

Study of college-age white men reveals cultural awareness deficit

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White identity had virtually no meaning for a group of white males in a new study by a University of Arizona researcher, and such individuals largely ignored or downplayed issues of race and instances of reported racism.

Nolan L. Cabrera, an associate professor in the UA's Center for the Study of Higher Education, also found that the men rarely had meaningful moments or experiences that would contribute to positive racial perspective during their undergraduate years.

Cabrera presented his research findings in a paper, "An Unexamined Life: White Male College Students on What It Means to Be White," during the 41st annual Association for the Study of Higher Education conference, which was held Nov. 9-12 in Columbus, Ohio. His project received funding from the Spencer Foundation and National Academy of Education.

For the study, Cabrera interviewed 62 politically diverse college-age males, asking them questions about what it means to be [white](#), and how they defined and experienced white culture.

"During these conversations with white men, 'white' was a relatively meaningless social category," said Cabrera, who is teaching "Whiteness in Education" during the spring semester. "The time that 'white' had a substantive meaning to them was when they felt racially marginalized, or when they experienced 'reverse [racism](#),' which is largely a myth."

Reverse racism omits the interplay of privilege and power, Cabrera said.

"Racial privilege does not make white people bad. Rather, it's reflective of the systemic realities of contemporary racism," Cabrera said. Yet, the men he interviewed either did not understand this or could not conceptualize it.

"The biggest problem is that we tend to individualize race and racism and turn the discussion into 'good/bad' or 'racist/non-racist' dichotomies," Cabrera said. "Rather, the study of whiteness in this instance focuses on actions, beliefs and experiences, and contextualizing them within the larger systemic reality of contemporary racism."

Thus, the men were overwhelmingly dismissive of evidence that race and gender shaped people's lived experiences, Cabrera said. They also tended to report that other people who had negative, racially based experiences were likely unable to acculturate or overstated the prevalence of racism, he found.

This led Cabrera to the concept that these men were leading an "unexamined life," one in which they had not developed a critical self-awareness. In an earlier study, Cabrera and his collaborators found that a level of racial discomfort can actually be beneficial in aiding a person in personal growth, but white men are effectively able to avoid such discomfort.

"Racial ignorance does not just create a lack of self-awareness, but it also leads to a number of racist behaviors," Cabrera said.

In a different study, Cabrera found that 90 percent of the white men interviewed either used or heard the N-word regularly.

"They tended not to think there was anything wrong with it because, in

their views, 'the meaning had changed.' That is, the N-word was no longer seen as being racist," Cabrera said. "But the bulk of people who supported that view were other [white men](#)."

This example points to a sort of coupling effect - conversations about racism and racial marginalization cannot occur without critical discussion about racial privilege, Cabrera said.

"However, in [higher education](#), we tend to only focus on the minority side of the coin. Racial minorities cannot be experiencing a hostile campus climate if there is not a group doing the marginalizing in the first place," Cabrera said.

"If we only focus on minority communities, we have an effect, which is racial marginalization, without a cause, which is white privilege," he said. "We need to understand both sides to paint a more holistic picture of the nature of contemporary racism."

Provided by University of Arizona

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