NEGOTIATING RACISM IN THE ACADEMY

Additional findings of the Commission on Race and Racism in Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association

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Introduction
Racism unarguably remains a key feature of academic institutions and is a problem for black faculty in all ranks. I hasten to note at this point that virtually all of what I discuss is relevant for all faculty of color, not just African Americans, though I do not mention explicitly faculty of other groups of color in all cases. I must also specify that with racism, I am referring to white-supremacist racism, the only kind meriting attention since it is the only kind with power behind it. Racism, thus, should not be confused with prejudice, which may or may not tie into dominance hierarchies, causing wealth and power to flow primarily to whites, with white elites receiving the lion’s share.

I will start by making some basic observations about racism, augmented and illustrated with observations about academe. Second, I will zero in on racism in academe, by providing more concentrated practical advice. I do not attempt to provide a mini-demonology of white-supremacist ills that the professor of color may encounter and to provide a medicine chest of remedies. Such an approach, like the typical medicine chest, might end up being a misbegotten paean to mere symptomology, not pointing clearly to underlying principles of prevention and wellness. Prevention and wellness, in an environment of racist attacks, rest on a two-pronged approach involving, first, the maintenance of psychological wellness and, second, a willingness and readiness to eliminate the disease, i.e., to grieve, sue, or take whatever actions are required. The second “prong” is highly important for the first. Finally, I will make a few concluding remarks.
Racism and Racism in Academe

It cannot be repeated enough that racism is institutionalized, i.e., structured into all U.S. institutions. It is everywhere. If we think of society as a huge machine with various basic settings for the many parts of the machine, an institutionally racist society is one with all the buttons set in the “on” position for ‘racism.’ Institutionalized racism can exist without whites who are consciously racist, though certainly not all have to be racist. Institutionalized racism is always proceeding full speed ahead because policies, laws, habits, and traditions have been set in such a way that leaves people of color profoundly disadvantaged. This disadvantage applies statistically to the group as a whole, not to every single individual. Thus, we find what I have termed “isolates” (Spears 1999c), individuals, often celebrities, who have amassed great wealth and are often proffered up to support the claim that the main hindrance to black progress is black culture. Oprah Winfrey and Bill Cosby are examples. I have argued that once a black person in the U.S. gains significant skills and/or a sound education, the field of opportunity has indeed changed as compared to sixty years ago. The key point is that the majority of U.S. blacks do not have access to such an education and skills. Social ills and a public education system generally in shambles greatly inhibit such access.¹

The institutionalized nature of racism recommends to us that we assume its presence everywhere and act to detect it so that we may act against it. We should look behind actions and words to get their shades of meaning and to determine how best to start documenting for action against any racist practice that becomes career diminishing or threatening. Most people want to be optimistic, but most people want more to be successful. In inescapably racist environments, the realistic person of color will be optimistic (hoping for the best) and realistic (preparing for the worst). Documentation, compiled quietly, is the black academic’s best miracle worker. What is more, documentation and the corrections it makes possible helps the institution to better itself, moving itself closer to the ideal of the great, good, and equitable college or university.

We must also think of racism as statecraft:

In a mature, racialized state, the U.S., for example, racism has become the pillar of statecraft, as it pertains to the nation-state and its empire. It must be made explicit that where racism is institutionalized, it is statecraft (Spears 2009: 93, 94).

Stated differently, racism is an essential feature of statecraft, defined as the pursuit by ruling elites of their interests, with interests being defined as the promotion and maintenance of power and wealth. In the capitalist state, power is wealth, and vice-versa; one implies the other. In this regard, we have but to think of bought politicians throughout the American political landscape, perpetually fundraising in order to finance their participation in largely sham electoral campaigns, prominently featuring voter disenfranchisement and vote-tally fraud (e.g., the Bush-Gore presidential election of 2000 and the Bush-Kerry one of 2004)—all of this since the “republic’s” beginnings.

