

White Men and the Denial of Racism

Published in Reading for Diversity and Social Justice, edited by Maurianne Adams et al, Routledge, 2000

"I had to work hard for what I have, but the recipients of Affirmative Action are getting something for nothing. Why should I support that? It's not democratic."

"Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) has placed white males at a disadvantage. If a white male and a minority are equally matched for a position, the minority will get the job because of EEO status. EEO has placed white males in a discriminated class."

"They stole my pay, they stole my promotion, and I couldn't say I didn't like it. white guys are being pushed around big time to make up for past wrongs. If you're Black and belong to a Black group, you're an activist. If you're white and you belong to a white group, you're an asshole. Nobody supports the KKK -- I don't -- but there's nothing for a white guy to join."

You're at a party, or in a meeting at work, and some white men let loose with their anger at those "unqualified minorities" who are getting all the good jobs while white guys like themselves are getting screwed. You know that this is a serious distortion of reality. But you also know that these "angry white men" truly believe what they're saying and that they have a lot of support from millions of like-minded Americans. And so you wonder: how did these guys come to believe that race-conscious remedies like Affirmative Action and EEO were so wildly successful that they are the ones who now need protection from "reverse discrimination?"

Although these white men are badly misinformed about racial progress, they probably are on one end of a continuum that includes progressive and liberal white men. The continuum is called "denial of racism." As I've thought about the comments of "angry white men," and reflected on my experiences as an anti-racist white man, I've come to believe that all of us white men are, to some extent, in denial about the ways that racism continues to benefit us and hurt people of color. Understanding the mindset of "angry white men" may help the rest of us realize how our thinking about race is clouded, and, hopefully, increase our clarity about white male privilege and racism as we speak out in support of racial justice.

"Why do we have to keep talking about racism?"

Most white men acknowledge that the genocide of Native people or the enslavement of African people were hideous chapters in American history. We'd like to think that all of that ugliness is behind us. But when we're given information about less extreme forms of racism that exist today, in the United States, we manage to slip into denial. I've been with groups of white men as we've watched the video "True Colors," in which a hidden camera documents the experiences of two young, college educated men, with similar qualifications and dress, as they go out to test for

racial discrimination in St. Louis, Missouri. The only difference between them is race: one is Black, the other white. A few white men express their shock when they see overt discrimination in ordinary interactions -- the Black man is followed in stores, quoted a higher price by a car salesman, patronized by job counselors about being lazy, and told that vacant apartments are not available -- as if they had no idea that racism is alive and well. Other white men watching the video seem to have no emotional reaction, as if it doesn't matter to them; some insist that the discrimination they've just seen has not occurred. It's stunning to me the number of times that white men have said, "they made that up" or "the same thing could happen to a white man" or "it must be because of the way he was dressed."

A few years ago, I was checking into a hotel with a Black male colleague. When he asked the white man behind the counter for our rooms, the clerk ignored him and spoke to me. I was stunned. That evening, in talking about the incident, my colleague was surprised that I was surprised; he assumed that I knew that such treatment was routine for him. As I began to notice the different ways we were treated in ordinary situations, I realized how frequently he, and other colleagues of color, were treated as if they were invisible while I was noticed and treated with respect.

When people of color try to tell us about racism they've experienced, we often stop listening or discount their interpretation of events, as if they were crazy and we knew "the truth." Let's suppose a co-worker tells us about white men who repeatedly question her qualifications, who won't talk to or sit with her in the break room, or who constantly refuse to believe the facts she's presenting. When we hear about these incidents, we often jump to the conclusion that we are being personally attacked as bigots and angrily defend ourselves. In our defensiveness, we miss the point that she was talking about systemic issues, not accusing us of anything. If we don't take it personally, we sometimes come to the defense of the organization, blame her for being too sensitive, or problem solve about how she can avoid such treatment in the future. None of these reactions give us any new information. Unfortunately, many white men don't have daily, intimate contact with people who are experiencing discrimination and so we don't even hear about it.

In writing about the white reaction to his book The Rage of A Privileged Class (an account of the pain and anger of Black professionals), Ellis Cose described what could be a case study of white male denial. "Many white readers suspect the Blacks in the book of seeing prejudice where none exists. Other whites accused those Blacks in the book of blaming their own shortcomings on racism, or of existing in some wacky, unreal universe where, as one reviewer put it, 'life is supposed to be perfect.' Many said, in effect, that they were tired of hearing about Black problems and that the 'whiners' should simply shut up (conveniently ignoring the book's point that those complaining generally kept their thoughts to themselves.)"

