

DISCRIMINATION IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Although discrimination and racism in the workplace in the United States has been the object of much attention and debate in recent decades, racism still continues to be prevalent in the workplace today, taking on various forms and resulting in a variety of outcomes. A definition of racism is necessary to better dispel the myths of racial discrimination, and the importance of diversity training for both the management and employees in an organization is essential for tackling the ever-present and ever-changing face of discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

America has been a nation of immigrants from its inception, and has often proudly declared itself as an egalitarian, humane society, dedicated to the removal of racism and inequality. Indeed, America has made great strides in improving working and social conditions for those in minority groups, from the emancipation of slaves, women's suffrage, the Civil Rights movement, equality for women, and more recently, the push for equal treatment of the GLBT community. Much legislation has been passed, and many corporations now have explicit emphasis placed on the value of diversity. Yet, despite America's claims of and efforts toward meritocracy and equality, what is preached is not always put into practice. Discrimination in the workplace is still a rampant occurrence even today, a claim strengthened by research. Statistically, upper management positions are dominated by Whites, and the disparity in income levels between Whites and people from other racial groups is noticeable (Katz & Moore, 2004). With all the focused attention diversity has received in recent years, one may be surprised to hear that discrimination still exists. While overt, blatant, and institutionalized racism has declined (although it has not disappeared), "in many cases, racism has merely become more subtle, more covert, and more sophisticated" (Katz & Moore, 2004). As Robbins and Judge state, the shift in the US workforce to a permanently diverse workplace "means organizations need to make diversity management a central component of their policies and practice" (2009). As diversity is a potential breeding ground for racism, organizations should strive to educate themselves on what racism entails and how to prevent it.

DEFINING RACISM

To address this issue, leaders and those in management positions in an organization need to increase their awareness of the racism still pervasive in American society, and should open their eyes to understanding how systems, organizations, and behaviors support discrimination, and should actively work to identify and remove racism in their own organizations (Katz & Moore, 2004).

The first step toward raising one's awareness of the pervasive racism lurking in the society around us is to set a clear definition of racism. Ridley (2005) suggests that racism can be delineated into two categories: individual racism and institutional racism. Ridley proposes the following outline for a definition of racism:

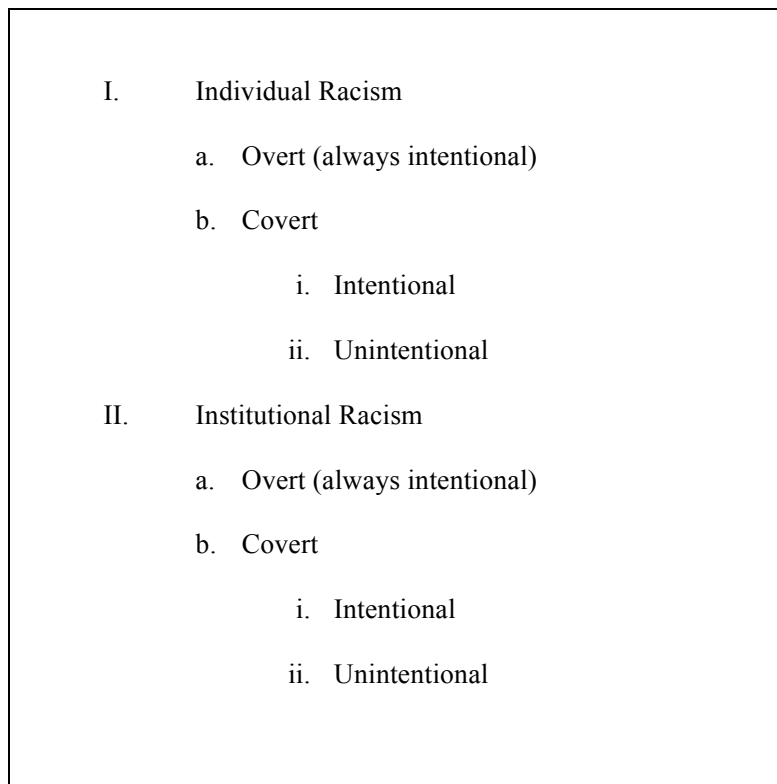


Figure 1: A Behavioral Model of Racism (Ridley, 2004)

It is clear that racism is not a simple, obvious process, but can take many forms and methods. The first category, individual racism, indicates the behavior or attitude of an individual person or even a small, informal group of people. Racism can occur individually through overt, or malicious means, or through covert, or subtle, means. Overt racism is always intentional and is based on stated beliefs; for example, lynchings of African Americans in the South indicate clear, obvious intent to cause harm. Covert racism takes a more subtle form, as the individual is acting on unconscious or hidden racist beliefs. The intention underlying this type of racism is difficult to determine, since only the individual knows whether their actions stem from hidden (but known) racism, or whether their actions arise from unknown racism. An example of covert intentional racism is when a manager avoids engaging in small talk with a minority employee for reasons known only to them. The minority employee may notice the lack of friendliness, but may not readily know the cause. In contrast, an example of covert unintentional racism is when a manager expresses pleasant surprise when a minority employee performs well.