¹ For introductions to the relevant issues, see Bonilla-Silva 2010, Desmond and Emirbayer 2010, Gallagher 2009, and Spears 1999a.
White supremacist racism is the only kind worth talking about, since whites hold the overwhelming balance of power, even when the head position in an institution is filled by a person of color or specifically a black person. Virtually all U.S. institutions, as the federal government itself, now headed by President Obama, have checks and balances structured into them, such that even a black head is not free to impose his/her will. Persons such as Obama represent lightly colorized white supremacist racism, as they lead and are led from their positions of very real but not structurally transformative power.

The institutionalized, and thus all-pervasive, nature of racism is of prime importance since it produces some social contexts, the academy is one, where racism cannot be easily pinpointed or detected as it occurs. Often, for example, it is the statistical analysis of behaviors and their effects on subjects that allows one to discern the workings of racism. Thus, for example, even profoundly racist patterns in tenure and promotion decisions may go undetected because it appears that institution-wide guidelines for career advancement are being followed.

Also, we must think of tenure and promotion up the faculty ranks as the promotion and maintenance of power/wealth in principally white hands. Racist practices in this regard are in effect a wealth distribution mechanism via the salaries that are paid. Racist practices in career advancement steer more income to whites and simultaneously more power also since, to take one example, full professor status is often an informal requirement for serving as a department or personnel committee chair, or as dean, provost, vice-president, etc. Those holding these positions have the power to greatly influence income-affecting decisions.

Any précis of racism requires mentioning the distinction between what I term “traditional racism” and “neoracism.” Racist practices falling under the former are justified by their beneficiaries in terms of pseudo-scientific biological differences among hierarchized races and the cultural difference they are asserted to produce, while the latter leans on posited cultural deficits of lower-hierarchy racial groups, in pushing pseudo-scientific claims of biological inferiority into the background—but not off the stage. Traditional racism is more brutish, thus leaving no doubt in the minds of its victims as to whether it exists. Lynching and debt-peonage-sharecropping under the Reign of Terror (Jim Crow) come to mind in considering it as opposed to neoracism, which leaves confused, victimized people of color sometimes wondering whether or not racism of consequence actually still exists. Faculty of color in the professoriat can be susceptible to this delusion, confusing smiles, kind words, and overall friendly behavior with the absence of racist malice. Also, they may misinterpret instances of smiles, kind words, and friendly behavior as indicators of a pattern of such, when what they have actually witnessed is only a holiday from a general project of white-supremacy maintenance.

One of the principal features of neoracism is the production of ahistorical narratives that promote the confusion of neoracism with trivial racism. Thus, we read daily in the popular
press discussions of post-racial blacks and social landscapes devoid of “angry” blacks, whose formative years were shaped principally by Reign of Terror (Jim Crow) segregation and the Civil Rights Movement. Confused post-racialists, in the academy and elsewhere, have mostly grown up with the absence of stark racial bigotry.

A critical point that we must not forget is that the U.S.’s stark racism of discrete, immutable racial categories is in transition toward a clinal racist system based on closeness to whiteness. Throughout U.S. history, closeness to whiteness has always conferred rewards, but at present we are witnessing the centralization of this factor in the workings of the U.S. racial regime in formation (Spear 1999, Bonilla-Silva 2010). We can refer to such a system, in formation, as colorist, in which power/wealth flows more freely depending on an individual’s closeness to whiteness with regard to skin tone, hair texture, and other physical features conscripted for our society’s racial formation. Colorism is merely discrete-racial-category racism with more levers and pulleys allowing partial entree to the rewards of whiteness in relation (largely) to brownness and yellowness. Since black faculty are inclined not to think deeply about colorism, due largely no doubt to the color “ranking” (brown or yellow) of most of them, they typically fail to take note of the benefits they receive in this regard. Dark-skinned, “far from white” professors should be aware of the colorist workings of the system, for in essence their careers require them to produce counterweights to the stigmata of nonwhiteness and also distance from whiteness. Any informal skin-tone tally at meetings with a significant number of black faculty (or faculty of color) will confirm the colorist workings of the U.S. racial system. This observation should not be taken as cause for intra-black blaming and divisiveness—indeed, we black folks have inherited these colorist troubles and were not involved in their institutionalization. Instead, it should be taken as a call for increased realism vis-à-vis this issue, racism cum colorism.

