

Racism and the Benefit of the Doubt: Rethinking Inequality

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Land Acknowledgement

I recognize that, in Colorado, we learn, teach, and live on or near the ancestral homelands of the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Pueblo, Shoshone, and Ute Peoples. We at Colorado College are specifically situated on the traditional territories of the Southern Ute Nation, the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, and the Northern Ute Peoples. We have a responsibility to acknowledge our Indigenous connections, as well as the histories of dispossession and forced removal that have allowed for the growth and survival of this institution. We also have a responsibility to recognize and highlight the continued social, intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions of Indigenous Peoples to Colorado College, Colorado Springs, and all of society.

Today's Agenda

- Lecture: the benefit of the doubt (20 minutes)
- Individual writing (5 minutes)
- Pairs discussion (10 minutes)
- Small groups exercise (15 minutes)
- Lecture: what white people can do (10 minutes)
- Individual writing (10 minutes)
- Small groups discussion (10 minutes)
- Last questions and thoughts (10 minutes)

The Dilemma of Racism

- Enormously complicated and profoundly complex
- Institutional/organizational, cultural, interpersonal, intrapersonal
- Within and across time and space/history and geography
- This complexity can discourage white people/people perceived as white from thinking we can do anything to work against racism
- We need an approach to racism that recognizes this complexity while helping white/white-perceived people identify concrete interventions we can make against racism

2005, Uintah and Franklin

Decision-Making Authority

- White people have most of the socially legitimated decision-making authority across institutions/organizations
- Access to social, cultural, political, and/or economic resources that they have the discretion to share or to withhold
- Authority to restrict or punish people, to scapegoat them, or otherwise to treat them badly – authority they can use or not at their discretion
- Society largely accepts the decisions authorized people make as appropriate because they are acting on behalf of the institutions they represent
- Those decisions can determine the quality of others' lives and even whether they live or die

Decision-Makers Can Decide...

- Who gets a good mortgage (or any mortgage)
- Who is followed in a store by a security guard
- Which potential hire is the “best fit”
- How to teach U.S. history
- Which new employee to mentor
- Whether a student can succeed in the class or not

Decision-Makers Can Decide...

- Who should and who should not get to vote
- Whether to pull over a particular driver and search their car
- How the media covers the police killing of an unarmed Black person
- Who gets appropriate healthcare
- Whether a student acting out has a problem or is a problem
- Whether a drug addict has a problem or is a problem

Racism Writ Small

- How do we understand the thousands of individual decisions and actions that add up to racism as cumulative and reinforcing across time and space, individual lives and generations?
- One possibility: racism as white people treating other white people well and treating people from BIPOC communities badly (individually, institutionally)
- Because of the decision-making power that white people have (and because of the history and current workings of racism), this positive/negative split reproduces racism

Good Faith as Positive Assumptions

- This has nothing to do with religion, religious belief, or spirituality; it is a different use of the term “faith”
- Assuming the best about a person and expecting the best from that person absent any evidence about what the person is like; the presumption that someone is a good person
- Giving someone the benefit of the doubt
- White people tend to make good-faith assumptions about other white people and to treat them in good faith depending on their other identities

Bad Faith as Negative Assumptions

- Assuming the worst about a person and expecting the worst from that person absent any evidence about what the person is like; the presumption that someone is in some way a bad person
- Withholding the benefit of the doubt from someone
- White people tend to make bad-faith assumptions about people from BIPOC communities and to treat them in bad faith (other identities, such as gender, sexuality, wealth, and ability may shape the nature of the bad-faith treatment)

Good-Faith Assumptions

- Competent
- Hardworking
- Harmless
- Intelligent
- Morally upright
- Financially stable
- Positive contributor to society
- Successful
- Unproblematic

Good-Faith Assumptions

- Trustworthy
- Reasonable
- Worthy of respect
- Rational
- Appropriately self-interested
- Deserving
- Within the bounds of normality

Bad-Faith Assumptions

- Incompetent
- Lazy
- Dangerous
- Unintelligent
- Morally problematic
- Financially unstable or insecure
- Detriment to society (Mitt Romney: “a taker”)
- A failure
- Problematic

Bad-Faith Assumptions

- Untrustworthy
- Unreasonable
- Unworthy of respect
- Irrational
- Militant; wants “special rights” or “special treatment”
- Undeserving
- Abnormal or extreme

Meta-Assumptions

- The assumptions already mentioned tend to cluster into three larger “meta-assumptions:”
- Competence/incompetence
- Morality/immorality
- Harmlessness/dangerousness

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

- Sociological term for a situation in which incorrect assumptions or beliefs lead to actions that change reality such that the incorrect assumptions or beliefs become true or are confirmed or reinforced
- What happens to a financially stable bank if many members believe (falsely) that the bank is in trouble?
- They may withdraw their money
- If enough bank members withdraw their money, the bank will in fact come to be in financial trouble though it was previously solvent
- Once the bank is known to be in financial trouble, the initially false assumption of the members becomes true and their belief about the bank is confirmed
- Had they not withdrawn their money, the bank would have been fine