Ultimately, we need to account for both the past and the present impact of racism in our society. Even if race-conscious remedies were designed to correct past discrimination, and even if race-conscious remedies don't work as well as they were designed to work, it is critical for us to see that they are a way to remedy current patterns of discrimination.

"What privilege?"

The debate over the legitimacy of race-conscious remedies has focused almost exclusively on the extent to which "minorities" should be compensated for past discrimination. Some say that the bill is long overdue; some say that the bill is paid and "minorities" should not get further compensation; and some say that the bill has been overpaid and that white men are due some compensation. For some white men, the debate is more narrowly focused: how long will white men have to pay for the sins of slavery?

Framed in this way, the issue seems absurd to many white men. We didn't own slaves and most (but not all) of our relatives didn't own slaves. That may be true. But what's also true is that there is a long and deep history of quotas and preferences favoring white men; in fact, for most of the history of the United States, the sign outside most workplaces has been, "white men only need apply." It could easily be said that there has been "affirmative action" in education and employment for white men in this country for at least 300 years. This includes colleges that set rigid quotas limiting or preventing the admission of Jews, women, and people of color, thereby accepting some white men who otherwise wouldn't be admitted if it weren't for the lower standards artificially created by keeping out so many applicants; children of alumni ("legacies") being admitted to prestigious schools with substantially lower qualifications than those entering students whose parents were not alumni; restrictive social clubs and sports facilities where white men "networked" for jobs, long before the term was a cliché; veterans who received additional points on civil service exams; and nepotism that got white men in the door or on the fast track, allowing them to skirt the competitive process that other applicants had to follow --assuming, of course, that the others even got in the door to apply.

Most white men don't need to look very far in their own lives to see how we have benefited from opportunities available to us and denied to all others. In 1966, while growing up in Northern New Jersey, I got my first job at the age of 16 as a house painter through my father's connections to the paint store where he worked. My boss patiently instructed me, as if he were my mentor; none of the painting contractors I saw were even hiring young men of color. (In fact, if they had hired young African-Americans or Latinos, they would have entered a hostile environment, given the daily barrage of racist comments about Blacks and Puerto Ricans.) In high school, I was encouraged to do well academically and placed in the college track; the young Black men in my high school were put into the vocational classes. Upon graduation, I was expected to go to a four year college; the young Black men disappeared from my life.

"What happened to 'the best man wins?'"

In a letter recently printed in the Boston Globe, a white man wrote that he is a member of "the most persecuted group in today's society." Recounting two incidents where he claims he was told

that he didn't get a job because "they were only hiring women" and they were "holding interviews until they found the Black person they needed," he asks, "whatever happened to the premise that the best person gets the job without regard to race, creed, sex, age, or national origin?"

While it is true that some Americans have succeeded against all odds and that the United States is a more egalitarian society than many other countries, it has never been true that this is strictly a meritocracy: a system in which individual achievement determines success. Success has always been based on race, as well as ethnicity, class, gender, and religious beliefs. The Founding Fathers and their successors explicitly used race to determine who was eligible to participate in the economic and political life of this country. Even with the passage of amendments to the Constitution and anti-discrimination legislation and Executive Orders, there were, and continue to be, preferences in hiring and appointments based on race, creed, sex, age, and national origin, plus family name, and class status.

Ironically, most men can tell poignant stories about the damage of ethnic, age, gender, and class-based preferences as their own parents and grandparents struggled to find work in the United States: "No Irish need apply;" older, more experienced workers being "put out to pasture" so that the company could get some "young blood;" women factory workers being told to go back into the kitchen at the end of WW II because returning male veterans needed jobs. And yet we white men hold on to the belief that there has always been equal opportunity when it comes to jobs. My father always told me, "Anyone can succeed in America if they just work hard."

Class status alone may be enough to insure -- or deny -- future success for some white men. In his article "Class in America," (Race, Class, and Gender in the United States), Gregory Mantsios writes, "Class standing, and consequently life chances, are largely determined at birth. Although examples of individuals who have gone from rags to riches abound in the mass media, statistics on class mobility show these leaps to be extremely rare For those whose annual income is in six figures, economic success is due in large part to the wealth and privileges bestowed upon them at birth."

