

Racial Inequality in Academia: Systemic Origins, Modern Challenges, and Policy Recommendations

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Abstract

In an ideal world, academia serves society; it provides quality education to future leaders and informs public policy—and it does so by including a diverse array of scholars. However, research and recent protest movements show that academia is subject to race-based inequities that hamper the recruitment and retention of scholars of color, reducing scientific impact. This article provides critical systemic context for racism in academia before reviewing research on psychological, interpersonal, and structural challenges to reducing racial inequality. Policy challenges include (a) the cultivation of harmful stereotypes, (b) the education of racially ignorant future leaders, and (c) the dedication of resources to science that informs only a few, rather than many. Finally, recommendations specify critical features of hiring, retention, transparency, and incentives that can diversify academia, create a more welcoming environment to scholars of color, and maximize the potential for innovative and impactful science.

Keywords

race and ethnicity, inequality, institutions, academia, stereotypes

Tweet

As protests like #BlackintheAcademy show, academia is not above racism. We provide critical systemic context for racism in academia; review modern psychological, interpersonal, and structural challenges; discuss implications for scientific impact; and explore policy remedies.

Key Points

- In an ideal world, academia serves society; it provides quality education to future leaders and informs public policy—and it does so by including a diverse array of scholars.
- However, protest movements such as #BlackintheAcademy have awakened the world to a simple reality: Racism permeates every facet of society, and academia is not above the fray.
- Historically, most academic institutions have long been exclusionary, fostering stereotypes and cultural myths that depict people of color as genetically, biologically, or culturally inferior.
- Today, psychological, interpersonal, and structural factors impede racial equity in academia, including racial ignorance, stereotype expression, and under-resourcing scholars of color.
- Implementing and evaluating policies and programs that can reduce racial inequality in academia can make science more creative, comprehensive, and impactful for society.

Introduction

In an ideal world, academia serves society. It provides high-quality education to future leaders; it is open and accessible to the broader public; and the knowledge produced within helps policymakers to remedy society's challenges. Unfortunately, academia is far removed from this rosy picture. Academic institutions educate future leaders but leave many without critical knowledge about historic and current role of race in our society. Academia is still highly segregated; if hired, scholars of color often leave academia because they feel unwelcome. Finally, the knowledge produced within academia is less innovative and impactful because it is largely created by—and applicable to—a narrow slice of humanity. The upcoming sections provide scientific evidence.

In 2020, social media movements such as #BlackintheAcademy and the Scholar Strike for Black Lives have awakened the world to this reality. Predominantly-White academic institutions swiftly responded in ways that could mitigate reputational harm. Journals and awards were renamed (Cahan, 2020), papers furthering harmful stereotypes (several recently published in top-tier journals) were

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retracted (Bauer, 2020; Johnson et al., 2020), and academic buildings, originally named for proponents of White supremacy, were renamed (“University Renaming Buildings Honoring White Supremacists,” 2020). Academia, deemed an overly progressive institution by some, may not be as progressive as it seems, hampering the education of our future leaders and the impact of our science. In this article, we discuss the systemic origins of racism in academic institutions; review the scientific research on psychological, interpersonal, and structural factors that maintain racial inequality in academia; and provide critical data-driven policy recommendations for academic reform.

Systemic Origins

When the United States was first formed, it was largely illegal for enslaved Africans to become educated. After the 14th amendment to the Constitution, a series of court rulings established precedent for “separate but equal” spaces for Black and White people—including higher education. The establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, although met with great opposition from White locals, became the main source of higher education and professional training for Black people after the Civil War. A century later, the Civil Rights Era saw the integration of Black people and other people of color into historically White institutions in the academy. However, these scholars of color were arriving into institutions where many professors, students, and administrators were ensnared in ongoing conversations about racial minorities’ inferiority (Moynihan, 1965).

Academia has long played a critical role in the devaluation of racial minorities. Namely, scientists bolstered the idea that different genetic material led to different levels of intelligence—and, in turn, different ability to contributing meaningfully to science. This idea, known broadly as the genetic deficit model or biological determinism, has been traditionally fostered by psychology, neuroscience, and other academic disciplines (Plomin, 2018; Saini, 2019). Notable scientific figures such as Sir Francis Galton and William McDougall championed these ideas, developing theories asserting that racial minorities are driven by animal-like instincts that govern their subhuman behavior. These concepts were published as science and taught in popular psychology textbooks. In their day, these pioneers of their disciplines contributed scientific and institutional legitimacy to erroneous perspectives about the inferiority of people of color.