Similarly, institutionalized racism takes on both overt and covert forms, yet this type of racism occurs at the organizational level. An example of overt institutionalized racism entails an organization explicitly stating that a certain group may not apply (i.e. “Irish need not apply”), or the past laws the US enacted barring the Chinese from entering and gaining employment in the US. Covert intentional institutionalized racism involves an institution asking for job candidates to have certain types of previous experience that those from minority groups are unlikely to have. Covert unintentional institutionalized racism is exemplified by an organization unknowingly using personality tests on job candidates that are culturally biased.

Unintentional institutionalized racism can also result in two types of outcomes. One outcome of unintentional institutionalized racism is *proximal*, which occurs immediately following the racist behavior. An example of this type of outcome is making racist jokes or comments in the vicinity of a

minority person, who immediately feels the intended sting of the comments and may also feel like an unwelcome outsider. A second type is a *distal* consequence, which is something that occurs later in the future as a result of an act of racism. For instance, avoidance of standing up against racism may not have immediate effects, but over time, the racism present in the work environment will only continue to snowball and increase in intensity. Both *distal* and *proximal* consequences can be either apparent or unapparent. Apparent consequences are easier to identify, making the creation and implementation of interventions easier, while unapparent consequences are more difficult to spot and therefore, harder to resolve.

One may wonder what causes unintentional racism, as much of it stems from seemingly good intentions. Yet, Ridley explains that there are three main causes of unintentional racism. The first occurs as a result of *miseducation*, or misinformation. As unintentional racist behavior can be exhibited by even the most educated individuals, a lack of education is not the issue; rather, it is the presence of incorrect information that poses the problem. Misinformation is channeled through the media, oversimplifying racial issues, and confusing correlational relationships with causal relationships. The second cause attributed to unintentional racism is what King (1991) terms as *dysconsciousness*, or the mindset of the majority (Whites) who take their privileged position of power in society for granted. King defines *dysconsciousness* as an uncritical mindset of perceptions, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs that cause a person to unquestioningly justify racial inequality. Essentially, the individual believes that their worldview is the default, “correct” way of viewing the world, and all others are deviant. King states that: “It is not the *absence* of consciousness but an *impaired* consciousness or distorted way of thinking about race... Uncritical ways of thinking accept certain culturally sanctioned assumptions, myths, and beliefs that justify the social and economic advantages White people have” (King, 1991).

The final proposed cause of unintentional racism stems from groupthink, or suspending one’s own personal opinions and adopting the views of what is best for the group as a whole. All of Ridley’s proposed forms and consequences of racism can occur in the workplace, as racism can be inserted into official policies and procedures, or it could arise through the actions of individual employees or members of management.

IN THE WORKPLACE

Discrimination based on race or other factors can occur in the workplace through a variety of methods. Katz and Moore (2004) detail some of the common ways racism seeps into a work environment. Important decision-making processes such as hiring, firing, promoting, and evaluating can be rife with discrimination, as employers often determine competence through subjective factors. As human beings generally like those who are similar to them, upper management may take this sometimes unconscious attitude with them when making decisions. Those who are most similar will be considered as more competent, and those who are most different are more likely to be considered incompetent. Further, those who are similar may be treated with more leniency and will be given more responsibility, while those who are different may have the rules stringently applied on them and may have to “prove” themselves before being given any responsibility (Katz & Moore, 2004). Further, as relationships are often built on a feeling of comfort and similarity, networking becomes more difficult for minority groups since key connections are lacking and the minority individual misses out on important opportunities as a result.

In addition to similarity increasing comfort levels between the employer and the employees, language plays a major role in contributing to workplace discrimination. Katz and Moore suggest that phrases such as “we want to hire a qualified person of color” or “we want a diverse pool of qualified candidates” reveals the underlying message that “qualified” must be added as it is not a default characteristic of a someone from a minority background. These phrases are often accompanied with descriptions such as “articulate” or “having good communication skills,” further indicating that these are exceptional and even

surprising characteristics of a minority. Upon being hired, a minority may be viewed with suspicion as having been hired for affirmative action purposes, and not for their actual qualifications for the position – and the individual themselves may deal with self-doubt from having the same suspicions (2004).

A further way employers and employees can engage in workplace discrimination is by avoiding or remaining silent on the issue of racism in their own organizations (Katz & Moore, 2004). Organizations may avoid investigating incidents of discrimination, as they may fear what they will find, or that their investigation may open the door for potential lawsuits. Racist policies, jokes, or comments may go unchecked as no one wants to speak up in defense of equality. Individual employees may not want to go out on a limb for fear of the potential negative consequences it may have on them personally, such as losing favor with management, being ostracized, or even fired for going against the status quo.

