

From “Calling in Black” to “Calling for Antiracism Resources”: the need for systemic resources to address systemic racism

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this essay is to highlight the urgent need for antiracism resource generation in organizations today.

Design/methodology/approach – This essay weaves together popular press articles, academic writings and the authors’ lived experiences to summarize, clarify and extend the work needed inside of organizations and academia to dismantle systemic racism.

Findings – We define antiracist resources as personal and material assets that counteract systemic racism through informing and equipping antiracist actions, and identify three resources—adopting a long-term view for learning the history of racism, embracing discomfort to acknowledge racist mistakes and systematically assess how organizational structures maintain white supremacy—for organizations to address systemic racism.

Research limitations/implications – While there is a critical need for more antiracism research, there are standards and guidelines that should be followed to conduct that research responsibly with antiracism enacted in research design, methodology decisions and publication practices.

Practical implications – The authors call for organizations to directly counter-racism via antiracism resources and offer examples for how these resources can inform and equip companies to create equitable workplaces.

Originality/value – This essay offers: (a) an updated, timely perspective on effective responses to systemic racism (e.g. police brutality and COVID-19), (b) a detailed discussion of antiracism resources and (c) specific implications for antiracism work in organizational research.

Keywords Antiracism, Resources, Systemic racism, Black employees

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Calling in Black to cope with police brutality

Grief. Helplessness. Fear. Anger. We shared these emotions with each other in a group text on July 7, 2016 when less than 48 hours before, videos emerged showing both Alton Sterling and Philando Castile being killed by police. We were in the middle of our doctoral programs, striving to meet candidacy requirements and dissertation milestones. Yet, we could not shake these traumatic feelings associated with their deaths, which were exacerbated by silence of these incidents from our academic institutions. We were expected to carry on with business



as usual despite the growing list of Black people whose lives were taken from policing behaviors since we began our graduate programs including: Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Laquan McDonald, Rekia Boyd, Tamir Rice, Aura Rosser, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland. Left to deal with our own trauma, we did what we were trained to do: conceptualize how and why directly experienced or vicariously observed racially traumatic events affected us and other Black people at work (McCluney *et al.*, 2017). We identified what we had been experiencing as racial trauma or a psychological injury caused by the experience of a racially motivated incident that overwhelms a person's capacity to cope (Bryant-Davis, 2007). Individuals seek resources or psychological, social, material and intangible entities that enable them to obtain valued ends (Hobfoll *et al.*, 2018) to cope with hardships like racism (Hobfoll and Jackson, 1991). Those who perceive that their organization lacked adequate resources to alleviate their felt racial trauma may "Call in Black" to work (McCluney *et al.*, 2017). Our conceptual model proposed that organizations can cultivate psychological and identity safety resources (Edmondson, 1999; Purdie-Vaughns and Walton, 2011) to reduce the need to call in Black.

Thankfully, there has been an abrupt shift in companies' responses to police brutality following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, MN (Russell Reynolds, 2020) including allowing Black employees to take time away from work (Hinchliffe, 2020). Although this may be viewed as providing Black employees with the resources needed to heal, it does not reduce the ongoing racism that Black people experience. First, associating the desire to call in Black with Black employees needing a mental health day could potentially pathologize Black people's justifiable responses to systemic racism as something "wrong" with them. Second, suggesting that Black employees take time off to cope implies that racism is an individual, rare event that should be managed external to the workplace (Morgeson *et al.*, 2015) instead of an overarching system that perpetuates inequitable outcomes, treatment and experiences across society and in workplaces on the basis of race (National Museum of African American History and Culture, 2020). Situating police brutality within this definition of systemic racism acknowledges the role that institutions play in maintaining a system of inequality. For organizations, that is acknowledging how racism is operating internally and the lack of resources they possess to create spaces for Black employees to reaffirm their humanity (Evelyn from the Internets, 2015). It is unsurprising, then, that organizational statements claiming that Black Lives Matter are met with scrutiny from their Black employees (Gallagher *et al.*, 2020). Many Black employees are now sharing their ongoing experiences with racism at work (Safdar and Hagey, 2020), illuminating how little progress companies, which has led to the departure of Black employees (e.g. Jackson and Jackson, 2019; Shibrava *et al.*, 2019).