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: School

- White teacher assumes white students are smarter than BIPOC students
- White teacher teaches more effectively to white students, offering more attention, encouragement, energy, mentoring, patience...
- Unsurprisingly, white students respond positively to the teacher's attention and focus, learning more as a result
- BIPOC students receive the message that they are not as smart and don't matter as much
- BIPOC students become alienated and learn less
- This pattern confirms the teacher's starting assumptions
- The problem was never the BIPOC students but the teacher

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy: Crime

- Police look for crime in BIPOC-majority urban areas rather than white suburbs (for multiple, complicated reasons)
- Police find crime in BIPOC-majority urban areas (where they look for it)
- Police miss the crime in white suburbs (because they don't look for it)
- Police pull over and search the cars of BIPOC drivers rather than white drivers
- Police find contraband in some cars of BIPOC drivers
- Police miss the contraband in the cars of white drivers
- These patterns confirm police suspicions about crime

Good-Faith/Bad-Faith Inertia

- Once we assume that certain people are trustworthy (for example), it takes a change of understanding for us to see those people as untrustworthy
- We don't expect them to be untrustworthy and are surprised
- We may have a hard time believing a “good” person did something bad
- Once we assume that certain people are untrustworthy, it is similarly hard for us to come to see them as trustworthy
- Over time and across society, this inertia reinforces racism

All White People are Implicated

- All white people are implicated in racism regardless of their intentions and regardless of whether they are overtly prejudiced or not
- White people are implicated in racism every time they benefit from the good-faith assumptions and actions of other white people
- White people are implicated in racism when, as a result of their own assumptions, they treat white people better than they treat people of color (interpersonally or in a decision-making capacity)

Five-Minute Writing Exercise

Write down one or two real-life examples of how bad-faith treatment by white people has harmed members of BIPOC communities. These can be commonly known examples or can be from your own life, but each should address the following:

- Whether someone with institutional decision-making authority was involved (if so, what specific authority did they have and how did they use it?)
- The specific bad-faith assumption(s) involved (to the extent that you know or could guess them)
- Which, if any, meta-assumptions were involved (competence/incompetence, morality/immorality, harmlessness/dangerousness)

10-Minute Pairs Discussion

- Share one or both of your examples with someone sitting near you
- Divide your time fairly
- Take the last minute or two to discuss what you can learn about racism from considering all your examples taken together

15-Minute Small Groups Exercise

- You will work in three groups
- One group will focus on decision-making authority
- One group will focus on good-faith and bad-faith assumptions
- One group will focus on the self-fulfilling prophecy
- Choose which group you wish to join
- Further instructions are in your exercise handout

We Are Responsible...

“We are not personally responsible for what people who look like us did centuries ago. But we are responsible for what good or ill we do to people alive with us today. We are, each of us, responsible for every decision we make that hurts or harms another human being.”

Isabel Wilkerson, Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, pp. 387-388

White Work against Racism

- Reject the idea that a racist is a mean person with bad intentions
- Accept the systematic understanding of racism in which all people are implicated in individual and institutional ways, whether their thoughts, words, and actions reproduce racism or challenge it (or some of both at different times)
- Educate oneself about the history and present reality of racism (books, blogs, podcasts, movies, etc.)

White Work against Racism

- Get comfortable with the discomfort of addressing racism and one's role in it as a white person, by doing emotional work and building resilience; reject white fragility to create solidarity
- Monitor one's assumptions and actions to learn how good faith and bad faith assumptions and actions play out in one's own life
- Begin to change these processes in order to treat all people with good faith

White Work against Racism

- Use one's socially legitimated decision-making authority to support BIPOC individuals and communities
- Use one's resources (including money), talents, time, energy, gifts, and passion to support BIPOC individuals and communities

Where Can White People Start?

- Our broken hearts
- Our discomfort
- Our own well-being
- Our self-education
- Our gifts
- Our resources

Where Else Can White People Start?

- Our interactions
- Our social roles
- Other white people
- Our relationships with people from BIPOC communities
- Our bodies
- Where we live

10-Minute Writing Exercise

- If you are white or are perceived as white, please use the handout to identify some personal next steps that you can take against racism
- If you are a member of a BIPOC community, please use this time in any way that is relaxing, productive, or restorative for you.

10-Minute Small Groups Discussion

- Find two to three other people with whom to talk
- If you are white or white-perceived, share at least one of the personal next steps you just wrote down
- If you are a member of a BIPOC community, you can join a group and participate as you see fit, or use the time as is most restorative or useful for you
- Please divide your time fairly in the small-group discussions

Last thoughts? Last Questions?

Thanks...

- To all of you for attending
- To Dr. Phoebe Lostroh for helping me with the PowerPoint
- To Dr. Dwanna McKay for the language used in the Land Acknowledgement

Please fill out the Excel@CC feedback form when you receive it so I can improve this presentation!