A white male colleague of mine, Mark Wise, once commented to me that white men got a raw deal. He suggested that people of color in the United States have always known that there is injustice, that they can work as hard, or harder, than any white man, and still not get ahead. Our raw deal, he suggests, is being told that life is fair. In the Fire Next Time, James Baldwin wrote, "The American Negro has the great advantage of having never believed that collection of myths to which white Americans cling: that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes or that they were born in the greatest country the world has ever seen."

Ironically, it may well be that Affirmative Action and other race-conscious remedies, if they survive their current test of credibility, will help create the meritocracy that we hold as our ideal. John R. Graham, writing in USA Today (November 16, 1993), described this shift as "...the old-boy network is being replaced by quite a different code of behavior -- competence. Who you know is giving way to what you know." Roger Wilkins, in "Racism Has Its Privileges" (The

Nation, March 27, 1995) described it this way: "It may be that we will need Affirmative Action until most white males are really ready for a color-blind society -- that is, when they are ready to assume 'the rank of mere citizen.' As a nation we took a hard look at that special favoritism thirty years ago. Though the centuries of cultural preference enjoyed by white males still overwhelmingly skew power and wealth their way, we have in fact achieved a more meritocratic society as a result of Affirmative Action than we ever previously enjoyed in this country."

"These people want something for nothing."

Some white men work very hard, giving everything they have, in stressful and dangerous jobs, to take care of their families; some white men put in a good day's work, provide for their families, and still have time to be with the guys; some white men have abandoned their families. The same can be said about men of color and female heads-of-households, regardless of race.

What is different is the amount of work it takes to reach a comparable level of success. People of color often have the sense that they have to do "twice as much to go half as far." A colleague once said to me, "I feel like I have to be twice as good as to accomplish anything as a Black man, and even if I'm in a strong position, I know that some whites will not see my strengths." In addition, work is made harder simply by the daily experience of subtle and overt racism.

Even more disturbing is the historical legacy of free or underpaid labor provided by people of color; white men who are angry that the recipients of Affirmative Action are "getting something for nothing" generally forget that the United States, under capitalism, was built on the backs of slave and indentured labor, and that the economy today is built on the backs of underpaid labor. In this way, white people benefit today from both past and current patterns of racism. This point is dramatically brought home to me whenever I stay at a hotel -- the service staff is largely recent immigrants, usually women of color, working for low wages and little or no benefits -- or hear about consumer goods sold for a nice profit in the United States but produced by Third World workers earning pennies a day in slave-like conditions. Seeing the comfort and success of white men as dependent on the underpaid work of people of color gives new meaning to the question of who deserves what.

"Affirmative Action Quotas are nothing but reverse racism."

Affirmative Action is a very varied and complex set of policies that is often described (or lambasted) as if it were simply a system of mandatory quotas. To reduce Affirmative Action to quotas is a gross distortion; in fact, the courts have reaffirmed on numerous occasions that Affirmative Action policies are not quotas and cannot, in their implementation, discriminate against the majority. In practice, Affirmative Action varies tremendously from organization to organization. It can mean an aggressive search for job candidates in a human service agency, set-asides for contractors, plans to reserve places in a training program, and hiring goals and

timetables for certain positions in a corporation. Any of these policies can be voluntary or mandated, with a wide variety of quality and compliance.

When Affirmative Action gets reduced in the public dialogue to quotas, white men end up thinking that "they don't have a chance." White men are still getting hired and promoted in organizations that have the most aggressive Affirmative Action policies. The strictest court-ordered hiring programs set up a one-to-one match: one person of color must be hired for every white person hired. (These rare cases of quotas have typically been established in police and fire departments that failed to comply with voluntary desegregation plans and, later, court-ordered mandates to integrate.) So even where there are quotas, it simply means that the competition for available jobs increases, not that white men will be totally shut out of jobs.

"What happened to standards?"

