

Anti-racist actions and accountability: not more empty promises

Anti-racist
actions

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Abstract

Purpose – The current piece summarizes five critical points about racism from the point of view of black scholars and allies: (1) black people are experiencing exhaustion from and physiological effects of racism, (2) racism extends far beyond police brutality and into most societal structures, (3) despite being the targets of racism, black people are often blamed for their oppression and retaliated against for their response to it, (4) everyone must improve their awareness and knowledge (through both formal education and individual motivation) to fight racism and (5) anti-racist policies and accountability are key to enact structural reformation.



Findings – The first three of these points detail the depths of the problem from the perspectives of the authors and the final two lay out a call to action.

Practical implications – This viewpoint is the joint effort of 14 authors who provided a unified perspective.

Originality/value – This was one of the most original experiences the authors have had – working with 13 former/current students on joint perspectives about police brutality and racism more generally. The authors thank for the opportunity.

Keywords Black people, Racism, Black lives matter, Police brutality, Anti-racist policies

Paper type Viewpoint

12 years old I was stopped by the cops as I walked down the block and thought

I wonder what's the purpose?

Videos in my memory started to surface

That explains why I know I'm innocent but feel nervous

-Tim Harrison (excerpt from Black Privilege, spoken word)

Black people are in a state of extreme psychological and physiological crises. The grotesque image of a white police officer using his knee to asphyxiate George Floyd, who was repeatedly crying out that he could not breathe and begging for his deceased mama, stirs even the most staid black person into feeling great depths of despair. Raging within black people are feelings of anger, anguish, anxiety, fear, sadness and a never-ending oscillation between all of these emotions daily. This incident (tragically, only one among countless others) has sparked attention, protests and a racial reckoning – both nationally and globally. The current piece summarizes five critical points about racism from the point of view of black scholars and allies: (1) black people are experiencing exhaustion and other physiological effects resulting from racism, (2) racism extends far beyond police brutality and into most societal structures, (3) despite being the targets of racism, black people are often blamed for their oppression and retaliated against for their response to it, (4) everyone must improve their awareness and knowledge (through both formal education and individual motivation) to fight racism and (5) anti-racist policies and accountability are key to enact structural reformation. The first three of these points detail the depths of the problem from the perspectives of the authors and the final two lay out a call to action.

First, black people are exhausted

Yes, they are just utterly, completely exhausted. Racism has a tremendous impact on Black Americans' well-being and research supports this contention. Those who face racism experience greater levels of psychological and physiological stress responses (Levy *et al.*, 2016), which necessitate the use of tiresome emotional regulation strategies (Hatzenbuehler *et al.*, 2009). Additionally, the necessary engagement in racism-related vigilance negatively impacts sleep (Hicken *et al.*, 2013). Not surprisingly, these feelings of distress and experiences of physical fatigue in response to racism often boost the exhaustion of black people (Borders and Liang, 2011; Thomas *et al.*, 2006).

The exhaustion deepens with each new death of a black person at the hands of police officers. The exhaustion comes from countless nights interrupted by nightmares about an imagined (or real) loss of a loved one at the hands of police officers. The exhaustion manifests itself in reduced productivity, diminished ability to focus, decreased cognitive coping skills, increased doubts about self-worth and value and a huge desire to sleep, zone out or engage in some other form of escapism (see Leigh and Melwani, 2019; McCluney *et al.*, 2017). Most black people have experienced firsthand or personally know someone who has

been racially profiled in some way by the police. They know the indignity of being looked upon differently for simply occupying a “white space,” being followed or perceived as guilty, being questioned about a crime for fitting a vague description and/or being treated aggressively by police officers for breaking no laws – these are simply the everyday terrors of being black. It is a tax of fear and humiliation that black individuals pay every day. And they are exhausted.

