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Pushing Back Against Racism and Xenophobia on Campuses

MarYam Hamedani, Hazel Rose Markus and Paula Moya highlight five ways college educators can have more effective conversations about race.

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In our well-intentioned rush to make education both possible and more humane during these chaotic times, we cannot afford to let our commitments to diversity, equity and inclusion slip. Fifty years of research in the humanities and social sciences reveals that race is central to understanding human behavior in the United States and throughout the world. It continues to be one of the most significant issues of our time.

Race both shapes individual experience and organizes communities and societies. It is a source of bias, prejudice, discrimination and oppression even as it can also be a source of identity, motivation and pride. If the goal is educating and equipping students to live and work in our current diverse and divided society, understanding racial dynamics is a key component of a college education.

Consider the current COVID-19 outbreak. As is often the case during times of crisis, racism and xenophobia are front and center. From President Trump's initial insistence on calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus," to the rise in verbal and physical attacks against Asian Americans, to the disproportionate impact (https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2020/04/02/825730141/the-coronavirus-doesnt-discriminate-but-u-s-health-care-showing-familiar-biases) of a racially biased medical system on the survival rates of people of color, the importance of race in society and in daily life has never been clearer. While the virus does not discriminate on the basis of race, race nevertheless affects who is likely to receive treatment, who is likely to recover first and who will suffer the most.

In today's climate, race is on students' minds, and they want to talk about it. Even so, many students and professors are not comfortable discussing race or equipped to have effective conversations about it. People show up to conversations about race with different histories, opinions, feelings, misconceptions and knowledge. Talking about race exposes our vulnerabilities and blind spots: students fear being misjudged or misunderstood by their peers or their instructor while professors worry about getting called out on social media or in teaching evaluations for making mistakes. Students and professors of color also often take the brunt of the emotional labor that these conversations evoke. These experiences frequently reproduce unequal power dynamics in the university, such that those with the most privilege in a room benefit the most. Finding common ground or a shared language to communicate can sometimes feel impossible.

Done right, however, conversations about race can be effective and even empowering. To accomplish that, we need to deal with a major stumbling block: people often show up to conversations about race with different and even inaccurate understandings of what race is and what racism means. We propose that by developing a shared understanding of race as actions that *people do*, rather than a thing that *people are*, educators can facilitate more effective learning experiences and conversations. Talking about race as actions that people do

People often think that race is a *thing* (https://wwnorton.com/books/Doing-Race/) or an essential characteristic that people have or are. The pernicious "logic" of race as a fundamental aspect of a person's being has a deep history in the United States and has undermined race relations since the nation's founding.

Here's how it works. Race becomes racism when people -- sometimes inadvertently, sometimes not -- start referring to another group in ways that portray them as inherently deficient, inferior or lesser. Next comes the inference that "those people" are lesser because their biological or cultural makeup -- their ancestry, DNA or blood -- is fundamentally different and cannot be changed. The final inference is that these so-called essential characteristics are the reason why some groups are more moral, more intelligent or even more human than others, resulting in a hierarchy. This view of race as a "thing" then fuels institutions, laws and policies that can be used to justify the current and past oppression of so-called inferior groups. In the U.S., slavery, Jim Crow laws, the Chinese Exclusion and Indian Removal Acts, Japanese internment, and Mexican repatriation are all outcomes of this way of thinking.

A large body of interdisciplinary research built up over decades, however, shows that race is better understood as a *doing* (https://wwnorton.com/books/Doing-Race/) : as actions that people do as they interact with one another and the institutions and practices of society. Racial differences and disparities are not caused by essential characteristics, either biological or cultural. Rather, racial differences arise because people who are situated differently in society have different kinds of experiences and social interactions with others and the world around them. Our differing experiences shape us into diverse kinds of people, with varying backgrounds, perspectives and lived experiences. People "do race" through their everyday actions and activities that are motivated by often unspoken but deeply felt assumptions about who counts, whom to trust, whom to care about, whom to include and why. This is how race is socially constructed.

Consider again COVID-19. Race is being done through how some people label the virus (as "Chinese"), how some people are treated (as in the 1,000 attacks (https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/what-anti-asian-attacks-say-about-american-culture-during-crisis) against Asian Americans) and by who gets blamed for the virus (people perceived to be Chinese (https://www.npr.org/2020/03/27/822383360/asian-americans-are-blamed-by-some-for-covid-19-outbreak) or Asian). Despite being socially constructed, race is real and impacts people's lived experiences. Even President Trump, who at one point defended calling COVID-19 the "Chinese virus," recently clarified in public comments (https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/03/23/coronavirus-latest-news/) and on Twitter (https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/1242202290393677829) that Asian Americans should not be blamed or mistreated.

Latinx people in San Francisco (https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/article/Bay-Area-Latinos-hit-hardest-by-coronavirus-15252632.php) and Navajo people in New Mexico (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/coronavirus-navajo-nation-crisis/2020/05/11/b2a35c4e-91fe-11ea-a0bc-4e9ad4866d21_story.html) are dying at much higher rates than their population numbers warrant. This has nothing to do with their "essential" characteristics. The disparity arises from the experiences and treatment they share: less access to quality health care, wealth and resources and higher rates of bias and discrimination.

Our forebears must be held accountable for making race as it is today -- for having done race in so many ways that created and promoted harmful differences among groups of people. We, however, are responsible for what we do today to either maintain it or remake it. Through our actions, we have the power to do race differently and "undo racism."

Along with our colleagues at Stanford University's Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, we have created a multimedia, evidence-based tool kit called RaceWorks (https://ccsre.stanford.edu/raceworks), turning scholarship into action to foster greater racial literacy. We believe that these five key components are key to helping students and professors effectively engage issues of race in conversation and in the classroom.

