



Stand-Your-Ground is losing ground for racial minorities' health



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A paper in this issue analyzing the impact of Stand-Your-Ground laws revealed a disturbing pattern of racial bias. Individuals (i.e., defendants) in Florida were more likely to avoid charges if the victim was Black or Latino but not if the victim was white. Indeed, individuals are *nearly two times* more likely to be convicted in a case that involves White victims compared to those involving Black and Latino victims.

Those who study constitutional law know that the principal reason the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment fails to protect Blacks and Latinos is that it is based on an *intentional* model of discrimination. Those who study race/ethnicity in the social sciences know that if intentional bias is how we look for discrimination, we will rarely find it. X and Y's analysis is another moment for us to mark the limitation of thinking about racism and discrimination in intentional terms. This commentary addresses how racially biased laws and policies such as Stand-Your-Ground reflect broad-based contemporary racism with implications for racial health disparities. We conclude that there is a pressing need to develop a scientific research agenda that reflects the interdependent, dynamic and reciprocal nature of the individual and contextual factors that shape race and health across multiple pathways.

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1. Contemporary racism, American social norms and Stand-Your-Ground

Despite progress towards racial equality, racism remains a normative part of social, legal, and economic structures in the United States. During the era of Jim Crow, social norms encouraged people to express their prejudices out loud—to signal where they stood on the question of race. By the 1980s, expressed discrimination against Blacks was not only illegal, it ran afoul of broad public values—that is to say, our social norms. This shift in public values created a strong disincentive for people to openly express negative views about Blacks. In other words, people who harbor negative views about Blacks are much more likely to conceal those views than to articulate them publicly. Such contemporary forms of racism, termed symbolic racism, are often subtle and expressed in American values (e.g., individualism) (Sears and Henry, 2003).

Not only is racism deeply intertwined with American values, negative stereotypes of Blacks are commonplace in American culture. The BEAGLE (Bound Encoding of the Aggregate Language Environment) Project constructed a data base of about 10 million words from a sample of books, newspapers and other materials that is a representation of American culture and equivalent to what the average college-level student would read in his or her lifetime (Verhaeghen et al., 2011). Statistical analysis of the associative strength between pairs of words revealed the following order of the frequency of the pairing of the word black with these 10 words in American culture: poor, violent, religious, lazy, cheerful, dangerous, charming, merry, ignorant and musical. Thus, negative stereotypes of Blacks (violent, lazy, dangerous and unintelligent) likely reflect how often Americans have seen or heard these words paired with black over their lifetime.

Implicit bias offers another window into understanding how racism reflects social norms. Unlike explicit bias, which reflects people's attitudes and beliefs that they consciously endorse, implicit bias results from cognitive processes that operate at a level below conscious awareness and without intentional control (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). Today, the most widely used methods for assessing implicit bias are response latency tasks (reaction time) tasks. The Implicit Associations Test (IAT) is perhaps the most well-known response latency task (Banaji and Greenwald, 2013). The IAT gauges differences in how easy or difficult it is for people to associate individual exemplars of various social categories (whites vs.

blacks, rich vs. poor, gay vs. straight, and so on) with abstract words and categories that have evaluative implications (e.g., good vs. bad, pleasant vs. unpleasant). Most Americans, regardless of race, display a pro-white/anti-black bias on the Implicit Associations Test (IAT) (Greenwald et al., 2009) even in children as young as six years old (Greenwald et al., 2009). Moreover, we now understand that implicit bias can be shaped by structural forces such as mass media (e.g., television, print media, video games), interpersonal forces such as the number of ingroup and outgroups members in one's local environments, and micro-forces such as family socialization practices.

In short, implicit bias is also part and parcel of American social norms.

Using implicit methods, psychologists have repeatedly demonstrated a strong and persistent finding: blackness in the U.S. is linked to perceptions of crime and danger. In one of the oldest demonstrations of this link, psychologists showed people pictures of a white man with a razor threatening a black man on the subway (Allport and Postman, 1947). Later, people were simply asked to recall what they saw in the picture. People tended to mistakenly recall that *black man* wielding the razor against the *white man*. Decades of research using more sophisticated methods reveals that blackness leads people to evaluate (without intent) ambiguously assertive behavior as aggressive (Eberhardt et al., 2004), quickens the speed at which people decide to shoot someone holding a weapon (Correll et al., 2014), and increases the probability that someone would discharge a weapon at all (Correll et al., 2014).

