



WE HUMANS

Why saying “I don’t see race at all” just makes racism worse

Mar 3, 2021 / Heather McGhee



Anson Chan

When I was growing up in the 1980s, we were taught that the way to be a good person was to swear that race didn’t matter, at least not anymore.

We had all learned the lessons of the civil rights movement — that everybody is equal, and according to the morals of the sitcoms we watched after school (*Diff’rent Strokes*, *Webster*, *Saved by the Bell*), what was racist was pretending that people were any different from one another. Furthermore, the most un-racist people didn’t even see race at all; they were color blind.

We now know that color blindness is a form of racial denial that took one of the aspirations of the civil rights movement — that individuals would one day “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character” — and stripped it from any consideration of power, hierarchy or structure. The moral logic and social appeal of color blindness is clear, and many well-meaning people have embraced it. But when it’s put into practice in a still-racist world, the result is more racism.

The sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of the groundbreaking book *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, describes how once we stop seeing racism as a factor and treat equality as a reality rather than an aspiration, our minds naturally seek other explanations for the disparities all around us.

In a way, color blindness makes the civil rights movement a victim of its own success: Legal segregation is over, so now it must be up to people of color to finish the work themselves. As Bonilla-Silva puts it, if racism is no longer actively limiting the lives of people of color, then their failure to achieve parity with whites in wealth, education, employment, and other areas must mean there is something wrong with them, not with the social systems that somehow always benefit white people the most.

Social scientists look to this question — whether you believe that racism is to blame for disparities or that Black people just need to work harder — to help them determine what they call racial resentment. And racial resentment, in turn, is a predictor of opposition to policies that would improve the economic security of millions.

Instead of being blind to race, color blindness makes people blind to racism, unwilling to acknowledge where its effects have shaped opportunity or to use race-conscious solutions to address it. Denial that racism still exists; denial that, even if it does exist, it's to blame for the situation at hand; denial that the problem is as bad as people of color say it is — these denials are the easy outs that the dominant white narrative offers to people. Wellesley College professor Jennifer Chudy's research finds that only one in five white Americans consistently expresses high levels of sympathy about anti-Black discrimination.

Color blindness has become a powerful weapon against progress for people of color, but as a denial mindset, it doesn't do white people any favors, either. A person who avoids the realities of racism doesn't build the crucial muscles for navigating cross-cultural tensions or recovering with grace from missteps. That person is less likely to listen deeply to unexpected ideas expressed by people from other cultures or to do the research on her own to learn about her blind spots.

When that person then faces the inevitable uncomfortable racial reality — an offended coworker, a presentation about racial disparity at a PTA meeting, her inadvertent use of a stereotype — she's caught flatfooted. Denial leaves people ill-prepared to function or thrive in a diverse society. It makes people less effective at collaborating with colleagues, coaching kids' sports teams, advocating for their neighborhoods, even chatting with acquaintances at social events. Nor is denial easy to sustain.

To uphold the illusion of effortless white advantage actually requires unrelenting psychological exertion. Sociologist Dr. Jennifer Mueller explains that color blindness is a key step in "a process of knowing designed to produce not knowing surrounding white privilege, culpability and structural white supremacy."

But it was a white poet, novelist and farmer named Wendell Berry whose words brought home to me most poignantly the moral consequences of denial. In August 2017, I traveled to Northern Kentucky to meet with a multiracial grassroots organization called Kentuckians for the Commonwealth.

After a day of workshops, one of the members gave me a dog-eared copy of a book by Berry, a local hero who had grown up in rural Kentucky during the Jim Crow era. The book was called *The Hidden Wound* — Berry wrote it in 1968, in the midst of widespread protest and unrest — and that night in my hotel room, I read it from cover to cover.

By denying the reality of racism and their own role in it, Berry explained, white Americans have denied themselves critical self-knowledge and created a prettified and falsified version of American history for themselves to believe in, one built on the "wishful insinuation that we have done no harm." Of course, he understood the impulse of white people — himself included — to protect themselves from "the anguish implicit in their racism."

A few years before Berry published *The Hidden Wound*, James Baldwin, as keen an observer of human behavior as there's ever been, wrote his own account of what happens when white people open their eyes to racism.

"What they see is a disastrous, continuing, present condition which menaces them, and for which they bear an inescapable responsibility. But since, in the main, they seem to lack the energy to change this condition, they would rather not be reminded of it." Baldwin went on to observe that white Americans "are dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed

themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence.”

