

Myths about Racism in Academia: Why we are where we are

Disclaimer:

I'm a young, able-bodied, cis-het, white, private-educated, protestant Christian man from an affluent family from a major city. I check almost every privilege checkbox available. Opinions are mine, and I still have a lot of learning to do.

This discussion is about anti-black racism in the USA, from my (white) perspective.

Cameron Clarke – June 10th, 2020

African American History - Persistence and Tenacity

Myth: “There is no more racism in America”

Reality: Overt racism has tainted everything, and anything less than anti-racist action, even unconsciously and unintentionally, contributes to systemic racism

- Although overt racism (often what is meant when discussing interpersonal “racism”) is no longer generally socially acceptable, there is a long history of racism:
 - 1619-: Colonialism, its basis in chattel slavery, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade until 1808
 - 1691-: Racist slave codes, co-option of religious rhetoric and slave patrols/ terrorism
 - 1861-: The Civil War over slavery, 13th amendment, race riots/ lynching/ terrorism and Black Codes
 - 1916-: The Great Migration, The New Deal, redlining, and continued racial terrorism and Jim Crow
 - 1964-: Civil Rights Act, over-policing, mass incarceration and the War on Drugs
- Collectively this history has built massive inequity into the systems of daily life:
 - Policing
 - Property ownership, generational wealth, access to economic opportunities
 - Political representation, segregation, class divide
 - Relevant to us: Education and Academia
 - Everything else in one way or another, etc...

Black in Academia - Overcoming Disadvantage

Myth: “Black people are treated equally in Academia”

Reality: Success in Academia is predicated upon successfully navigating all of the same steps as everyone else, but with additional obstacles around every corner

- The possibility of educational equality has only recently been generally guaranteed
 - Foundation of public schools, segregation (upheld explicitly by Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896)
 - Foundation of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and exclusion from most others
 - Brown v. Board of Education, boom in private schools in America, “segregation academies”
 - Regents of University of California v. Bakke: replaces Affirmative Action with Diversity and Inclusion
- The aforementioned historical context and systemic racism/inequities produce self-fulfilling stereotypes (“stereotype threat”) and additional obstacles at every step
- “Diversity is a Dangerous Setup” - We’ll hear more from Adam on this, but the idea is that what is needed is active equity and justice in education, possibly even reparations, rather than just supplying diversity of experience/background/opinion for assumed-white organizations and education

White in America - Obstacles to Progress

Myth: “White people have no race/culture/ethnicity or are ‘normal’”

Reality: Centuries of control by white, land-owning, Christian men has guaranteed the upper-hand for whiteness (hence “white supremacy”) and deemed WASP identity as “normal” and aspirational

- **WASP: White Anglo-Saxon Protestant** racial-ethnic identity (REI) characteristics (stereotypes and broad generalization about “white” people):
 - The norm as the European, land-owning (and often slave-owning), Christian leaders for centuries
 - Avoid conflict, bottle up complaints, but seek resolution quickly once issues become unavoidable
 - Value personal achievement over family
 - Value quiet and understated leadership, merit, and familiarity (to detriment of outsiders/other cultures)
 - Value personal accountability and intentions over systemic perspectives and outcomes
- Combining all of these cultural tendencies together explains a few things:
 - Why white folks dislike talking about racism (see it as a problem to be solved, usually understood as a personal hatred or bias, rather than the culmination of centuries of history and systemic construction)
 - Why discussions of solutions too often focus on intentions rather than outcomes
 - Why criminal justice is focussed on guilt and retribution rather than causes, restoration and prevention

Sources - Further Reading

Myth: “I understand racism and don’t need to do anything to undo it”

Reality: Racism is a disease that has infected society, including academic stereotypes, institutions, and even curriculum, which takes continual actively anti-racist learning and work to overcome.

- [Academic article on Racial-Ethnic Identity development and black male academic achievement \(I haven't read it yet\)](#)
- [Racial Equity Tools webpage](#)
- [Scaffolded Anti-Racist resources \(following the REI development trajectory for white people\)](#)
- [Another Anti-Racist resource](#)
- [Showing Up for Racial Justice \(SURJ\)'s toolkit for calling allies in regarding racial violence](#)
- [SURJ's Anti-Asian Racism response toolkit \(especially relevant during COVID-19\)](#)
- [#ShutdownSTEM's scaffolded resource portal](#)
- [A group of Catholic leaders' diagnosis of the criminal justice system in America](#)
- [The Equal Justice Initiative's recent report on racially motivated lynchings in America and their lasting legacy](#)
- etc...

I’m available to talk about these things and learn together

Keep asking, reading, listening. Be humble.

Try not to be a burden to anyone who may be exhausted about this already from living with racism.

Seek to be actively anti-racist. Don’t be afraid to acknowledge mistakes and grow from them.