Some white men believe that Affirmative Action is unfair and inefficient because race and gender are used as criteria for employment in an otherwise objective process. However, it is seldom the case that being hired or promoted is an objective process: we all know that it is a very subjective process. We've all been in situations where someone got the job because of who they know, not simply their abilities. My son landed summer jobs in the financial industry -- each one a "resume-builder" -- based on his aunt's and uncle's business contacts; in one case, his boss was a man for whom he had caddied at an exclusive, private country club.

Even with the right contacts to get in the door, job candidates are often explicitly evaluated on how they will "fit in" and "get along" with their future team members; sometimes, this is the major criteria for selecting the one person out of several who all have essentially equal qualifications on paper. If the workplace is dominated by white men (and most of the higher paying and more desirable jobs are) then, all things equal, it is likely that another white male will be seen as more compatible than a person of color. In addition, employers may prefer to hire white men as a way to avoid having to "walk on eggshells" around people of color.

"Is she qualified?"

Affirmative Action was never designed to be a program to hire "unqualified" people; it was designed to get women and people of color in the door to compete with us, when we found ways to lock the door on anyone but white men like ourselves. And while there are cases where poor implementation of Affirmative Action led to the hiring of an unqualified person of color, there are also plenty of situations where incompetent white men have been hired.

I believe that it is race-based prejudice that leads us to routinely question the qualifications of people of color. Why is it that we don't routinely wonder about a white guy's qualifications? Why is it that we always wonder, and comment on, the qualifications of the person of color who

got a job previously held by a white man? Can it be anything other than deeply held beliefs about who is qualified? Or, as Roger Wilkins suggests in "Racism Has Its Privileges," using the term "unqualified" may be simply an updated and more socially acceptable version of referring to people of color as "inferior." A white men writing a letter to the editor of the Boston Globe apparently wasn't worried about being socially acceptable: "The white male made this country what it was before females and minorities polluted the entire system."

Most of us have accumulated a lifetime's learning of biases about people of color -- they're lazy, sneaky, not intelligent, you can't trust them. And yet some of us claim to be unbiased. These biases are reinforced for us every time that we're told by an employer or supervisor, "the only reason you didn't get the job is because you're white." In many cases, this is a lie that serves only to bolster the ego of the unsuccessful applicant and perpetuate our belief that we are the competent, qualified ones. A former AT&T Division Manager and now management consultant, John P. Fernandez, author of Survival In The Corporate Fishbowl, writes, "When a manager or organization implies that the lack of mobility is to be blamed on women and minorities, it should raise a red flag. white males should recognize that, by allowing their (superiors) to shift blame, they are allowing them to avoid discussing the employee's actual ability to do the job."

A colleague of mine, Gerald Jackson, recently suggested to me that most people are, in fact, initially "unqualified" to do the jobs they are hired to do. It makes sense: generally, people are hired or promoted based on their potential to do a job they don't yet know how to do. My colleague concluded that people of color should have the same opportunity as white men to be "unqualified" when hired.

"There are no opportunities for us."

When we blame "minorities" for a lack of job opportunities, we are simply following an old pattern where the members of oppressed groups attack each other, or members of other oppressed groups, rather than challenging the oppressor directly. When it comes to white men losing job opportunities, the "oppressor" is not undocumented workers, legal immigrants, or "Affirmative Action hires," it is the corporate mentality that downsizes, sends jobs overseas, breaks unions, outsources, and prefers technology to people, all in the interest of stock holders and top management who benefit from an improvement in the bottom line. Under capitalism, some unemployment is desirable; under capitalism, exploitation is a given. It's easier to blame "minorities" than the CEO and board; it's difficult to criticize capitalism when you've always been told that the United States is the land of opportunity for white guys like you.

When they encourage scapegoating, white male talk show hosts and right-wing politicians keep us from seeing the real enemy. Their agenda is certainly not truth-seeking: the reactionary talk show host encourages white male backlash for his financial gain; the politician manipulates white male anxiety for his re-election. When working class, Jewish, gay, disabled men, or older men (and we will all be older workers some day) allow ourselves to be deceived, we are

supporting a system that will scapegoat us when the opportunity arises.

"The minorities have taken my job"

For some white men, the scapegoating of people of color for the failures of capitalism is made easier by an underlying belief that white men deserve to have the good jobs. During a period of plant closures at a major US corporation, I repeatedly heard comments like this one: "My father and grandfather worked here their whole lives, I've put in 25 years in this plant, and now they're taking my job and giving it to some Mexicans." For these white men, there was a clear recognition that the company is to blame; over the course of several days, I heard about all the lies they were told concerning job security. But their comments about "the Mexicans" suggest not only prejudice but also anxiety about the presence of people of color in formerly white-held occupations.