Racist behaviors are all of a piece, whether involving leery looks in elevators or lynching, with char-roasted, often asset-dispossessed,² hanging bodies, sexually mutilated, and dismembered, and displayed at festivals for the celebration and maintenance of white supremacy through bonding rituals of brutality.

The enactment and perpetuation of white supremacy takes many forms. Behaviors buttressing racism take physical and mental shapes. Thus, the put-downs, insults, and marginalizations that we face daily are all part of the ritualizing, symbolizing, and physical enforcing of racism. Even microaggressions play key roles in reinforcing racism and keeping people of color in their “place.” Academe is not innocent of microaggressions (Chew 2008), the term that has been used by Assistant Professor of African American Studies and Sociology Ruby Mendenhall of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC). (She was chosen to lead a campus study of microaggression by UIUC’s Center on Democracy in a Multiracial Society.) The term refers to subtle insults (and devaluations, which are insults, I would add), spoken or otherwise communicated,

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². Lynchings not infrequently involved the confiscation of the assets of those lynched. The confiscation of Black assets, sometimes termed white-capping by historians, did not always involve lynchings, however. Rather than drawing on academic sources here, I draw on my own personal sources: my family history.
directed toward people of color, often automatically or unself-consciously. Examples include repeating, without attribution, a black faculty member’s remarks in a meeting, not citing important work of black scholars in academic work (even though ideas from that work are appropriated), and communicating great surprise at modest accomplishments of black faculty (e.g., publishing an article in a leading journal, when the black faculty member does so regularly).

Additionally, when we speak of the maintenance of racism, we must note the two primary means for doing so: physical force and ideology. Coercion takes many forms, from containing the rebellious outbursts of rioting in African American communities, notably during the Civil Rights Movement, to the various forms of policing directed against people of color, resulting in the U.S. having the highest incarceration rate worldwide. Having lived in predominantly African American, multi-class communities most of my life, I know that this policing has little to do with helping black populations; it is, rather, an effort that maintains spaces3 for drug trafficking and other profitable cancers in addition to the entrapment, primarily of young black males, to feed the profitable prison industry (Spears 1999b; Buck 1999).

The second buttress of racism is ideology in the critical sense that references a group of ideas devised to promote and maintain the vested interests of a ruling elite. (We may speak of ideologies of other groups in the social hierarchy, but the term typically references the ideology of elites.) An ideology, in this case that of white supremacy, is a construct that is typically not directly perceivable. It must be made visible, so to speak, through the analysis of actions, images, and words, both those spoken and unspoken. Its fundamental purpose is to distort reality—i.e., its basic meanings and trends—in re-presenting reality in fractured, partial, misleading, and confusing ways. Academe, as other institutions, has its own version of white supremacist ideology. If we think of ideology as composed partly of directives, one of them in academe is (i.e., at research universities) “publish or perish.” As many, perhaps most, such rules or guidelines, this applies consistently to people of color only. Thus, black professors hardly ever get tenure or advance to full professor without significant publications, and many whites do not either. However, in every research university department I know of, there are whites who have worked around the rule but precious few, if any, blacks. I know of none. For example, everyone in one department at one highly prestigious university knew that a white professor was indeed a full professor, but had not published anything to speak of. He was brilliant, all agreed, but had a “writer’s block.” I invite the reader to imagine, a black full professor at a Stanford or University of Michigan who has advanced to the top of the scale without publications worth mentioning, but excused because of sympathy for his writer’s block. (Let me stress that I am not making this up. As is often the case, these “rule-breakers” are blond and blue-eyed, suggesting an intraracial colorism among whites.) The crucially important point that underlies this observation is that rules are mostly for subaltern populations. Exceptions to the rules are

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3. After moving into Harlem, I often called politicians’ offices in order to get their staffs to do something about the utterly unhampered drug trade. They would often admit in so many words that nothing could be done; that it was condoned by powers much higher than they. Once, during a call to the local precinct to get crack users and dealers away from my front door, the officer speaking said to me, “What do you expect me to do about it?” Although anyone in any neighborhood could point to drug houses (and dealers), New York’s finest undercover policemen could find only one or two every few years, judging from the presence of principals on the street. Residents had every reason to believe that the “uncovered” drug dealers had not been paying off police and other officials. This view is corroborated by the many news stories in the New York Times during the 1990s, to take one period. As a sample, see “Corruption in the ‘Dirty 30’,” October 1, 1994, http://www.nytimes.com/1994/10/01/opinion/corruption-in-the-dirty-30.html?scp=2&sq=%22Dirty+30%22&st=nyt, accessed 8-3-2010.
normally reserved for members of the dominant group.

