

Claims of “Post-Racial” Society and Other Denials of Racism May Reflect Ignorance of History

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Young white supremacists in Chicago (below) line the streets to harass civil rights demonstrators

New research suggests that commonly observed differences in how groups perceive racism may be explained by ignorance about — and even denial of — the extent of racism over the course of history.

The research, conducted by psychological scientists at the University of Kansas and Texas A&M University, indicates that African Americans had more accurate knowledge of historically documented racism compared to European Americans. This difference in historical knowledge partially accounted for group differences in perceptions of racism, both at a systemic and an incident-specific level.

“Survey research consistently documents that, relative to White Americans, people from historically oppressed racial and ethnic minority groups tend to report less satisfaction with race relations, see social inequality as a greater problem, and see more racism in incidents, such as legislation targeting undocumented immigrants and ‘stand your ground’ laws,” say the researchers.

The authors note that these perceptions of racism are often treated as exaggerated or delusional. But theory and research from cultural psychology suggest that differences in how people perceive racism

may arise because individuals from minority groups are actually attuned to knowledge that individuals from the majority group lack. Individuals from the majority group may deny racism in the context of current events because they are ignorant about documented racism from the past.

To assess whether individuals from minority groups might be more attuned to the reality of racism, the researchers adopted methods from work in *signal detection theory*. Their research is reported in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

College students — 199 European American students and 74 African American students — completed a “Black history” test in which they had to judge whether statements about past incidences of racism were true or false. Some statements discussed well-documented incidents that experts agree are true, representing the factual *signal*. Other statements concerned incidents that were plausible but fabricated, representing the fictional *noise*.

The students also completed measures that assessed their self-esteem in relation to their racial identity and their perceptions of both systemic racism and isolated incidents of racism.

As the researchers predicted, historical knowledge was a positive predictor of racism perception for both African Americans and European Americans.

However, as a group, African Americans were more accurate in identifying historically true events. Compared to European American participants, they identified more factual, but not false, events as true. Further analyses indicate that greater knowledge of historically documented racism may help to explain, at least in part, the observed relationship between race and perceptions of racism.

The findings also suggest how social identity may influence perception of racism. African Americans who reported greater relevance of racial identity perceived more racism, while European Americans who reported greater relevance of racial identity perceived *less* racism. These associations were stronger for perceptions of systemic racism than for perceptions of racism in isolated incidents.

Together, these findings are consistent with the hypothesis that perceptions of racism are influenced by the relevance of one’s racial identity. Individuals in the majority group may be less likely to perceive systemic racism because it presents a greater challenge to a mainstream worldview.

Ultimately, this research underscores the importance of historical knowledge — and activities, like Black History Month, that highlight marginalized forms of historical knowledge — for understanding current events.

“Although popular and scientific understandings tend to portray ignorance as a lack of knowledge, this work emphasizes that ignorance itself is a form of knowledge that makes it possible to ignore or remain unaware of things that might otherwise be obvious,” say the researchers.

The researchers note that their findings are echoed in the lyrics to a song from the late Bob Marley: “If you know your history/then you will know where you’re comin’ from/and you wouldn’t have to ask me/who the heck do I think I am.”

The work was part of dissertation research that Jessica Nelson conducted with Glenn Adams at the University of Kansas. Their collaborator and co-author on the work is Phia Salter of Texas A&M University.