In the post-World War II, decolonization, and American Civil Rights movement eras, it became less acceptable to overtly express ideas about racial superiority and inferiority. However, many still subscribed to these views, ultimately finding more socially desirable ways to express them (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). As biological theories grew less politically acceptable, cultural deficit models began to emerge as explanations for societal disparities. Cultural deficit models espoused the more progressive—for its time—notion that

racial minorities were experiencing less upward mobility because of cultural shortcomings, including reduced work ethic, weak family ties, and poor impulse control. For example, Walter Mischel used his famous delayed gratification paradigm to claim that Black children allegedly lack impulse control. In these studies, children who could subdue their desire for sweets and refrain from eating one marshmallow placed in front of them to receive the reward of two marshmallows later achieved greater success in school and career. Mischel and others extended this logic to attempt to show that White children were better at delaying their gratification than Black children (Grusec & Mischel, 1966; Pettigrew, 1964; Renner, 1964). These studies were published in prominent academic journals and used in government reports, perpetuating stereotypes that Black people are lazy and that a lack of self-regulation—rather than slavery, Jim Crow, and extant discriminatory policies—is the root cause of their disadvantage (Moynihan, 1965). Decades later, a review of this literature found that nearly half of Black participants preferred to delay their gratification and half didn’t; the results hinged on whether Black subjects valued the reward in the first place (Banks, 1983). The author of this review appeared before the United States Congress in an effort to delegitimize this harmful narrative that was presented as science and published in policy briefs (Hearing on the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1990). This effort was largely unsuccessful.

Now well into the 21st century, stereotypes of Black Americans’ biological and cultural inferiority remain in public consciousness (Williams & Eberhardt, 2008; Zou & Cheryan, 2017). For instance, medical trainees believe erroneous and dangerous ideas about the biological differences between Black and White people, including the notion that Black people have thicker skin and higher pain thresholds than White people (Hoffman et al., 2016).

Current Challenges

Racism is systemic, baked into the origins of American academia (see Saini, 2019; for a longer review). And racial inequality is embedded in current academic patterns and practices—psychological, interpersonal, and structural. Below, we explore these modern challenges.

Psychological

Several psychological and cognitive factors contribute to racial inequality within academia by undermining the ability of scholars of color to feel welcome and respected. The following does not aim to review the literature on the psychology of race in academia. Rather, we illustrate from selected examples, many drawn from our own research.

Racial ignorance. Academics are people first; they are therefore subject to the well-studied motivations and fallacies that

maintain racial inequality in all other areas of society. One such challenge is a racial ignorance on the part of White academics. Sociological research describes racial ignorance as a general lack of knowledge about how race shapes the experiences of people in society (Mills, 2014; Mueller, 2020). Racial ignorance is also all but ensured by structural factors such as segregation (Massey & Denton, 1993) and curricula that neglect the role of race in society's past and present (Adams et al., 2008). Segregation and a colorblind education leave White academics without the personal experiences (Rothstein, 2017) or critical thought necessary to detect and reject racism in society and institutions. White adults therefore tend show a motivated tendency to downplay their own racial privileges and endorse meritocracy (Lowery et al., 2007). This aligns with recent research showing that people underestimate the magnitude of racial inequality in society (Kraus et al., 2017) and our institutions (Boykin et al., 2020; Ray, 2019). If people do not "see" racism, they will hardly be motivated to fix it, in the academy or elsewhere.

Stereotypes. Stereotypes, the typical picture that comes to mind when considering a social group (Lippmann, 1922), play a significant role in creating a negative environment for scholars of color. Since the onset of the transatlantic slave trade, academics, including scientists and philosophers, have cultivated stereotypes depicting Black Americans as predisposed to laziness, criminality, and unintelligence (Saini, 2019). Stereotypes "not only promote discrimination . . . but they also arise from and are reinforced by discrimination, justifying disparities between groups" (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 7). These cognitive schemas are born from inequality while serving the purpose of maintaining inequality by depicting disadvantaged group members as deservedly inferior.

While stereotypes are now less overtly negative, stereotypes depicting racial minorities as inferior remain in circulation. A recent study featuring thousands of adults found that both White and Black Americans hold race–status associations, characterizing Black Americans as low status and White Americans as high status (Dupree et al., 2020). People hold race–status associations in different ways, with different implications. Some ranked White Americans as higher in social status than Black Americans and described White Americans as higher in status-relevant attributes (e.g., power, status) than Black Americans. These race–status associations are likely rooted in knowledge about racial inequality. People who hold these direct race–status associations tend to be lower in anti-Black prejudice, more willing to hire Black applicants, and more supportive of policies that reduce racial inequality (Dupree et al., 2020).