**Negotiating Racism in Academe**

One telling set of statistics, which appears yearly in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, indicates the thinning out of faculty of color as we ascend the professorial ranks. At my own institution, I am repeatedly surprised to learn of faculty who have been at the institution for several decades, some even longer than I have, but who have not advanced to full professorship. This is true despite there being no obvious disparities between the research and publications (the real criteria) of the professors of color and those of their white (primarily male) colleagues who have been promoted to full professor. (In my experience, older white women do not fare appreciably better than male faculty of color.)

One of the tasks that I have taken on over the last decade or so, having been for many years a member of tenure and promotion committees, is to encourage these professors of color to put in their candidacy for promotion to full professor. Fortunately, they have all been successful, but their success does not mask the larger problem. Too often, black (non-Latino) and Latino faculty especially fail to pursue promotion as aggressively as they should. No doubt this is due both to their not receiving adequate encouragement, if any, and their not knowing fully what is required for promotion (and tenure), given that the requirements are not quantified. A knowledge of precedents is key, but committees processing candidates for promotion are usually all white, and the networks of professors of color do not function to channel to them critical information on career advancement.

More disheartening than these problems with tenure and promotion is that faculty members of color who have been helped in their career advancement by more senior faculty members of color typically turn around and put obstacles in the way of faculty members of color coming along behind them. It would seem that among some faculty members of color there is a frequent warped desire to keep the ranks at the top from “losing prestige” due to the entry of too many faculty of color. (See more on internalized oppression below.)

As we all know from our familiarity with theories of institutional racism, most African American faculty (to focus on one group of color) are primarily vulnerable to the general way in which the institution operates informally and more specifically to effect their exclusion from informal channels of communication. Lamentably, this problem appears not to be any less pronounced for senior faculty than junior ones.

Related to the problem of exclusion is what I would label internalized oppression, which causes black faculty not to develop the sense of entitlement and equity that would cause them to be more aggressive in pursuing tenure and promotion. I have seen a number of cases where faculty of color do not put themselves up for promotion even though they have been told repeatedly that they are well positioned to do so. They fear
being voted down and do not take seriously the option of fighting negative decisions via grievances and perhaps lawsuits. I make this observation as an academic who has filed grievances to win tenure and every promotion (one awarded retroactively), with legal research done and potential lawyers identified. (Grievances, in my situation, are filed and managed by our faculty union; most, not all, public universities have a grievance process.) An observation that I make with great sadness, is that black faculty at my institution who have been in a position to provide me critical help with tenure and promotion have done so (one person) in only one case. This is another way in which internalized oppression works, instilling the fear that assisting another of one’s subordinated race/ethnic group will incur the wrath of white supremacist powers.

Indeed, it is no doubt fear in most cases that causes so many blacks and other faculty of color not to grieve and sue. Many want to get along and, as many have noted, not put themselves through the critical help with tenure and promotion have done so (one person) in only one case. This is another way in which internalized oppression works, instilling the fear that assisting another of one’s subordinated race/ethnic group will incur the wrath of white supremacist powers.

Of course, there exists another path to the top of the academic ladder: Degrading and blaming other blacks—or more specifically, African Americans, for their own misfortunes. This course is certainly taken ostentatiously by some black academics; and, I might add, this overall phenomenon deserves analytical attention.