Our conceptual model demonstrated how Black employees may feel the need to call in Black to work when egregious forms of racial violence occur in society (McCluney *et al.*, 2017), but did not address how Black employees may feel *everyday* in organizations that reinforce and reproduce systemic racism. In light of the current multi-layered crises affecting Black people, we extend our calling in Black model to consider how organizations can address systemic racism as the root cause of Black people experiencing vicarious racial trauma and everyday racism at work (Essed, 1991). Specifically, we explain how and why systemic antiracism resources are needed to counteract systemic racism and offer specific resources for implementing antiracism in organizations and academic research. We ground our call for antiracism resources within literature on antiracism, resources and inclusion.

2. Systemic racism in the COVID-19 era

The world is currently plagued by multi-layered crises that put human life at risk and demand immediate, continued and systematic action. As of July 2020, the COVID-19

pandemic has been transmitted to over 9.17 million individuals worldwide and led to the death of over 156,744 individuals in the United States alone (Coronavirus Resource Center, 2020). A disproportionate number of people who have contracted and died from the virus are low-income Black, Latinx and Native/indigenous people in America (Opper *et al.*, 2020). A second crisis—what president of the American Psychological Association, Dr. Sandra L. Shullman, labeled the *racism pandemic* (Mills, 2020)—has persisted and magnified in conjunction with the spread of the novel coronavirus. This manifests in killings of unarmed Black Americans at the hands of non-Black civilians (February 23, 2020: Ahmaud Arbery) and police officers (March 13, 2020: Breonna Taylor; May 25, 2020: George Floyd; May 27, 2020: Tony McDade; June 12, 2020: Rayshard Brooks), in addition to non-Black civilians weaponizing the police against innocent Black people (Harriot, 2020). The world was forced to pause and bear witness to the continued violence inflicted on Black people due to persistent policing of Black lives.

Although sweeping changes are being enacted via government regulations and policies, organizational structure adjustments and economic relief to address the COVID-19 pandemic, responses to the racism pandemic remain stalled (e.g. police reform policy disagreement; Bogel-Burroughs and Healy, 2020), debated (e.g. controversy surrounding the removal of slaveholder monuments; Ortiz and Diaz, 2020) and inconsistent (e.g. Starbucks public support of Black Lives Matter paired with a private ban on Black Lives Matter apparel; Sacks and Samaha, 2020). Yet, the widespread call for significant changes and actions to address racism resounds. The recent killings of unarmed Black Americans has sparked protests across the United States and in 40 other countries worldwide including in the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and Brazil (Aljazeera, 2020). In the past month alone, Americans' financial support for the Black Lives Matter movement increased as much as it had in the past two years (Cohn and Quealy, 2020). We are living in a time of unprecedented reckoning, and organizations *must act* accordingly to address the racism pandemic that is affecting the workforce.

Many large corporations have since issued public statements denouncing racism in policing and have donated money to racial justice organizations (Hessekiel, 2020; Togoh, 2020). Yet, their actions have not ushered in widespread change needed to counteract racism (Roberts and Washington, 2020) and do not appear to extend beyond empty words (Dowell and Jackson, 2020). Our conceptual model called for organizations to create resources to support Black employees' mental, emotional and physical health. However, as the past three years have shown us, these racially traumatic events are ongoing and persistent (Leigh and Melwani, 2019). Merely treating the symptoms of systemic racism is not a viable solution. Therefore, we call for organizations to strive toward creating *antiracism* resources that actively counteract racism. It is our hope that organizations see this moment as an opportunity to develop systemic tools that promote change.

3. Creating antiracism resources in organizations

Antiracism is taking direct action against racism. We illustrate why antiracism is critical for this moment in our history by framing racism as adhering to Newton's first law of motion: an entity (i.e. racism) will remain in motion unless it is compelled to change its state by the action of a countering external force (i.e. antiracism). Racism is real and is constantly in motion as evident in disparate access to housing security, educational opportunities, wealth distribution, health outcomes and progression of Black people in organizations (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2017). Unless the force of racism is met with direct countering forces, it will persist at its current strength and velocity. Dr. Ibram Kendi (2020), a leading antiracism scholar, emphasizes the limitations of merely being "not racist" in a racist society stating, "there is no such thing as a "not-racist" policy, idea, or person. Just an old-fashioned racist in a newfound

denial. All policies, ideas, and people are either being racist or antiracist.” Although this statement is provocative, it further illustrates how the lack of self-reflection concerning one’s roles, beliefs and actions, whether intentional or unintentional, maintains systemic racism. For example, an employee may believe that their everyday work tasks, such as putting paper in a printer tray or scheduling a meeting, are harmless and do not demonstrate racism. Yet, we argue that the choice and ability to carry on “business as usual” and ignore the everyday microaggressions, injustices and violence affecting Black people in and outside of work continues the motion of racism and is therefore not antiracist. In support of this idea, scholars have directly argued that a “not racist” position “is a form of racist violence” (Lentin, 2018, p. 400).