Other race–status stereotypes are more subtle—with more pernicious effects. Some "guess" that Black Americans hold low-status jobs (like dishwasher or janitor) while White Americans hold high-status jobs (like doctor or scientist). These race–status associations are likely based on

differential observation of White and Black Americans in high- versus low-status roles. People who hold these indirect race–status associations tend to be higher in anti-Black bias, less willing to hire Black job applicants, and more likely to reject equalizing policies.

Race–status associations—particularly subtle ones—are closely tied to stereotypes of incompetence and stereotypes that can harm scholars of color. Indeed, prior work has found that people characterize those who hold high-status jobs (such as doctors or scientists) as higher in competence than those who hold low-status jobs (such as dishwashers or janitors; Fiske & Dupree, 2014). Recent decades have seen a reduction in explicit endorsement of anti-Black prejudice and stereotypes (Bergsieker et al., 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Fiske, 2002), but such stereotypes are still widely known, potentially affecting day-to-day experiences of scholars of color in ways that reduce their likelihood of staying in academia.

Interpersonal

In navigating mostly-White academic spaces, scholars of color are subject to numerous subtle or deliberate cues that they do not belong (Anderson, 2015). Stereotypes can leak into interracial interactions, leaving racial minorities feeling disrespected, unwelcome, or simply unsure. This is especially the case when White Americans express various forms of race–status associations. Anecdotal and empirical evidence suggests that Black and Latinx Americans who hold high-status jobs in mostly-White institutions—such as hospitals or academia—commonly experience their White colleagues or clients making assumptions about their role (and status). For example, a recent New York Times article explored a common experience encountered by physicians of color in hospitals—being mistaken for a nurse or service worker by patients or colleagues (Goldburg, 2020). Qualitative interview data support this anecdotal evidence. Such experiences are commonplace in high-status (and mostly-White) spaces (Sellers & Shelton, 2003; Williams et al., 2016), and they can wear on people of color who spent years gaining experience and qualifications for their position—such as scholars of color.

White Americans also convey race–status associations in the words they use when communicating with racial minorities, potentially affecting racial minorities' feelings of belongingness within academia. In a recent paper, Dupree and Fiske (2019) found that White liberals use fewer words related to competence when conversing with a Black person or (mostly-minority audience) than they do when interacting with a White person (or a mostly-White audience). White liberals likely engage in this phenomenon, coined the Competence Downshift, in a folksy attempt to connect with racial minorities. Indeed, White conservatives, who tend to be more prejudiced against and less interested in getting

along with minorities (Ho et al., 2015; Knowles et al., 2009; Kteily et al., 2014), showed no such competence downshift. In mostly-White, outwardly-progressive academic communities, scholars of color may regularly find themselves on the receiving end of likely well-meaning, but ultimately patronizing behaviors.

White Americans not only downshift competence, but also conservatism. A recent study found that White Americans describe themselves as significantly less supportive of conservative policies (like building more prisons) and more supportive of race-relevant liberal policies (like reparations) when discussing politics with a Black (vs. White) individual. This effect was driven by the stereotypical perception that Black Americans are less conservative (and more liberal) than White Americans. This has implications for interracial contact; Black Americans were more willing to interact with White Americans who downshifted conservatism than those who did not (Dupree & Foster-Gimbel, 2020). However, this may backfire—particularly if Black Americans unexpectedly observe White Americans expressing more conservative views with a White friend or colleague. Stereotypes come to life in day-to-day interactions—even those featuring progressive White Americans. Scholars of color likely take notice.

Structural

On a more macro level, structural and institutional challenges enhance racial disparities in academia. Below, we review the research surrounding a few of these challenges.

Tokenism. Scholars of color are often one of the few or only to be found in their labs, departments, or institutions. Research on tokenism illustrates how this lack of representation affects feelings of inclusivity and motivation from scholars of color. Being one of the few or only in an organization can prompt people of color to infer that the organization is harmful to them and to people like them (King et al., 2010). Although academic institutions have historically profited from slavery, these institutions are now rewarded for appearing to value racial equity, thus incentivizing institutions to engage in diversity as image work (Ahmed, 2012). However, White Americans typically view such work as firmly in the purview of racial minorities, rejecting White applicants for roles that reduce racial inequality (Dupree & Torrez, 2020). Small numbers in academic institutions means that scholars of color are disproportionately asked to work in service of racial equity for their department, institution, or discipline—heading committees, mentoring minority students, and reviewing papers or grants for relevant research (Rodriguez et al., 2015; Syed, 2017). This work may make academic institutions appear fairer to White Americans (Kaiser et al., 2013), but it unduly burdens scholars of color already subject to unique psychological and interpersonal challenges.

