Towards Antiracism: Using Critical Race Theory as a Tool to Disrupt the Status Quo in Health Professions Education

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Abstract

The use of words such as race, racism, antiracism, and antiracist has increased in health professions education (HPE). While the words are used more frequently, additional work is needed to demonstrate a commitment to enhance equity, diversity, and inclusion in HPE. It is important that we contextualize these words, understand the connections between them, and use this information to implement sustainable actions to disrupt the status quo in HPE. Critical race theory is a tool to consider for this journey. In this commentary, the author provides an overview of key concepts ranging from race to critical race theory as a primer to the Research in Medical Education plenary.

How much racism is there in the world? Many modern-day readers believe that racism is declining or that class today is more important than race. And it is certainly true that lynching and other shocking expressions of racism are less frequent than in the past. Still, by every social indicator, racism continues to blight the lives of people of color. —Delgado and Stefancic, 2017

Over the past year and a half, several events have shed light on the racism present in the United States. While the topic of racism has recently been spotlighted by industry, government, and those in higher education alike, racist practices have been deeply ingrained in the fabric of the United States for centuries through its structures and systems. In fact, the structures and systems emerging from and perpetuating racism are so deeply ingrained in society that the manifestation of racism is both “indiscernible”, yet noticeably evident depending on who you are—and more specifically, the color of your skin.

Racism as a Pillar of the American Experience

On the one hand, the rampant racism, couched as meritocracy, altruism, and justice for all, has been the norm for the racially minoritized. Racism is indiscernible to the racially minoritized because to be racially minoritized is to be an heir to structural and, likely, interpersonal racism. Racially minoritized individuals experience racism in their everyday lives from the fear of being stopped by the police for a traffic offense and this stop being more likely to lead to their demise when compared with their White counterparts. They feel it in the housing market while paying more interest for homes and having their homes appraised for less. They feel it as they navigate the K-12 school systems, where curricula are whitewashed and children of color are punished at greater rates than their White counterparts. They continue to feel it as they navigate the transition into postsecondary education, graduate studies, and most relevant, health professions education. It is felt through admissions committees devaluing their experiences; microaggressions from their peers and professors; and flowery mission statements touting equity, diversity, and inclusion as a priority only to be followed by empty promises.

The same sociopolitical climate in which racism sets the standard in the United States for the racially minoritized is also indiscernible to White people because, in most instances, it is also normal to them—particularly through the benefits and privileges they receive as a result of the systems in place. While, in some instances, Whites may have similar experiences as the racially minoritized (e.g., poverty), they do not experience the same things on the same levels that the racially minoritized do and for the same reasons (i.e., structural racism). They operate in a society that, through racism, is built for their success. However, in this same environment, the racially minoritized are “required” to assimilate to whiteness to have societal success—with no guarantee of receiving or sustaining it. These structures and systems trickle down from government through laws and politics, from our communities to our workplaces, and also to our institutions of higher education.

Disrupting the Status Quo Through Understanding and Action

Over the past 18 months, faculty, staff, administrators, and students in academic medicine, and higher education broadly, have increased their usage of the phrases “antiracist” and “antiracism” and have become more knowledgeable of “racism” and the role it plays in impeding the success of the racially minoritized and advancing White interests. Consequently, these and other key terms have been used regularly in mission statements, strategic plans, and email blasts responding to racist events, and the like. However, while the use of the terms has increased, they are seldom defined and the linkages between them are rarely connected. Further, scholarly and conceptual frameworks are sparsely employed as instruments to guide action and accountability for individuals and organizations embarking on antiracist journeys. Therefore, we must begin with understanding some key terms. Then, we must employ tools that will disrupt the status quo toward antiracism. One promising tool to contribute to this disruption is the use of critical race theory to guide us in this work. In Box
1, I provide definitions of some key terms. I will then provide some context of these key terms by connecting the links between them. Lastly, I define critical race theory and provide some tenets of the movement. These concepts will be expanded upon in a forthcoming manuscript and the 2021 Research in Medical Education address.

From Antiracist to Race

As indicated earlier, the phrases such as antiracism and antiracist have been used widely over months past. However, as we consider these concepts for individual transformation and take steps to implement organizational policy, a scaffolding process is necessary, through which foundational context is grappled with and key constructs are connected (see Box 1). First, antiracists are needed to carry out antiracism practices. Next, antiracism is required because of racism. Subsequently, there is no racism without racists. And finally, racists rely on the concept of race. However, race is socially constructed.

While we often use the aforementioned terms, the word “racist” is often avoided. It is taboo. If we have accepted that structural and systemic racism exists, we must also accept that individuals perpetuate these structures and systems. If we desire to become antiracist individuals, we must also accept the reality of what it means to be the alternative. We must be aware that to be racist extends beyond the rationale of one committing violent hate crimes and “one-off” events such as spewing racial slurs. It also represents the role that individuals play in contributing to racist systems and structures—both actively or by refusing (including through inaction) to disrupt the system through which some benefit and others are oppressed and disadvantaged.

From Words to Action

Recently, the critical race movement has become needlessly, but calculatedly, villainized. However, critical race theory is a necessary tool to consider if organizations and individuals are committed to becoming antiracist. The critical race theory movement, as defined by Delgado and Stefancic, “is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming

Box 1

Definitions of Key Terms

Antiracist: One who is expressing the idea that racial groups are equals and none need developing, and is supporting policy that reduces racial inequity.17

Racism: A system of ignorance, exploitation, and power, whereby one group deems itself superior to all others on the basis of ethnicity, culture, mannerisms, and color. The group deeming themselves superior carries out oppressive behaviors and benefits from this system while other racial and/or ethnic groups are negatively affected.18–20

Racist: One who is supporting a policy through their actions or inaction of expressing a racist idea.17

Race: Products of social thought and relations…. Not objective, inherent, or fixed, [race] corresponds to no biological or genetic reality; rather, races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient.1

The concepts in this commentary provide readers with additional tools and context for their antiracist journeys. As individuals and organizations navigate their journeys toward becoming antiracist, they must have an awareness of how past events shape present circumstances, reflect on how they contribute to perpetuating or impeding racism, and take action to disrupt the systems from which some benefit and others do not. This begins with understanding how key concepts such as race, racism, and racist are intimately connected to antiracism and antiracist. It also requires individuals to seek out and employ tools such as critical race theory to assist in their activism, even if it makes some uncomfortable. Further, disrupting the status quo involves speaking up and giving up power and privilege. It includes legitimizing the voices and experiences of the racially minoritized. And while diversity statements and strategic plans are a start, disrupting the status quo toward antiracism must involve accountability—otherwise, it is only a performance.

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References


References cited only in Box 1