SOLUTIONS

In order to begin to resolve issues of discrimination in the workplace is to first raise awareness about the true nature of racism and dispel the myths surrounding it. Ridley (2005) suggests fifteen propositions for further clarifying racism; a few of which are particularly noteworthy. He first begins by stating that racism is a behavior, as it is controllable, observable, repeatable, and measurable. This indicates that a person has control over their behavior, and organizations can conduct research on racism as it can be observed, measured, and repeated for reliability. Further, racism is a learned behavior, and it can therefore be changed. Second, Ridley reminds us that even members of minority groups can be racist. Racism is not a solely White problem, but is an issue that can occur within any group, no matter how powerful or marginalized the group may be. Another reminder regarding the nature of racism is that power is needed in order for an individual to engage in racist behavior. Although a person may seethe with hate toward a particular minority group, they are unable to take action without having some sort of power at their disposal. If someone has the ability to control themselves and others (Leigh, 1984), they are in a position to act in a racist manner.

Ridley also reminds us that although we often consider racism as direct acts, inaction is also a form of racism. Someone observing racism occurring but fails to do or say anything to stop it is contributing to racism and is part of the problem. Finally, probably the most salient suggestion that Ridley proposes is that raising awareness of racism is not enough to solve the problem. Rather, organizations need to go a step further by clearly identifying specific racist behaviors. When a behavior is singled out, a person can then begin to change that particular behavior. Presenting racism as an urgent, yet vague, undefined issue only makes people feel frustrated, powerless, and even dismissive, as they have no way of making any improvements or positive changes.

In line with Ridley's suggestion to provide specific steps for tackling the issue of racism, organizations can provide multicultural training for both upper management and employees alike. Robbins and Judge state that multicultural training typically emphasizes three areas: the legal component involved when dealing with those from diverse backgrounds, the benefits of a diverse workforce, and the importance of developing practices that will help foster the skills and abilities of all employees (2009). To help facilitate this process, the United States government Office of Personnel Management provides some guidelines for implementing diversity training. The OPM stipulates that diversity training should:

- Have clearly stated goals and learning objectives that relate to the mission and needs of the organization;
- Use appropriate training approaches, methods and materials;
- Provide advance information to employees on course content and instruction methods, attendance policy, and alternatives for learning;
- Be provided in a supportive and non-coercive environment;
- Be conducted only by experienced and fully qualified instructors; and
- Be monitored and regularly evaluated.

Figure 2: Guidelines for Conducting Diversity Training (Taken from the US Office of Personnel Management website: <http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/policy/divers97.asp>)

As noted in the guidelines, the diversity training should be geared specifically toward the particular organization receiving the training, as the needs and circumstances of each organization will vary. Further, the training should be conducted only by trained and qualified individuals, and should be held in a safe, facilitative environment.

In addition, any sort of training program should have clear goals and purposes. The Office of Personnel Management further detail the goals of diversity training as helping the attendees understand the legal requirements for maintaining the Equal Employment Opportunity and Affirmative Action laws. The training should also stress the fact that diversity includes both similarities and differences among individuals within the organization and within the greater society, and that diversity is essential for providing a variety of viewpoints, approaches, and actions necessary for innovative and appropriate planning, decision-making, and problem solving. Further aspects of the training should include emphasis on developing the interpersonal skills necessary for dealing with individuals with both similarities and differences. Trainees should be encouraged to always exhibit behavior that “respects each individual, preserves human dignity, honors personal privacy, and values individual differences as well as common characteristics” (<http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/policy/divers97.asp>). Additional goals entail:

- Increasing employee awareness of equal employment opportunity laws;
- Increasing employee understanding of how diverse perspectives can improve organizational performance;
- Preventing illegal discrimination or harassment in the workplace;
- Improving workplace relations;
- Building more effective work teams;
- Improving organizational problem-solving; and
- Improving service to customers.

Figure 3: Additional Goals for Conducting Diversity Training (Taken from the US Office of Personnel Management website: <http://www.opm.gov/hrd/lead/policy/divers97.asp>)

These additional goals should provide specific action steps, guidelines, and examples for trainees to better work with both each other and with those they are employed to serve. In addition to the recommended guidelines and goals for diversity training, the OPM advises trainers to follow up the training session with some sort of evaluation in order to assess the quality and effectiveness of the session.

CONCLUSION

Employers must realize that racism is not an ancient relic of the past, but in fact is alive and well and more than likely, thriving in their own organizations. The steps to tackling the issue of racism in today's modern and diverse workplace is to first come to a clear understanding of the definition of racism, the various forms it takes and outcomes that result from it. After gaining a clearer image of racism, "employers and leaders in the workplace can identify racism, barriers that are still in place, and the ways in which they are maintained. Most importantly, we can then intervene appropriately in order to create a more effective, productive, and healthy organization" (Katz & Moore, 2004). Gaining the crucial information needed for better multicultural practices in the workplace and taking the necessary steps to address the issue of racism and discrimination, employers can then provide better organizational harmony, unity, and productivity, as well as successfully compete in an ever-changing and the rapidly expanding globally interconnected business world.

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