed. The grandfather clause stated that anyone who had a grandfather that had ever voted was given the right to vote (ie, grandfathered in), and thus was exempt from the new requirement for poll taxes and literacy tests. This addition made certain that the majority of voters would be White men, likely by large numbers, because, of course, no grandfather of a Black man at the time had ever had the chance to vote. Without access to education or economic success, few Black men would ever gain the right to vote under these statutes. It was an insidious and powerful way to ensure white supremacy.

I try to envision what history might have told us in the absence of this grandfather clause. Imagine the impact on migration, segregation (Jim Crow) laws, and access to quality education, health care, housing, and economic success. If Black men of the day had been able to continue to have a voice in their communities and our national politics, there is no doubt our country would look very different today. The ongoing influence of our racial history continues to astound me, particularly as a White person learning it for the first time.

In my work as a family physician, I strive to improve health equity, decrease health disparities, and train others to do the same. This lesson in history has led me to question our common language, and to recognize where history is repeating itself. We have not yet seen the end of efforts to restrict voting access to communities of color. Though many White people may just want to move on and forget the past, much more than the language remains in our world today. The echoes of the origins impact us all—and unfortunately, we may not even be aware of most of it.

FOOTNOTES

* “Grandmothering in” never had relevance since it would take another 20 years for women to win the right to vote. In fact, Black women were effectively restricted from voting for nearly a half century more. But that “herstory” is for another day.

** Capitalization of White and Black in this piece are intentional to meet the Correct and Preferred Usage in the *AMA Manual of Style* and recognizes that choosing to not capitalize White in regard to race implies Whiteness as the norm.³

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