The exhaustion is amplified by well-intentioned, non-black people. Often guided by sympathy, and sometimes by guilt, many ask “how are you doing?” or “what can I do to help?” and assure people that “it will get better” or “they understand.” But these questions and comments, at times, only augment exhaustion as black colleagues are relied upon to provide resources, education, guided discovery and emotional support to their non-black peers. This extra responsibility becomes particularly stressful as black people, who often share genuine feelings of outrage, risk being labeled as angry and unwelcoming. Further, these authentic reactions sometimes lead non-black peers to become defensive and/or to withdraw from others. Instead of preserving the emotional resources needed for their own self-care, black people must help manage the emotions of their non-black colleagues (e.g. Richeson *et al.*, 2005). This task is particularly exhausting when these non-black peers remain silent in the face of widespread systems of oppression and inequality that underlie protests, such as those taking place today (e.g. Tatum, 2008; Wattsjohnson, 2003).

Second, racism against black people includes – but extends well beyond – police brutality

Many Americans mistakenly attribute police brutality to a “few bad apples.” As policing researchers, legal scholars and activists have rightfully argued (e.g. Alexander, 2010; Dukes and Kahn, 2017; Haider-Markel and Joslyn, 2017; Harmon, 2012; Tyler *et al.*, 2015), the issue is not the fruit but the tree itself (for review, see Hall *et al.*, 2016). Law enforcement agencies were not established to protect and serve black citizens; rather, the first police forces were created to preserve the institution of slavery and protect white assets by apprehending runaways and preventing revolts among enslaved people (Waxman, 2017). Subsequent iterations of police forces were formed to uphold the racist laws (e.g. Jim Crow) and policies (e.g. the War on Drugs and the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994) that were designed to maintain the social, economic and political powers of white citizens.

It is not surprising that black communities typically distrust police officers and other law enforcement agents; rather than protecting the civil rights and liberties of black people, many police officers violate them (e.g. Desmond *et al.*, 2016). Consider how black men like Philando Castile and Emantio Fitzgerald Bradford Jr had their Second Amendment right violated, when they were killed by police for legally possessing guns or how black women like Atatiana Jefferson and Breonna Taylor had their Fourth Amendment right violated, when they were killed senselessly in their own homes by police while violating no laws. In these ways, it is clear that black people do not and were never meant to receive equal protection under the law.

Moreover, the structural racism evident in our country is much bigger than police brutality. Anti-blackness (and the various forms of racism that originate and profit from it) runs deep in the roots of this country. As a result, structural racism is evident in all spheres of life (e.g. Bonilla-Silva, 2012), from education (e.g. Okonofua and Eberhardt, 2015) and voting rights (e.g. Anderson, 2018) to housing (e.g. Zenou and Boccia, 2000) and employment (e.g. Watts and Carter, 1991). Black individuals are viewed as deathworthy criminals (Eberhardt *et al.*, 2006), uneducable students (e.g. Gershenson *et al.*, 2016) and undesirable neighbors (e.g. Bobo and Zubrinsky, 1996). Black people also receive low-quality healthcare and face life

expectancies that are far shorter than those of white people (e.g. [Fiscella et al., 2000](#); [Nelson, 2002](#)). The effects of racism tenaciously compound over generations – both within particular spheres of life (e.g. racism in elementary schools often permeates middle- and high-school experiences) and between spheres (e.g. racism in housing can lead to racism in schooling). To overcome America’s racist past and present, every institution must be redesigned with the needs of black people in mind. Black people simply deserve to live and thrive, despite a system that suggests otherwise.

Third, black people are blamed for the racism they experience and vilified for their resistance to it

The disparate treatment that black people face at the hands of police is routinely explained in ways that place unwarranted blame on black people (e.g. [Eligon, 2014](#); [Kendi, 2017](#)). Rather than addressing problems within this racist system, people who are in power often defend the actions of police, which allows the current bigoted system to remain in place. This behavior, called “preserving the status quo” ([Jost et al., 2004](#), p. 909), is often described through the lens of system justification theory ([Jost and Banaji, 1994](#)), which proposes that people tend to hold favorable attitudes toward prevailing social structures (also see [Jost et al., 2004](#); [Kay and Friesen, 2011](#)). This, itself, is a manifestation of racism. Black people are often doubted and scrutinized rather than believed and taken seriously during encounters with police officers.

