

Moving Beyond Colorblindness and White Guilt: Understanding Systemic Racism in the Age of #BlackLivesMatter

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Goals for today

1. Begin with recent study on racial beliefs of UVA medical students
2. Myth/Ideology of race as biological
3. Why dangerous history of this ideology matters
4. Return to UVA study and impact of belief in biological races in healthcare today
5. Discussion and take away

“The disturbing reason some African American patients may be undertreated for pain”

- Washington Post article 4/4/16
- Study on UVA medical students
- “Researchers at the University of Virginia quizzed white medical students and residents to see how many believed inaccurate and at times "fantastical" differences about the two races -- for example, that blacks have less sensitive nerve endings than whites or that black people's blood coagulates more quickly. They found that fully half thought at least one of the false statements presented was possibly, probably or definitely true. Moreover, those who held false beliefs often rated black patients' pain as lower than that of white patients and made less appropriate recommendations about how they should be treated.”

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/04/04/do-blacks-feel-less-pain-than-whites-their-doctors-may-think-so/>

Similar Studies

- 2000: Hospital ER in Atlanta: 74% of white patients w bone fractures got painkillers compared to 50% of black patients
- 2007: Physicians underestimate pain of black patients
- 2015: Black and Latino children w appendicitis receive much less pain treatment than white children

(Details in *Washington Post* article and on handout)

So what does this mean?

1. Belief in biological races is persistent
2. and completely untrue
3. and dangerous

1. Belief in biological races is **persistent**

- Scholars have been saying race is a social construct and not biological for more than 50 years
- Around 2000, w Human Genome Project, seemed like everyone was close to agreement that race is a social construct:
- “What we’ve shown is the concept of race has no scientific basis” (Project leader)
- However, over past 15 years, belief in biological races has increased

2. Idea of biological races is **untrue**

1. Humans are 99.5% to 99.9% identical
 - Differences amount to only .1 to .5%
 - Of that tiny amount of difference, 85% has no connection to race or where our ancestors lived because this variation is spread around the globe
 - Of the rest of that difference (amounts to .015% to .075%) there is correlation to our ancestors' migration patterns, still doesn't relate to racial categories
2. Skin color is very recent adaptation and is only “skin deep.”
3. There is more genetic variation between two randomly selected members of the same race (like two white people living in Sweden) than there is between one randomly selected member of one race (a white Swede) and one randomly selected person of another race (a black Kenyan).
4. There is no way to scientifically separate people into racial categories and say that everyone in one racial group shares a certain biological feature that nobody in another racial group has.

3. Belief in biological races is **dangerous**

- Ideology = belief system you're indoctrinated to believe, so you take it for granted as the truth
 - Humans can be divided into different biological racial groups
 - These groups can be positioned on a hierarchy with white at the top, black at the bottom, and indigenous people, Latinos, and Asian Americans occupying various intermediary positions depending on the moment (white supremacy)
- US history filled with horrifying examples of the danger of this ideology
 - Genocide and colonization of indigenous Americans
 - Slavery
 - Eugenics movement
 - Japanese internment
- Ideology provides rationale for how these are justified in a democracy
 - If white people are only group seen as biologically fully human, then it's nature that grants them citizenship; government is just doing what's "natural" by supporting slavery, land seizures of indigenous peoples, etc.

What do we do?

- Recognize danger and injustice of ideology that race is biological, recognize how persistent it is today and how to identify it
- If race is not biological, then it's a social construct, a human invention. If humans invented it: Why? When? How? White people especially need to learn this history and understand that whiteness is an invention, created in part to break alliances between European and African laborers in early colonies. The categories of white and black were created as a divide and conquer strategy.
- White guilt is paralyzing and unproductive, but if white people recognize race as a social construct then they can develop hope and responsibility. If we created race, then racism is not inevitable; there is hope we can dismantle racism. And with this knowledge, white people have a responsibility to act. No one alive today invented race; neither did their parents or grandparents. It's much older, but we did inherit it. We need to decide what we do with this dehumanizing inheritance.
- Being colorblind denies this system of racial oppression we've inherited, so this answer is unacceptable. White people have the power and responsibility to act, and that can begin with calling out the ideology that race is biological for what it is, a lie perpetuated to control people for the benefit of those in power.

Return to study of UVA med students

- If future doctors believe human races have biological differences, and this belief is a foundation for their decisions about pain treatment, this has much broader implications.
 - Which patients are perceived as fully human?
 - Who has access to mental health resources for addiction, and who is punished?
 - When people of color are perceived as the primary drug addicts in the War on Drugs, there was a lot of pressure to punish drug users. But as the *NY Times* headline ran last year: “In Heroin Crisis, White Families Seek Gentler War on Drugs.”
 - Who is perceived as inherently criminal and who isn’t?
 - How does the unconscious and implicit bias (reinforced by the widespread ideology that biological races exist) affect the decisions of everyone working with addicts, including doctors, nurses, social workers, counselors, lawyers, prosecutors, judges, and other staff?

Activity

1. Take a few minutes to reflect on the following: If you're already a professional in the field, think about your work experience, and if you're a student, think about case studies, classroom discussion, and what else you've learned in your coursework so far. What is one instance where you think the ideology that race is biological affected a decision or a comment by a medical professional, counselor, student, or other related professional? (Keep in mind that this is often operating unconsciously.) Then, if you're comfortable doing so, share your example with another person or small group of people. [Total time = 10 min]
2. Once you've discussed #1 in your group, brainstorm together some possible strategies for raising awareness in your workplace or classroom that race is not biological but rather a social construct. What types of effective conversations or interventions could be used to help your colleagues understand this ideology and its dangerous impact? How might this action lead us closer to racial justice? [Total time = 10 min]
3. Come back to the full group, and hear from as many small groups as possible.
4. Take away: Think about what action steps you could take back to your classroom or your workplace now or in the future that could allow you to debunk the ideology that race is biological and confront systemic racism.

Thank you!

- Don't forget to check out the resources on my blog:

<https://dividednolonger.com/>

- Email me any feedback, questions, etc.

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- All of the info in the slides as well as the above is on the handout.