This leads me to speculate that underneath white male anger is fear of competing with people of color. It's one thing to compete with other white men and lose; but to compete with people who you've always been told are "less than" strikes at the heart of our sense of (racial) self-worth. I have painful memories of working as an assistant to an African American woman as she taught a class, and wondering to myself: what do the white men in the audience think of me as I sit here next to this Black woman, "beneath" her? Regardless of how she saw my role, or what the white men actually thought, I carried the prejudice inside myself. How many other white men carry this same fear?

"We're now the minority."

There are places in the United States where people of color are sometimes the numerical majority: in some urban neighborhoods (but not inside most office buildings located in or near those same neighborhoods); in some rural areas when crops are being harvested; at some religious and cultural events; and occasionally in some social and work-related settings within an organization, as in the case of Black employees eating together in the company cafeteria or Latina employees working together on the service staff.

But for most white men, our daily experience is one of being the majority, and in many cases, living and working in racially segregated environments where there are few, if any, people of color. If we look at all the places where white men are "in control," it seems obvious that people of color aren't even close to "taking over": white men are 82.5% of the wealthiest Americans, 77% of Congress, 92% of state governors, 70% of tenured college faculty, 90% of daily newspaper editors, and 77% of television news directors. In most workplaces, the vast majority of white men report to another white man.

This fear of non-white people taking over may be a matter of perception. Widely quoted

"Workforce 2000" statistics citing the decline of white men in the US workforce by the turn of the century may have been taken more seriously than the authors anticipated. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the racial shifts among white collar workers from 1975 to 1994 are real but meager: the percentage of white workers dropped from 92.3% to 89.7% over twenty years, a change of less than 3%. And although white people will become less than 50% of the US population sometime in the next century, the Urban Institute estimates this will not happen until the year 2090. When this data is combined with the evidence that racial segregation in residential areas is actually higher than it was 2 or 3 decades ago, it becomes clear that most adult white men have a good chance of living out their lives in the company of other white people.

The false perception of being a racial minority may be further explained by the fact that white people typically overestimate the number of people of color present in a particular context. In a 1990 Gallup poll, the average white American estimated that 32 percent of the US population was Black and 21 percent was Hispanic; the real figures were 12 percent and 9 percent. Recently, while doing a presentation to a group of employees at a corporation, I experienced this phenomenon first-hand: glancing at the audience, I thought that white people were the minority, until I actually did a head count. Of the 42 people present, there were 17 white men, 9 white women, 12 African-American women, 3 African-American men, and 1 Asian-American man -- a total of 26 white people and 16 people of color.

"We're victims, too."

Although Blacks are seen as "whiners," and the expression of rage by people of color is seen as pathological, white male complaints that "Affirmative Action has gone too far" receive political, media, and corporate support. The Congressional elections of 1994 provide a case in point of political support for white male anger: Republicans, and some Democrats, campaigned on positions which essentially legitimized white male beliefs that US citizens of color and immigrants, both legal and undocumented, are "the problem." Politically, it meant that the expression of white male rage would be seen as rational and reasonable. This is a variation, from the perspective of white men, of Derrick Bell's "Second Rule of Racial Standing," as described in Faces at the Bottom of the Well: "Not only are Black s' complaints discounted, but Black victims of racism are less effective witnesses than are white s, who are members of the oppressor class. This phenomenon reflects a widespread assumption that Blacks, unlike whites, cannot be objective on racial issues and will favor their own no matter what."

An example of media support for white male anger is the February 13, 1995 issue of US News and World Report, which asks in bold letters on its cover, "Does Affirmative Action Mean NO white MEN NEED APPLY?" In the lead article, an illustration shows women and people of color climbing ladders to success and leaving a white man behind, while the authors state, "Affirmative Action poses a conflict between two cherished American principles: the belief that all Americans deserve equal opportunities and the idea that hard work and merit, not race or religion or gender or birthright, should determine who prospers and who doesn't." The illustration

may be a reflection of white male paranoia but hardly represents reality; in their comments, the authors have clearly bought into the myth of meritocracy.