Dealing with racism is a part of every African American’s, and nonwhite’s, job description, in a way that it is not part of whites’. For the nonwhite person not to consider it a part thereof is to leave her/himself open to the pains of unpreparedness. These pains abuse the psyche and, over time, eat away at one’s mental and physical health. I have made two points to many of my students of color, who are almost all stressed out about some racist incident that happened to them yesterday or twenty years ago: first, respond when the incident happens, even if it involves only saying something. This may sound trivial, but from listening to students and from my own experiences, I know that NOT responding during the occurrence has psychological costs that we do not know how to measure. If we do not know how to respond to these incidents—as the incident unfolds, we need to develop a repertoire of strategies, words and actions, rehearsed beforehand if necessary, to respond to incidents of racism.

For example, I have made a practice of responding to “microaggressions” (Chew 2008) as they unfold or immediately afterward. Several times in my early career, I would make comments in a meeting and get no response from my white
colleagues, only to have my comments recycled later by a white colleague (always male) with commendation and excitement. I started simply butting in right after the recycling of my comment, not waiting for recognition by the chair, saying, “Thanks [first name] for stressing the importance of my earlier comment; we really need to...” Some of those present get my point. Others do not. Most important, however, is that I have struck back and consequently do not replay the episode in my mind, fuming, for weeks afterward.

Second, and related, is that the best revenge is living well. Living well is being successful, as one defines success, and being happy, a state of mind that in no way implies complacency or unwillingness to continue the struggle. Struggle can in and of itself be a major component in happiness—which some may prefer to call contentment, satisfaction, or a sense of well being. Also worth mentioning is that living well, particularly in the sense of economic and employment wellbeing, provides you with the contentment-inducing pleasure of seeing racist whites (and others who have held you back throughout your life) “eat their hearts out” when they witness your success—in spite of them. The therapeutic and uplifting value of such contentment should not be underestimated. Sadly, it is often also “friends” and members of our own families who must “eat their hearts out,” after having started in our childhood, telling and otherwise communicating to us that we were unworthy, or that “black people can’t do that.”

In this connection, I will mention that most white colleagues I meet are straightforwardly or ever so slightly condescending unless perchance they already know me by name. They see in me perhaps, a black professor who has somehow gotten through “reverse racism” a job that a “better qualified” white person could have had. Even adjuncts (whom I have hired!) sometimes take this stance. One, in a fit, even stated as much, overly frustrated from being middle-aged with Ph.D. in hand but still without stable employment. (Try as I may, I have never been able to put a more positive interpretation on these scenarios.)

Once at a going away dinner for me after I had secured a new position, I confided to the very good friend sitting next to me that the new position did not come with tenure, but I had decided to take it because of the generous salary of a certain number of dollars—rather than going into the private sector, as I had previously planned. A white friend and colleague, whom I hold in the highest esteem, overheard and blurted out, “What! That’s more than I’m making!” He immediately apologized and conveyed his congratulations. Good friend, good liberal, champion of justice for people of color—in the final analysis, he was still white, and as 99.9% of such whites, expecting the people of color whose causes he championed to be below him on the various scales of achievement.

Such white liberals, I hasten to add, should by no means be vilified. They should be commended for the good that they do, even though they prefer to do it within their preferred scenario—helping people of color toward whom they feel superior.
Conclusion
Over the years, I have discovered that many of my wonderful black social science colleagues (and others of color, not to mention whites) have not grown up in the U.S. They do not, consequently, have the understanding of certain important contextual factors in looking at racism that are often required for putting current analyses on a firm foundation. To be sure, conditions in the U.S., with regard to race and racism, vary according to region and other factors (e.g., urban/rural location). In the final analysis, each black community’s experience has been unique, though there are certainly basic strands that run through all of their experiences.

What I am getting at here, however, is that the grand narrative, so to speak, of race relations in the U.S., which we most often find in textbooks and academic writing generally, does not capture the overall reality or prepare us for what we need to know, especially in practical terms. We must think about social realities as filtered through our own interests and requirements. This means we have to rethink often the social science that we are handed, the received paradigms, theories, methodologies, and conventional wisdom, which do not serve us well in elaborating strategies for survival and success within a racialized society. We need to turn the tools we were given in graduate school, at least partially, to practical concerns, which, as this book, may not advance our careers, but will have soul-nourishing, lasting effects for the sisters and brothers who come behind us.
References