Incentivization. Diversifying academia will require scientific evidence. Unfortunately, diversity science efforts are not incentivized in academia as it is currently structured. This may be because such work allegedly lacks objectivity, scientific rigor, and personal detachment (Torrez et al., 2020; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Indeed, experimental research finds that White Americans view racial minorities discussing racialized topics as more biased and less objective, particularly if these racial minorities strongly identify with their race (Torrez et al., 2020). Work on racialized topics is therefore undervalued, underfunded, and underpublicized.

Similarly, scholars of color embarking on service work related to promoting diversity and inclusion will find that their efforts go unrewarded, as academia rewards publication in high-impact journals and citation counts. Declining such service work may result in being labeled as not a team player, particularly if the scholar is viewed as a diversity hire. However, those who do focus their time and efforts on publishing will, if they pursue diversity related topics, find diversity-related research must reach a higher caliber to be published than research that avoids mentioning diversity (King et al., 2018). This may be why publications related to diversity and inclusion are underrepresented in top-tier journals (Hartmann et al., 2013; King et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2020). Such research is more likely to be conducted by scholars of color and include participants of color, but is less likely to be funded by government agencies (Hoppe et al., 2019).

Scholars of color note “undervaluation of their research interests, approaches, and theoretical frameworks” as a contributor to job dissatisfaction (Guthrie, 2004; Turner et al., 2008, p. 143; Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008). Devalued scholarship is less likely to be published in top-tier outlets and cited by others. The scientific community interprets publications and citations as visibility, factored into promotion and tenure decisions, ultimately affecting earnings (Diamond, 1986; Leahey, 2007; Sauer, 1988). Without visibility, scholars of color are unlikely to be hired, promoted, or tenured.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Considering systemic and modern challenges driving racial inequality in academia reveals that a myriad of factors hinder representation and inclusion. We next explore policy implications, finding that the social sciences offer targeted policy solutions.

Hire Scholars of Color With Cluster Hires and Targeted Recruitment

Racial inequality reduces academia’s ability to help policy-makers solve the world’s problems. One of these problems is

the deep-seated issue of racial inequality. How can academia help solve this “race problem” (DuBois, 1903) without first cleaning its own house? Racially homogeneous academic institutions sacrifice the potential to produce innovative, impactful science. Indeed, diversified countries, organizations, and research teams see more innovative outcomes (Hofstra et al., 2020; Simonton, 1997). Employees from diverse backgrounds facilitate more complicated ideas that ultimately yield stronger material gains (Herring, 2009; Phillips et al., 2009).

To yield these benefits, academic institutions need focused, cohesive strategies to increase diversity. They also need to dedicate resources to this cause. Cluster hires of faculty who specialize in research related to racial inequality can increase the number of scholars of color. For example, one department chair (Chilton, 2015) successfully initiated a cluster hire focused on racism and societal inequality in the Americas, proposing that “the next four hires—whether it took four years or 40—would be in the cluster” (Chilton, 2015, “Sharing Subfields’ Strengths” section). Her department successfully hired five faculty over 4 years. Chilton notes that this strategy “helped recruit and better retain an extraordinary faculty . . . [and] recruit a more diverse graduate student cohort,” describing the resulting scholarship on issues of race and social justice as “simply stellar” (Chilton, 2015, “Sharing Subfields’ Strengths” section). Other departments have followed this strategy with similar results.

Universities can also take earlier steps to recruit scholars of color. They sometimes target graduate students at historically Black colleges and universities or organizations aimed at increasing the number of underrepresented minorities in their respective disciplines. Together, successful recruitment and hiring of scholars of color can provide a strong signal that homogeneous academic institutions are invested in change.

Retain Scholars of Color With Tracking, Funding, and Mentorship

In the wake of global protests against racial injustice, many organizations are scrambling to hire people of color. Although efforts to diversify are admirable, it remains to be seen whether these institutions will retain their new employees of color. Predominantly-White academic institutions struggle to retain scholars of color, who can feel unwelcome and disrespected in mostly-White spaces (Anderson, 2015). To increase the likelihood of retention, academic institutions should strongly consider tracking the well-being and productivity of scholars of color, asking early and often what the institution can do to support them. They should back up queries with resources, whether it is funding organizations for scholars of color, funding access to academic coaches, or funding promotions or raises for scholars of color who receive competitive offers elsewhere. Academic

institutions should also be more mindful of mentorship. Interracial mentorship relationships are less likely to arise organically and more likely to involve tension or low rapport (Boykin & Smith, 2019; Leitner et al., 2018), jeopardizing people of color’s upward mobility. Academic institutions can mitigate these effects by taking an explicit approach to mentoring, be it hierarchical or peer-based.