Several scholars have provided guidelines for how companies can take meaningful action against racism to advance racial justice (Kramer, 2020). We build on Kendi’s definition of antiracism to inform our recommendations that companies create and disseminate antiracism resources in the workplace. According to Kendi’s groundbreaking book *How to be an Antiracist* (2019), antiracism includes a continual commitment to learning about racism, acknowledging racist mistakes and creating equitable structures to replace systems that maintain white supremacy and the marginalization of Black people and other stigmatized groups. Therefore, we consider antiracism resources as *personal and material assets that counteract systemic racism through informing and equipping antiracist actions*. As the history, goals, practices and antiracism starting point of each individual and organization varies, *we do not believe that there is one antiracism best practice* or resource guide that can address the diverse ways racism manifests. We, instead, offer three examples of individual, relational and structural antiracist resources that can be created in organizations based on our lived experiences and emerging scholarship in this area.

Adopt a long-term view for learning about racism. As viral videos of police brutality migrated from social media into mainstream news after the murder of George Floyd, we were forced to relive traumatizing events. A residual effect of persistent racism in society is the intergenerational fatigue felt by Black people that compromise their physical and psychological health (Winters, 2020). Observing the rise in global consciousness as people around the world are “waking up” to racism has several effects on Black people and other people of color, including the emotional and psychological distress of knowing that prior to this moment, most people “did not care” about these issues (Morris, 2020). Although people have purchased numerous books to begin the process of educating themselves on systemic racism (Harris, 2020), it does not recuse individuals from enacting racism. What’s more, the immediacy of forming an antiracism task force or book club may further harm Black people who have silently endured racism from their newly “woke” colleagues for years (Safdar and Hagey, 2020). We recommend that White and non-Black employees *adopt a long-term view of their learning* as an antiracism resource in organizations. Unlike traditional views of learning as achieving “mastery” or completion, framing learning of antiracism as a never ending journey may decrease the negative outcomes associated with reactive, knee-jerk responses that constrict our thinking and actions. Racist acts, intentional or not, will continue to emerge in a racist society. Therefore, non-Black coworkers and leaders will find their learning about racism to be most helpful if they prepare for a longer journey of reflection, change and growth.

Further, adopting a long-term view of learning will reduce non-Black people’s need to absolve themselves of racism by burdening their Black colleagues to validate their efforts and educate them. Black employees have been “put on the spot” to lead antiracism efforts in their companies by managers who feel too busy or ill-equipped to have productive conversations about race (Morris, 2020), which further exposes Black people to White fragility and defensiveness. Although non-Black coworkers may be well-meaning in these exchanges, these conversations are uniquely burdensome and potentially unpleasant for their Black colleagues. We and other Black employees have been accosted or boldly and urgently

approached by our newly converted antiracism coworkers to develop and produce workshops that effectively dismantle systemic racism and share our experiences of racism with colleagues; all of which contribute to our mental and emotional exhaustion with little, if any, additional compensation or recognition for this form of [diversity] labor (Ahmed, 2012). This labor depletes the cognitive and emotional resources Black people need to do their day jobs while simultaneously managing grief associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing police brutality (Gaines, 2020). Joining in the conversation and learning of racism is only the beginning of this work. To more effectively support Black employees and coworkers, individuals must use their own privilege to alleviate the burden that racism has placed on Black people.

Embrace discomfort as part of acknowledging racist mistakes. To reconcile the harms of racism and restore justice in organizations (Opie and Roberts, 2017), it is critical that organizations acknowledge their role in perpetuating racism. This process is uncomfortable as it admits the ugly truth of our history, but this does not mean companies should avoid it. We recommend *embracing discomfort to acknowledge racist mistakes* as a critical resource for organizations. Unfortunately, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work in organizations has promoted the comfort of all persons as a desired goal, which prioritizes friendliness over engaging in crucial work around dismantling systemic racism (Cortina et al., 2019). Promoting the feeling of comfort at work does not facilitate cultural competence, but seeks to increase dominant group members' tolerance of differences. In these environments, Black employees still feel uncomfortable acknowledging how they have experienced racism at work (Livingston and Opie, 2019).