Wendell Berry calls this suffering “the hidden wound.” He counsels that when “you begin to awaken to the realities of what you know, you are subject to staggering recognitions of your complicity in history and in the events of your own life.” Of this wound — this psychic and emotional damage that racism does to white people — he writes, “I have borne it all my life . . . always with the most delicate consideration for the pain I would feel if I were somehow forced to acknowledge it.”

As I closed Berry’s book in that Kentucky hotel room, I thought about what it must be like to be part of the dominant group in an unfair “meritocracy” that denies its oppressions and pathologizes the oppressed.

“I think white folks are terribly invested in our own innocence,” says the scholar Catherine Orr. The belief that the United States is a meritocracy, in which anyone can succeed if only they try hard enough, also supports the notion that anyone who is financially successful is so because they’ve worked harder or are somehow more innately gifted than others.

Both ideas operate as a justification for maintaining our profoundly unjust economic system. Recent research from social psychologists at Yale and Northwestern finds that “Americans, on average, systematically overestimate the extent to which society has progressed toward racial economic equality, driven largely by overestimates of current racial equality.”

Wealthy white Americans, they find, have the most unrealistic assessment of how much progress the United States has made in terms of economic equality (and thus how fair the competition has been that they seem to have won). In a 2019 public opinion survey, majorities of both Black and white people said that being Black makes it more difficult to get ahead in America. Yet only 56 percent of white respondents believed the corollary — that being white helps you get ahead.

And of those who recognized the obstacles Black people face in terms of economic mobility, Black respondents attributed this to systemic discrimination, such as having less access to good schools and high-paying jobs. White people, on the other hand, were more likely to blame problems such as the lack of good role models and family instability — pathologies, in other words, that ultimately lay blame at the feet of Black people themselves.

Morally defending your position in a racially unequal society requires the fierce protection of your self-image as a person who earns everything you receive. From the tradition that trade unions make a place for members’ sons and legacy admissions at colleges to college students who can choose career-building but unpaid or low-paying internships because families can support them and employers who seek “a good fit” by hiring younger versions of themselves, the deck is stacked on behalf of white people in ways that are so pervasive we rarely notice them.

Within this context, many white people both resent affirmative action and imagine that it is vastly more widespread than it really is. The share of Black and brown students at selective colleges has actually declined over 35 years despite stated affirmative action policies, and the overwhelmingly white categories of children of alumni, faculty, donors or athletes made up 43 percent, for example, of students admitted to Harvard from 2010 to 2015.

Meanwhile, according to a 2016 study by Harvard Business School professor Katherine DeCelles, Black job applicants who removed any indications of their race from their résumés were significantly more likely to advance to an interview. Many other studies bear out similar findings, including an economic research paper that traced improved job prospects to whether applicants had names like “Greg” or “Emily” as opposed to “Lakisha” or “Jamal,”

and a sociological study in New York City that found that “Black applicants were half as likely as equally qualified whites to receive a callback or job offer.”

Still, the idea that people of color are taking jobs from white people is another zero-sum belief that lingers on from era to era. As Ronald, a middle-aged white man from Buffalo, New York, told the [Whiteness Project](#), “I think affirmative action was nice. It had its time, but I think that time is over with. Are we going to keep this up another one hundred fifty years? ‘Oh, we gotta have so many Asians in the fire department, we gotta have so many Blacks in the fire department.’ . . . The white guys will never have a chance to be a fireman or a cop anymore.” Although using such numerical quotas to achieve affirmative action in employment was outlawed in 1978 by the Supreme Court, Ronald’s grievance is evergreen, as is his certainty that white guys getting all the public service jobs was the natural order of things, not its own form of white affirmative action.

Excerpted from the new book [The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together](#) by Heather McGhee. Copyright © 2021 by Heather McGhee. Reprinted by arrangement with One World, an imprint of Random House, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

Watch her TEDWomen Talk now:

Heather C. McGhee
Racism has a cost for everyone

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather McGhee is an expert in economic and social policy. The former president of the inequality-focused think tank Demos, she has drafted legislation, testified before Congress and contributed regularly to news shows including NBC’s Meet the Press. She chairs the board of Color of Change, the nation’s largest online racial justice organization.

blog book excerpt education heather mcghee race race in America racial justice racism society and culture