Increase Transparency in Hiring Practices, Promotion Practices, and Salary Rates

Hiring processes are often handled by a small number of faculty on hiring committees, leaving room for biases and discriminatory practices to creep in, often masked as “fit” (Rivera, 2012). Relatedly, tenure processes are famously ambiguous, tenure-track faculty members describing tenure standards as “a moving target” (Trotman & Brown, 2005, p. 7) muddled by a lack of feedback and information spread through word of mouth. More transparent evaluation processes can improve the success of junior faculty (Nir & Zilberstein-Levy, 2006; Stupnisky et al., 2015).

Several examples of government initiatives sought to increase diversity and inclusion through greater transparency. In 2011, President Barack Obama instituted Executive Order 13583, an initiative aimed at creating a more diverse federate workforce. Furthermore, the Obama administration instituted Executive Orders 13665 and 11246 (amended) to reduce pay discrimination by increasing pay transparency among federal contract workers, noting that “when employees are prohibited from inquiring about, disclosing, or discussing their compensation with fellow workers, compensation discrimination is much more difficult to discover and remediate, and more likely to persist” (Obama, 2014). Private universities have yet to follow public universities in publicizing employees’ salaries.

Incentivize Work That Enhances Diversity and Inclusion

Academic institutions should incentivize work that increases diversity and inclusion, be it in the classroom, the lab, or the journals. Such incentives could look like course relief for faculty; the creation of new metrics that track, display, and reward diversity-related service work (e.g., in tenure dossiers); or simply additional funding to reward such work. Relatedly, White faculty should share this workload with faculty of color, as such incentives will likely take time.

Modify Curricula to Educate Racially Sensitive Citizens and Signal the Importance of Race

Organizations now try to educate adults about bias through trainings (e.g., the now-commonplace implicit bias trainings), often with mixed results (Kalev et al., 2006; Paluck

et al., 2020). While educating the public about racial disparities is a critical component of designing equitable and inclusive organizations and policies, this process should begin far earlier than adulthood, when such trainings entail an optional or mandated workplace events. In the United States, the public school system all but ignores racism or depicts it as an individual, rather than systemic, problem (Adams et al., 2008). Academia can serve a critical function in mitigating racial ignorance by modifying core curricula to include coursework on historic and current racial inequality. Mandating such coursework could stimulate discomfort among some students. However, this would meet two aims. First, it would signal that academic institutions see the importance of race and racism in society, an important cue that most institutions avoid through the use of colorblind language (Plaut, 2014) or fumble after important race-related events (such as shootings of unarmed Black individuals), thus harming Black employees' productivity and well-being (Leigh & Melwani, 2019; McCluney et al., 2017). Second, it would help ensure that citizens and leaders are more racially sensitive, meeting an increasingly prominent critique of national leadership. However, such courses will need to be taught—ideally by faculty with expertise in the subject matter. This reinforces the need for academic institutions to prioritize hiring and retaining faculty of color, who are more likely to study racism in its many forms.

Caveats

Much, if not most, of the literature explored herein solely focuses on the effects of racial group membership. A number of factors may complicate these effects—and therefore the efficacy of recommendations based on this literature. For example, effects may differ for various racial minority groups, who are subject to different stereotypes and biases (Zou & Cheryan, 2017). Moreover, effects may differ based on gender as well as race. For decades, scholars have called for an intersectional theoretical perspective. This theory acknowledges that people identify with multiple groups and considers these intersectional identities, testing, for example, the degree to which experiences and phenomena differ for White women versus women of color (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Dupree, 2020). Overall, numerous factors may complicate strategies aimed at reducing racial inequality in academic institutions, making them worthy of close attention.

Conclusion

As the world faces social, political, environmental, and medical strife, the need for scientific research to inform policy-based remedies is greater than ever. Academia, as currently constituted, is unable to see and fix the racial inequality within its own walls, diminishing its true potential to train

future leaders of society and help solve the world's problems. If policymakers wish to draw on science that is innovative, comprehensive, and applicable to more than one swath of humanity, then they should strongly consider the impact of racial inequality within academic institutions.


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