Corporate support for white male anger is evident when white men are not confronted for making comments concerning the qualifications of an "Affirmative Action hire;" from the perspective of the "Affirmative Action hire," this comment is inflammatory and creates a hostile work environment where colleagues are not respected. Another example can be seen in the trend to deemphasize race and racism in corporate diversity training in favor of a more inclusive definition of diversity, one which includes age, class background, educational level, sexual orientation, physical ability, religious or spiritual beliefs, and even personality and work style. At one level, I absolutely support this approach: it allows white men to see the ways in which they have been legitimately targeted for oppression, thereby opening a window for our understanding of how other groups get targeted; it provides some recognition, and relief, for our legitimate feelings about being targeted; and it includes in the diversity framework many groups that also face substantial discrimination.

But I often feel as if there is a second agenda that might be described as "We don't want to alienate the white men by talking about race too much -- we need their expertise and productivity -- so we'll find ways to make diversity more palatable to them." A Newsweek poll, conducted on March 23-24, 1995, found support for this position: 23% think Blacks losing out because of racial discrimination is a bigger problem in the workplace, while 46% think white s losing out because of Affirmative Action is a bigger problem.

Speaking Out About Racism

Not all white men are in denial about the impact of racism; some white men recognize that discrimination still exists, some support Affirmative Action, some even account for the privileges they get as white men. But I'm struck by the relative absence of these voices of allies in the fight against racism. As their white brothers speak up in anger at immigrants, welfare recipients, and "inner city" youth -- to name a few of the current scapegoats -- these allies against racism contribute to what Dr. Martin Luther King called "the appalling silence of the good people." These white men aren't talking even though they know, through the experiences of friends and colleagues, that sexism, racism, and other forms of oppression are daily experiences for many citizens of the United States.

My wish is that more white men speak out about racism. I'd like to see more statements like this letter to the editor of the Boston Globe:

"The opponents of Affirmative Action say the only discrimination that remains is reverse discrimination. This is absurd.... Affirmative Action is a sometimes clumsy attempt to remove the extra hurdle that no white male applicant would have faced. It is clumsy because on some

occasion a woman or a person of color may seem to be given an unfair advantage over a white male. The fact is that the white male has an unfair advantage everyday of his life...I don't want to bash white males. I'm one myself. But I do acknowledge that my life is easier because I am white and male. I wish that opponents of Affirmative Action would acknowledge the same thing and admit that they don't want to surrender the unfair advantage they possess."

or this comment in the "OpinionLine" in USA Today:

"The politicians will tell you that the attack on Affirmative Action is a cry for racial justice. That is not so. It is an expression of the anger and frustration felt by large number of overwrought and underemployed white men. Their anxiety is understandable, but Affirmative Action is not their enemy... The United States is going through a period in which the politics of meanness is in the ascent... Eventually we'll find our higher selves and chase the dogs of bigotry and fear and ignorance from the yard."

or this comment in an AT&T publication for its employees:

"I had to unlearn life-long messages that implied that white males were superior, were meant to be leaders, in control... The fact is that subtle discrimination still takes place. We perpetuate it and either are not even aware of it or deny it. To understand this took some real thinking, questioning, and soul searching. It didn't come easy. It still is painful, but I cannot avoid the facts."

When these types of comments are as frequent as those that deny the realities of racism, I'll begin to trust that, in my lifetime, there might be substantial progress on our unfulfilled commitment to racial justice in the United States. If, however, the attacks on race-conscious remedies continue, unchallenged, I'll wonder if we aren't headed for what Derrick Jackson, a columnist for the Boston Globe, has called the "racial ice age," referring to the 50-100 year cycles of progress and backlash for people of color. In a June 16, 1995 column, he concluded, "There is nothing in the history of this country to suggest that the glaciers of the new racial age will do anything but slice through the trees, rip up the roots, and leave behind mere moraines of racial progress -- when there should have been mountains."

I want to thank the many colleagues and friends who have helped me understand the dynamics of racism, and who have helped me conceptualize parts of this article, particularly Valerie Batts, Harry Brod, Angela Bryant, Pat Griffen, Tom Griggs, Gerald Jackson, Jim Kilpatrick, Wekesa Olatunji Madzimoyo, Horace Seldon, Althea Smith, and Mark Wise.