Stand-Your-Ground laws state that an individual has “no duty to retreat” from any place one has a lawful right to be and may use any level of force, including lethal, if one reasonably believes one faces an imminent and immediate threat (Abuznaid et al., 2014). Forty-five states including Florida have adopted the “Castle Doctrine” stating that a person has no duty to retreat *in the home*. Twenty-two states have expanded the interpretation of the Castle Doctrine beyond the home to include anyplace a person should lawfully be.

Blacks are a threat or a perceived threat. Stand-Your-Ground laws authorize a person to protect and defend one's own life against threat or perceived threat. If contemporary racism manifests in broad swathes of American culture then perhaps it is not surprising that individuals using Stand-Your-Ground laws as a defense were more likely to avoid charges if the victim was Black or Latino. Indeed, racial bias seems like a biased but logical finding. Future research should be able to document more nuanced racial biases in Stand-Your-Ground laws as the content of cultural racism shifts (e.g., black women with masculine features are stereotyped as more dangerous) and the terrain in which racism manifests changes (e.g., from urban cities to more rural areas). To claim the finding is logical does not undermine its importance or the urgent need for more research. We merely suggest that Stand-Your-Ground laws, like any law, constitute and reflects the society in which it was conceived. In American society that reflection includes an unhealthy diet of discrimination and racism.

2. Contemporary racism undermines the health of racial minorities and all Americans

The burden of racism is a distinctive social exposure that shapes the health of racial minorities above and beyond socioeconomic factors (SES). The burden of health disparities incurs social and economic costs to all Americans. As we have documented at the outset of this commentary, scientific evidence indicates that discrimination, whether intentional, symbolic, or implicit, is pervasive. Institutional racism and personal experiences of discrimination are added pathogenic factors that affect the health

of minority group members in multiple ways (Williams and Mohammed, 2009; Lewis et al., 2015): discrimination can lead to reduced access to desirable goods and services; racism can trigger increased exposure to traditional stressors (e.g., legal challenges, unemployment and financial strain); and experiences of discrimination resulting from stereotypes and prejudice are an important psychosocial stressor that adversely affects physical and mental health. In our view, the findings with respect to racial bias and Stand-Your-Ground laws can be added to the multiplicity of stressors that operate via institutional racism and personal experiences of discrimination to adversely affect the health of racial minorities.

There is an urgent need to develop a scientific research agenda that targets institutional or cultural racism and the complex ways in which it manifests systematically throughout culture. Racism is a system in which there is reciprocal causality of disparities across domains, with a set of dynamically related components of subsystems working together (Reskin, 2012). Accordingly, disparities in one societal domain are not independent of those in other domains. Given these interlocking subsystems and the interdependence of racism across domains, Reskin (2012) indicates that the key to successfully eliminating racial disparities is an exogenous force that dismantles racism in every subsystem or acting on key leverage points in the system of racism, such as racial bias in the law. There is a need for complex conceptual and analytic models (such as complex systems computational modeling) that will capture the interdependent, dynamic and reciprocal nature of the individual and contextual factors that shape race and health across multiple pathways.

It is prudent to reflect on history in the United States when searching for needed interventions to address racism. A review of the effects of civil rights and related policies of the 1960s documented that these race-targeted policies improved health and reduced disparities in health (Williams and Mohammed, 2013). They narrowed the black-white economic gap and resulted in larger absolute and relative gains in life expectancy and declines in mortality for black males and females compared to whites from the mid to late 1960s to the late 1970s. In addition, reductions in black infant mortality and improved health for black women and their children born during this period has also been documented. The implications of these interventions are clear. Upstream changes in laws and policies that minimize racial bias have downstream consequences for public health (for review of needed interventions see Williams & Purdie-Vaughns, under review).

3. Conclusion

As this commentary goes to press, New York City police officers slammed famed retired African American tennis pro, James Blake to the ground and handcuffed him as he left his hotel in New York mistaking him for identity theft (Mueller, 2015). Although Blake was eventually released, assuredly fear and anxiety followed by embarrassment and outrage likely lead his biology to act in ways that will compromise his physical and mental health far into the future. For millions of viewers watching this incident on the nightly news, their future health could potentially be compromised in small but impactful ways. This singular incident is quite different from the systematic racial biases found in X and Y's article. Yet, the idea that race is a reliable proxy for threat and danger in the context of crime is a thread that ties these phenomena together. To the extent that a robust program of scientific research can develop effective interventions to reduce systematic and institutional forms of racism, we advance research on all forms of inequality that affect the health of our global society.

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