Five Ways to Cultivate Racial Literacy

Use the language of "doing." Race is not a biological or cultural essence, so avoid referring to race in any way that portrays it as a thing that people have or are. In conversations, and in learning experiences about race, use the idea of race as a doing as a starting point to create common ground and dispel misunderstandings. Reflect on what people involved in the conversation think race is, ask why and how they know that. Then compare and contrast answers that cast race as a "thing" versus race as a "doing." So, if someone says "Chinese people" or "Muslim people" or even "my people" are a certain way, follow up by unpacking where people think these so-called differences come from and why. Draw attention to the fact that answers that construct race as an essential characteristic ignore the way all people either do race -- or undo racism -- through their actions, their relationships with others and their ideas about others.

The idea that race is not a biological or cultural essence is difficult for many people to understand for the simple reason that most are used to thinking of it that way. When you teach about race, make sure to draw the contrast between ancestry (the genetic inheritance passed down from biological parents to their biological child through the process of human reproduction) and race (a complex system of ideas and practices regarding how some visible characteristics of human bodies such as skin color, facial features and hair texture relate to people's

Learn to perceive how race and racism operate in society. Race operates across different levels of society: the *individual* level (people's biases, stereotypes, feelings and attitudes); the *interactional* level (interactions with other people like family, friends, teachers, police officers and with products like social media, TV, film, music and advertisements); the *institutional* level (schools, law enforcement agencies, financial institutions); and the *ideological* level (cultural and historical narratives about race and racial difference). These levels all influence one another in the doing of race; they can then be sites for intervention. Mapping how race is done in society empowers us to have an empirical, evidence-based perspective that can lead to scalable changes that mitigate racism.

For instance, some students might see testing police officers for bias, with the purpose of rooting out likely racists, as a viable policy solution (https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/3/7/14637626/implicit-association-test-racism) to reducing racial disparities in law enforcement. This perspective, however, locates racism in the hearts and minds of individual police officers and often stops there. A doing-race perspective considers how institutional practices and policies, like conducting discretionary traffic stops, contribute to disparate treatment by race and can result in systemic versus individual-level biases. It's important to look beyond individuals' biases, beliefs and attitudes to see how race is done (and reinforced, reproduced and reflected) throughout the social worlds that these individuals inhabit.

Know the history of race and understand how it influences the present. Doing race does not just involve what we are doing today. Racially significant incidents and discriminatory laws continue to shape our institutions and the cultural stories we tell about why some groups are supposedly superior or inferior to others. While ideas about race may change over time, they are rooted in an ongoing history and the actions of the past. When mapping how people do race, understanding the past is necessary for understanding the present.

Some students might not realize, for example, that political "dog whistles" of today can be more fully understood and critiqued when their historical context is taken into account. Calling Mexican migrants "illegal" is not only problematic today for the biases and stereotypes that the term calls up, but also because it neglects a complex history of settlement, movement and migration between Mexico and the U.S. over several centuries.

Acknowledge that all people "do race." All people "do race" as they interact with one another and the institutions and practices of society. Cultural narratives about race are in the air we breathe -- they are part of our individual experiences, thoughts and feelings, the stories we tell, the media and art we consume, and the social institutions we participate in. They powerfully shape how we see one another and the world around us. No one is exempt.

brown people can cause very different feelings and reactions depending on students' racial backgrounds and experiences. Professors and administrators addressing such issues need to consider how race is being done, both by themselves as well as others, when such topics come up.

No matter the intention, words carry certain connotations and historical weight. If you do not have the lived experience of people in those groups, you may be unaware of those connotations. Acknowledge that when we use problematic terms, we are doing race and that our actions have impacts about which we may be unaware and wish to avoid.

But also recognize that since people do race, they also have the power to "undo racism." While people are shaped by the societies they live in, they can also change or disrupt the norms, values, institutions, practices and policies that reinforce and reproduce racism. We have the power to change our world and undo racism.

By spotlighting how people do race, educators are also laying the foundation for how students can be empowered to undo racism. As historian Ibram Kendi asks in his bestselling book *How to Be an Antiracist* (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/oct/11/how-to-be-an-antiracist-by-ibram-x-kendi-review) , how can each and every one of us play a role in building an antiracist society? Through increasing racial literacy by learning how to perceive when, where and how race is done, students can be empowered to be change agents in building a more equal and inclusive world.

Talking and learning about race is hard, uncomfortable and threatening. But the classroom -- physical or virtual -- should be a brave space for encouraging students and professors alike to lean into that discomfort while, at the same time, leaving room to recognize that people's fear and anxiety can be triggered by different factors and experiences. Really caring about race and fighting against racism means that we need to take responsibility, recognize the history that we all share and perpetuate, and learn how to talk about it.

Bio

MarYam Hamedani (https://sparq.stanford.edu/who-we-are/our-team) is managing director and senior research scientist at Stanford SPARQ (https://sparq.stanford.edu/) and director of the RaceWorks project (https://ccsre.stanford.edu/raceworks) , developed in collaboration with Stanford's Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity (https://ccsre.stanford.edu/) . Hazel Rose Markus (http://web.stanford.edu/~hazelm/) is professor of psychology at Stanford University, faculty co-director of Stanford SPARQ (https://sparq.stanford.edu/) and co-editor of Doing Race: 21 Essays for the 21st Century (https://wwnorton.com/books/Doing-Race/) . Her research is featured in RaceWorks

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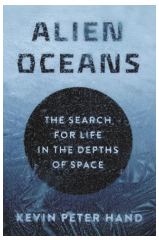

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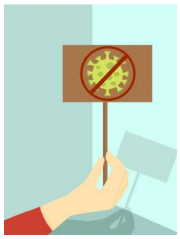

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