"Feel good" DEI efforts are not enough to properly acknowledge and address the racist structures that still pervade society. True safety necessitates the acknowledgement of racist actions that companies have and continue to engage in. Essentially, to foster antiracism in organizations, dominant group members need to become more comfortable with being uncomfortable (Ferdman, 2017). It is time that we all share the "burden of uncomfortability" that Black employees experience on a daily basis; from enduring microaggressions (Sarkis, 2020) to feeling pressure to code-switch (McCluney et al., 2019). By embracing discomfort, non-Black employees will recognize feelings of defensiveness and fragility as part of the work needed to become antiracist instead of an indicator to discontinue these efforts. We recommend that organizational DEI leaders move away from seeking comfort, toward uncharted waters along their DEI journey. Embracing discomfort as a resource will help reframe the goals of antiracist organizations from feeling good to doing good.

Systematically assess how structures maintain white supremacy across organizations. Kendi's definition of antiracism calls for individuals to create equitable structures and replace those that maintain White supremacy. To enact these behaviors, companies must first identify structures that reinforce White dominance (Ray, 2019). We propose that *systematically assessing how organizations are structured* is a resource that will enable companies to identify deeply rooted ideologies that perpetuate rather than dismantle systemic racism. As an example, Castilla and Benard (2010) find that managers in companies who reward employees based on merit enact biases that favor White men and reinforce disparities in pay and performance for White women and people of color. The only way to address systemic racism is with systemic solutions. Therefore, if companies are truly interested in being antiracist, they must be willing to interrogate taken-for-granted aspects of their workplace and make systemic changes to their organizational infrastructure. Implementing accountability metrics for merit-based pay and increasing transparency of decision-making for managers are some solutions that counteract biases on a systemic level (Castilla, 2016).

Organizations should also systematically assess how they recognize and promote leaders. Traditional DEI programs are designed to increase minority representation, but not to

challenge racial hierarchies that are built into the fabric of workplaces, which may explain the dismal numbers of Black people in leadership roles (Lowe, 2013). Rather than focusing on how to bring more diversity into the workplace, Ray (2019) challenges us to question why so much power remains with White people. One response could be the lack of a systematic approach for addressing racism in organizations. Companies tend to fire leaders who were caught enacting racist behaviors (Kirsch, 2018). Yet, this does little to change the demographic makeup of leaders or challenge the processes within companies that routinely promote White men into leadership roles. Bold actions are necessary to actively disrupt the status quo of leaders as exemplified by Reddit's co-founder Alexis Ohanian when he stepped down from Reddit's board of directors (Vega, 2020) and asked for his seat to be replaced with a Black person (Togoh, 2020). Systemic racism extends beyond individual behaviors to discriminatory procedures, unfair policies and biased practices that result in inequitable outcomes for Black people. Systematically assessing organizations' infrastructures offer numerous directions for creating equitable workplaces.

4. Implementation of antiracism practice in organizational research

Organizations are not alone in our call for the creation and dissemination of antiracism resources. It is also on us as management scholars to inform this work through conducting scientific research in this area. As junior Black scholars who have tiptoed around doing work on racism because of warnings that we will be perceived as biased for doing "me-search" (Ray, 2016), we now find numerous scholars identifying and using antiracism in their papers. Although we are excited to see our field finally recognize the power and importance of antiracism work, we feel that it is our responsibility to extend a call for academics to incorporate antiracism into their scholarship with a deeper understanding of Black people's experiences with racism at work. We offer a few places to start and foundational work to inform antiracist research.

Identify racism in the practice of research. It is imperative that we remind our readers that academia is also an institution that creates and maintains racism (Green, 2016). As participants in this system, it would behoove us to question taken for granted assumptions in the practice of research as perpetuating racism. Scholars have demonstrated the inherent biases we face in the review process when seeking to publish diversity research (King *et al.*, 2018), which is likely to be exacerbated with research on race. With regards to writing, our field tends to use racist language on topics that are not about racial issues such as associating negative behaviors and traits with "darkness" (see more in Bergman, 2019), but cringe when scholars use language that is not palatable to readers from dominant groups. Further, writers continue to use the phrase "women and people of color" which erases women of color and ignores the anti-Blackness that is present among non-Black people of color (Acevedo, 2020; Pan, 2020). In terms of methods, our journals tend to prefer quantitative approaches without considering the dearth of Black employees inside a single company that would compromise traditional statistical models. We have all received critiques in our research that centers the experiences of Black people to generalize the findings to others, but find that work on majority White samples are taken as the norm. Harkening back to our previous discussion on Black fatigue from engaging in diversity work, we have also experienced non-Black colleagues wanting to formulate research questions in ways that see our lived experiences as an exciting new endeavor, even when unrealistic (e.g. one of the authors was asked to insert a White woman with an afro hairstyle into an experimental study about Black women's experiences with natural hair in the workplace). Identifying these aspects of the research process as reinforcing racism are the first step toward disrupting them. Below, we offer additional recommendations for scholars to practice antiracism.