However, the reality is that system justification is embedded in the fabric of black life in America. The notion of the “American dream” defends a myth of meritocracy wherein through higher education and hard work anyone can climb the social ladder and create a good life for themselves. The belief that American life is fair ignores the deep, institutionalized racism that prevents black children from attending better public schools, black parents from finding and buying homes in certain “good” communities, black job applicants from securing high-status jobs ([Castilla, 2008](#); [Pager, 2003](#)), black employees’ upward career mobility ([Ferguson and Koning, 2018](#)) and black people from growing intergenerational wealth. The belief that it is legitimate for police to use excessive force and kill unarmed black individuals ([Van der Toorn et al., 2011](#)) has fostered continued systemic corruption against black people.

Not only are black people blamed for racism but they are also disparaged for fighting against it or persevering in spite of it. For example, research in psychology illustrates that people disfavor status quo changes and take immediate, and periodically subtle, action to subvert it (e.g. [Craig and Richeson, 2014](#); [McDonald et al., 2018](#)). We have seen this throughout the history of resistance to racism, particularly in the hostility directed at black people who dare to disrupt the current social order. Although in retrospect people consider Dr. Martin Luther King (MLK) Jr, Ella Baker and Malcolm X as trailblazing civil rights leaders, these individuals were – during their time – widely disliked for their activism and marked as sources of racial tension (e.g. [Cobb, 2018](#)). Analogously, present-day activism for racial justice – whether peaceful or violent – is consistently met with anger, hatred and condemnation of black people. For instance, Colin Kaepernick’s peaceful protest of taking a knee during the national anthem during the 2016–2017 football season motivated the league to vilify him and anyone who joined. Despite apparent changing attitudes toward his method of protest, no team has hired Kaepernick since then. Similarly, following the murder of George Floyd, protestors were summaratively described as “thugs” who needed to be met with violence ([Wines, 2020](#)). Using countless methods, Black Americans have consistently expressed the opinion that racism can no longer be tolerated. And consistently, their actions have been met with the hackneyed idea that they are “damned if they do, damned if they do not.”

Fourth, education is paramount in the fight against racism

One of the best ways to reduce the proliferation of racism is through education. Most black people learn very early on (from a variety of sources other than formal education) the history of slavery, oppression and racism that has organized – and continues to organize – society. Yet, many non-black individuals fail to comprehend that the USA was built on the backs of those who were enslaved. They know little about the brutalities of slavery and century of Jim Crow laws. In fact, too many non-black people think “slavery was not that bad,” believe blacks “are lucky to be here” and state that black people “are much better off here than if they would have stayed in Africa” (see [S.M., 2014](#)). Shockingly, it was only in 2018 that the Texas State Board of Education decided to identify slavery as the main cause of the Civil War (see [Daley, 2018](#)). History books too often display the civil rights movement as almost singularly being MLK Jr’s peaceful protests, which led to “freedom” and “equality” for Black Americans. This is neither an accurate representation of the civil rights movement nor an appropriate reflection of black people’s continued oppression. Black history that is taught in schools is tremendously whitewashed and inadequate.

Combating systemic racism requires a transformation of the national education curriculum. Our call for education is very specific. Rather than additional implicit bias workshops that gesture broadly at discrimination, we call for a formal education on racism – an education that starts from elementary school and continues through high school. Research shows that by the time children enter school, they already endorse stereotypes and exhibit prejudices along social identity lines (e.g. [Bigler and Liben, 2007](#)) and thus, it is critical and valuable to correct them – through formal lessons – early ([Bigler and Wright, 2014](#)).

