
Understanding the Origins of White Denial



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Even as the existence of systemic racism becomes increasingly apparent, complacency is returning among white people. But research provides tools for reviving white racial consciousness, by remembering and celebrating common humanity.

When asked in a 2015 interview to reflect on race relations in the United States, Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg replied: “People who think you could wave a magic wand, and the legacy of the past is over, are blind.” With this short quip, the late beloved Justice hit upon a truth.

The killing of George Floyd at the hands of police touched off a summer of protest and long-overdue attention to systemic racism. As international support for the “Black Lives Matter” movement intensified, protesters in more than 60 countries took to the streets to proclaim their opposition to systemic racism and their solidarity with its sufferers. Tragically, incidents of racist violence and police brutality have continued in the weeks and months following Floyd’s death. In August, police in Kenosha, Wisconsin shot

Jacob Blake several times in the back, right in front of his young children, launching a fresh round of passionate protests.

Strangely though, as the bloody evidence of systemic anti-Black racism piles up, white Americans appear less, rather than more, convinced of its existence. Since June, the proportion of white Americans who acknowledge racism as a major problem has slid from 45 percent to 33 percent, according to YouGov/The Economist surveys. In addition, white Americans' unfavourable views of police and acceptance of the significance of specifically anti-Black racism are also trending down to levels from before the Black Lives Matter resurgence.

Although poignantly relevant in the current context, the phenomenon of white denial is not new; it has been noted in earlier research. The question is: Why should it matter to those of us working towards DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) goals? After all, in preparation for racial equity work, DEI practitioners rightly focus on the marginalisation and micro-aggressions regularly endured by Black people both living in America and working in global business. Centering and supporting these individuals and their voices and experiences is absolutely essential.

White people's over-representation in leadership means, however, that their buy-in is crucial to the success of DEI efforts. We wrongly assume that all well-meaning people will be on-board (or quickly get onboard) once they know the ugly truth of systemic racism. Unfortunately, this assumption ignores research indicating that even well-meaning white people can be incapable of recognising racism – and therefore engaging in anti-racist work – when two conditions are present: an inaccurate understanding of history and a sense of identity threat.

“Marley hypothesis”

In movies and on TV, racially biased white characters often experience a change of heart after a first-hand encounter with racism. The implication is that acknowledgement of racism is the product of empirical proof. Even if this “epiphany” explanation were true – and increasing denial among white Americans over the course of this past summer suggests, at the very least, major flaws with this explanation – it unfairly places the onus on groups subjected to marginalisation to “prove” the existence of bias to whites.

By contrast, a 2012 [paper in *Psychological Science*\[1\]](#) finds supporting evidence for the “Marley hypothesis” (so named for its resonance with the lyrics of Bob Marley’s song “[Buffalo Soldier](#)”), which associates denial of present-day racism with ignorance about the historical record. The researchers administered to a racially mixed group of undergraduates three surveys: on Black history, on their propensity to perceive racism in the world around them and on the relevance of racial identity to their self-esteem. There were strong correlations between the results of the first and second surveys. Participants who identified as European American were not only far less knowledgeable than African-Americans about Black history, but also perceived much lower levels of racism. The European Americans’ lack of historical knowledge statistically predicted their lower recognition of racism in the modern context.

The blindness of dominant groups to the discrimination around them is a reflection of the power of perspective to shape a person’s sense of reality. The obvious consciousness-raising remedy is to encourage or even require that [white people learn about the history of racism](#). Once that has been accomplished, there is room to go further still, the researchers suggest. They write that “experience of collective identity both reflects and promotes particular representations of history”, i.e. one’s sense of racial identity may carry within it a slanted historical interpretation. This distortion of history is apparent in the resistance to educational initiatives such as *The New York Times’* 1619 Project, culminating in the creation of a “[patriotic education commission](#)”, whose purpose seems to be to prevent the teaching in US schools of facts about the history of racism. Along with exposure to accurate information, which can best be gleaned from diverse scholars, white people should be encouraged to explore what “whiteness” really means and has meant throughout history.

Moreover, research points to [inflexible social environments](#) influencing racial attitudes as people move from place to place over time. It is, therefore, imperative to combine individual approaches, in which white people are given the tools to educate themselves, with systemic approaches to anti-Black racism. We must all strive to acknowledge history, recognise the ugly truth of the status quo and work together to dismantle racist systems.

Self-affirmation

Kinias' 2016 [working paper](#) (co-authored by Marie-Claire Fennessy) highlights another way to circumvent white denial. Inspired by a [paper published ten years before](#) finding that white people are able to recognise more racism after completing a values-based self-affirmation exercise, this paper explored additional interventions, including adding a reflection on one's best self and mindfulness meditation.

In an experiment involving 359 white American adults, Kinias and Fennessy discovered that those who engaged in values-based self-affirmation and best-self reflection were more likely to attribute incidents of potential discrimination to individual or institutional racism. However, a single brief [mindfulness meditation](#), which we know can reduce other biases, had no such effect.

Self-affirmation in the forms of values reflection and best-self reflection served to reduce the psychological need for white denial. Designed to boost feelings of *eudaimonic well-being* (i.e. self-actualisation and authenticity), these interventions worked because they provided a psychological buffer against identity threat – the often unconscious fear of being judged negatively on the basis of a social identity. A single brief mindfulness meditation, while encouraging sharper focus on the present moment, did not bolster participants' sense of self, and therefore did not improve their ability to perceive racism.

These results suggest to advocates of DEI that a shaming approach is counterproductive. Raising the topic of anti-Black racism without prior intervention appears to automatically and unconsciously invoke defensive mechanisms in many white people. If white people feel they are personally being blamed for systemic racism, their defences will almost certainly be heightened. To reduce resistance and promote the success of DEI initiatives, a more effective approach would begin by allowing white stakeholders opportunities to recall the positive aspects of their identity and creating an atmosphere of psychological safety before engaging in challenging discussions about racism.

Anti-racism under threat

We have, so far, linked white denial primarily to implicit or unconscious bias. That is not because we doubt that explicit and conscious racism is still a driving force in many of our institutions and organisations. To the contrary, an enormous body of evidence testifies that naked racial prejudice is still

tolerated, if not welcomed, in too many areas of society.

What the research shows, however, is that in the absence of deliberate racial animus, it is helpful to consider white denial in light of social identity threat and inherited historical perspectives (rather than negative personal characteristics). This approach not only allows for more accurate identification of underlying blockages, but also may help DEI advocates defuse the divisiveness and misunderstandings that surround the issue of systemic racism, especially in the current US context. The burgeoning field of DEI has already been swept up in this fractious political climate, leading to backward-looking actions such as an executive order banning [diversity training for federal agencies](#).

If DEI and anti-racism work is to garner the wide base of support it deserves and needs, the origins of white denial must be clearly identified and effectively addressed.

The authors humbly dedicate this article to the memory of Ruth Bader Ginsburg who, through her lifetime of work as a law professor, equality advocate and Supreme Court Justice, served as an inspiration, role model and trailblazer for all who concern themselves with establishing social equity.

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[1] By Jessica C. Nelson and Glenn Adams of the University of Kansas, and Phia S. Salter of Texas A&M University.

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