Learn the history of systemic racism in organizations to inform current research. Although a segment of management scholars focus on history, taking an ahistorical approach to systemic racism limits the implications of our research. To exemplify studies continuously report the underrepresentation of Black leaders in organizations and offer quick fixes to improving perceptions of Black people as leaders. We acknowledge the significance of this work, but fear that the proposed problem (i.e. biases) will not usher in structural solutions, but suggest that companies continue to conduct ineffective unconscious bias training (Chang *et al.*, 2019). Learning *why* Black people are not represented in leadership unveils the reinforcement of structural discrimination beyond individually held biases. Specifically, organizations were allowed to discriminate against hiring Black employees until the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 and have engaged in diversity and inclusion practices that leave unequal structures intact since then (Liu, 2017). Further, not acknowledging the history of Black employees erases their contributions to management theory and practice, which forces us to rely on majority White samples to inform management approaches. Thankfully, two significant bodies of work have recently emerged that will be a great starting point for scholars to learn about the history of racism in organizations. First, Drs. Leon Prieto's and Simone Phipps' new book *African American Management History: Insights on Gaining a Cooperative Advantage*, chronicles the "golden age of Black business" which enhances our array of leadership and business philosophies. Second, Drs. Laura Morgan Roberts, Anthony Mayo and David Thomas edited volume, *Race, Work and Leadership: New Perspectives on the Black Experience*, compiles essays from present-day thought leaders in industry and academia to examine work through the lived experiences of Black people, opening new paths of inquiry and investigation for the broader management field. Using history as our teacher will enable us to move beyond individual solutions toward enacting systemic change.

Consider how the framing of research questions reinforces racism. As diversity and inclusion scholars, we need to also critically examine how the research questions we pursue can undermine efforts to truly make changes in organizations. Asking why Black people and other people of color are treated differently at work, for instance, has an unstated assumption that the experiences of White people are normal and expected (Bergman, 2019) without questioning why White people enjoy unearned privileges that others do not receive. Our field also overly relies on the business case to justify diversity programs and initiatives while ignoring and undermining the moral and legal approaches to dismantling discrimination and racism within organizations (Wrench, 2007). Research on whether diversity produces superior performance is inconclusive (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004) and does not change existing organizational systems that reproduce racism. As pointedly highlighted by Roberts (2020), the "business case for diversity is inadequate for equipping leaders to make difficult moral decisions like pledging their support and commitment to antiracist initiatives that may alienate some consumers. The business case tends to underestimate these and other costs of advancing justice and equity." If we want our work to truly change (vs maintain) systemic racism, we must consider how our approach to research perpetuates these issues.

5. Conclusion

Four years after we desired for our experience of collective racial trauma to be seen and validated, we now boldly call for organizations and scholars to demonstrate their valuing of Black lives. We emphasize the need for organizations to develop antiracism resources to counter the persistent force of racism. Specifically, this racial zeitgeist offers an opportunity for employees and leaders in organizations to: (1) proactively seek long-term, self-led education on racism, (2) embrace discomfort in acknowledging racist mistakes and (3) directly identify and change structures that maintain White supremacy. In addition, we urge scholars

to go beyond including “race” “racism” or “antiracism” in theoretical models or variable lists and enact antiracism resourcing by: (1) identifying racist research practices, (2) engaging in the scholarly pursuit of understanding racism and (3) countering the common practice of norming Whiteness in research question framing, methodological decisions and presented research implications. Just as racism is dynamic and changes in form across time (Hebl *et al.*, 2019), so too must our understanding of Black individuals’ experiences and practices countering anti-Black racism. We encourage those who seek to be antiracist to remember that this is not an earned identity or label (Kendi, 2020), but a consistent practice demonstrated through earnest action. It is our hope that scholars and practitioners alike will use their power and privilege to dismantle discriminatory systems, never again passively returning to “racism as usual.”

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