Further, formal education must also rebuke the notion of a biological or genetic race, particularly because people of all races share 99.9% of all-genetic material (see [Chou, 2017](#)). Too often, inaccurate beliefs such as black people somehow being stronger (e.g. having survived slavery) or less sensitive to pain (e.g. being less human; [Goff et al., 2014](#); [Waytz et al., 2015](#)) compared to those of other races, leads authority figures like police and educators to perceive black adults and children as indomitable and invulnerable beings. As such, it is not surprising that medical students who endorse myths about black and white people’s biological differences are more likely to misdiagnose a black patient ([Hoffman et al., 2016](#)). Dismantling the myths that contribute to disparities in health outcomes (perpetuated by a more than 150-year history of scientific racism; [Saini, 2019](#)) should be a main goal in revising educational coursework and curricula. Students should be encouraged to hold anti-racist beliefs. Understanding racism – both interpersonal and structural – is the key to improve black lives ([Salter et al., 2018](#)).

This call also includes formal educational training within the workplace. Instead of a one-time “diversity” training module, we call for multiple and repeated trainings on the history of racism and modern-day manifestations of racism in the workplace and programming to educate employers and employees alike about how racism has shaped occupations (e.g. [Moss and Tilly, 2001](#)). A cultural shift is needed whereby the racism that existed in the past and currently exists within organizations is discussed openly and honestly with the intent of eradicating it. One of the more problematic things organizations can do is rely singularly on implicit bias trainings to solve all their diversity-related problems. This is especially true in organizations where such activities are one-offs (not embedded in a holistic developmental program) and simply serve as “window dressing” while being pursued with very little enthusiasm or authenticity. Such programs typically do nothing to redistribute power in organizations in service of true equity ([Ray, 2019](#)). While these workshops can be important to make people aware of their own biases, they are too often perverted into an excuse to conclude “I am not racist; it is implicit”; “everyone is racist, so I do not need to change”; “It is not my fault; it is innate.” That is, the focus on implicit bias has potentially ironic effects (see

Paluck and Green, 2009), such that those who act in discriminatory ways can be held less accountable and seen as less punishment-worthy when their behavior is attributed to implicit rather than explicit bias (Daumeyer *et al.*, 2019). In sum, it is crucial to consider that one cannot have quality education and training if the enthusiasm, resources and support given to those initiatives and the people who lead them are limited and insufficient.

Fifth and most important, our country needs anti-racist policies and accountability – not empty promises, inaction and passing off responsibility

For decades, hope has rested on the belief that policies will adequately address the issues that taunt black communities; however, this doctrine has not fulfilled its promise. Many policies have, in fact, exacerbated or obscured the presence of the issues that black communities endure. For example, body cameras were touted as a way to decrease police brutality by monitoring the actions of police officers and holding them accountable for misbehavior, yet the implementation of this policy has been inconsistent in part because police officers have turned off their cameras with relatively little punishment (Ariel *et al.*, 2016). America's trajectory will not change unless its people address the root causes (i.e. system racism) with measures that are results-oriented.

Thus far, attempts at reform have been met with strong resistance by the majority of police departments and unions. Reform must take place at both the individual and institutional levels. At the individual level, people who hold power – largely white people – must act to dismantle current systems of privilege and oppression. This requires all people – non-black and black – to see each other as neighbors who are part of a collective village. White people must demand that police protect their black neighbors with the same compassion and respect used to protect white people. The battle against violence and other acts of racism is one that requires everyone's help. Together, we can enact the kinds of sustained collective action required to reconcile the chasm between the potential of “the American dream” and the fearful existence to which many black people are subjected.

Each of us – and each of you – must be held accountable. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, black people cannot “bend the arc” toward justice alone. As Bell's (1980) interest convergence theory suggests, widespread change will not come about until the interests of black and white people converge. Hence, the burden is on each of us to challenge racist actions, policies and institutions (see Kendi, 2019). Efforts must not end when the protests end. Consider the actions and the inactions that you are taking. Evaluate how you, your behaviors and the policies that you support affect your black family members, friends and co-workers. Confront the racist conduct in which you have participated and stop them immediately. Take steps to manage your own guilt and anxiety about what is happening instead of outsourcing this labor to your black friends. Call out your friends and family who make racist remarks. Resist complacency, stay vigilant and become a real ally to black people. Though we continue to observe incidents of racist behavior, we have begun to see people being held accountable for their actions. For example, Lisa Alexander and Amy Cooper faced financial repercussions (e.g. job loss and negative publicity) for attempting to levy their privilege against people of color. We simply must hold each other accountable.

At the institutional level, police departments must overcome their racist nature by being redesigned with the needs of black people in mind. This revolutionary work will not be easy but has some clear starting points. Specifically, we must consider the role of the police. We must redefine the role of policing in communities and ask ourselves, “What is it that we want law enforcement to do?” We must question why police budgets steadily increase, while the budgets of other critical institutions (e.g. education, medical and health facilities, housing; Hinton, 2016) diminish. We must have broad conversations to construct ways for law enforcement to protect and serve the public good for all.

Additionally, we must reevaluate the criteria for selecting incumbents in these roles. The minimum requirements to become a police officer should go beyond possessing a high school diploma or the General Educational Development (GED), a motor vehicle license and no criminal history within the past 10 years [1]. It is a folly to assume that less training and education should be required for individuals with the power to legally end someone's life, than for the individuals who educate our children in primary and secondary schools or those we entrust to prosecute and defend alleged offenders. In effect, the requisite reformation involves structural changes to the way that we define the role of, select for and train individuals in law enforcement.

Finally, accountability is the key in this struggle. As [Kendi \(2019\)](#) wrote, there is no middle ground. For instance, management research suggests that organizations should conduct a needs analysis of their culture and develop a results-based set of anti-racist change initiatives (e.g. [King et al., 2010](#); [Roberson et al., 2003](#)). Organizations must also ensure that black employees are not only represented in low-level employment but that they also have meaningful places in management and leadership positions. Further, organizations should collect and share data on outcomes of diversity initiatives as motivation for continued growth and to demonstrate accountability. Finally, organizations and their leaders (e.g. the U.S. President, politicians, chief executive officers [CEOs], deans, chairs, managers, police chiefs, etc.) should be penalized when they condone racism or subvert diversity and inclusion efforts.

These systems, especially the policing system, have worked for generations to establish that black lives matter less than others' lives. We reject this notion and instead call for widespread shocks to the system. We demand a different status quo wherein each black life is as respected and cherished as each white life. We need change. The promises of solidarity, commitments to learning and allegiance to the movement from our non-black colleagues mean nothing if we do not create and implement effective sustainable policies.

Conclusion

No one is exempt from examining their own racist beliefs and actions and making deliberate choices to become more anti-racist. But there is a particular burden on the privileged and the powerful in our society to identify, admit and help dismantle racist policies that create and maintain the colossal gaps in the quality of life (e.g. housing, education, medical care and policing) that exist between black and white people in our society. The time for bending peacefully on one's knee is over – people of all races must stand together in solidarity and demand fairness and equality for black people in our country.

Ultimately, we need anti-racist policies and not unfulfilled promises. The five points that we focus on in this paper are critical. It is time for people to become aware of the levels of exhaustion that black people endure and realize that this racism does not exist in a limited sphere of police brutality. The burdens of inequality are too often cruelly turned to focus on the deficits, shortcomings and faults of black people rather than on racism and racist policies. Through explicitly anti-racist educational and political reform, our final two points do not provide a panacea but instead an initial prescription for what must be done if we are to eliminate racism. We ask you, our reader, to join this quest. Educate yourself and confront racism everywhere you see it – within your own mind, in the behavior of others and in the society we live. Be an active, daily agent who promotes anti-racism and anti-racist policies. Hold yourself and others accountable. Only then can we begin creating change. The future of black people's lives depends on you. Our lives depend on you. Or, as American novelist James Baldwin wrote, "the future of the Negro in this country is precisely as bright or as dark as the future of the country. . . it is entirely up to the American people, whether or not they're going to face and deal with and embrace this stranger whom they maligned so long." Will you help?

1. <https://www.uscp.gov/police-officer-application>

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