# **[Beyond Prejudice: The (Cultural) Psychology of Racism in Education by Glenn Adams](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/)**

If you did a survey of Americans and asked them about the extent of racism in American society, then you would likely find that White respondents perceive far less racism than do people from the “Other” ethnic/racial groups that European settlers have historically dominated. Alternatively stated, White folks are more likely than peoples they have historically dominated to believe that American society and its mainstream institutions are colorblind or race-neutral. What accounts for this difference?

For one thing, research suggests that White folks believe in the colorblind neutrality of American society because they are motivated to deny the extent of racism. The idea that American society and mainstream institutions harbor elements of racism is threatening to the American ideology of “liberty and justice for all” that students recite daily when pledging allegiance to the flag. Many White folks (including myself) would rather not think that the institutions from which we disproportionately benefit are racist, so we interpret ambiguous events in a way that allows us to avoid such troubling thoughts.

However, even if people could put aside identity motivations and consider evidence in unbiased fashion, some of the group difference in perception of racism would remain because the ideas and practices that inform mainstream American institutions—especially those, like the education system, that bear the strong influence of White sensibilities—are themselves biased. An important idea in this regard is what philosopher Charles Mills has referred to as “epistemologies of ignorance”.[[1]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftn1) Although we often think of ignorance as the absence of knowledge (and we imagine that the job of educators is to fill that absence), it may be more productive to think of ignorance as a kind of knowledge: specifically, ideas that promote inability to recognize things—like racism in U.S. society—that might otherwise be obvious.

**Historical Knowledge as a Tool for Ignorance (or Liberation)**

What are examples of knowledge that make possible the belief in the colorblind fairness of U.S. society? One broad category that Prof. Mills notes is understandings of history. In several investigations of the relationship between historical knowledge and awareness of racism, my collaborators and I have observed the following:

* **Knowledge environments vary across communities.** Official accounts of history in mainstream American institutions tend to provide a sanitized or white-washed story that downplays or obscures the legacy of racist violence in American society. In contrast, education materials associated with communities that have experienced domination (e.g., African Americans, Latin@s, Indigenous Peoples) tend to be more open about the reality of past racism.
* **Variation in knowledge environments is not accidental.** White Americans and people who are high in American identification dislike and “edit out” education materials that highlight the history of racist violence in American society.
* **Ignorance about past racism is associated with beliefs about the colorblind fairness of American society.** As a result of variation in exposure to different knowledge environments, ignorance about past racism is greater among White Americans than among racially dominated others, and this difference in knowledge/ignorance accounts for differences in beliefs about the colorblind neutrality of American society.
* **… and therefore with variation in support for social justice policies.** In turn, faith about the colorblind neutrality of American society promotes the sense that policies designed to counteract racist injustice are no longer necessary. [[2]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftn2)

Together, these studies reveal how the celebratory understandings of history that dominate mainstream American institutions promote ignorance about the racial violence that has defined American society.  These studies also suggest how forms of knowledge in marginalized communities admit greater recognition for the defining role of racist violence in American history, promote greater awareness of the potential for racism in the present, and thereby lead people to express stronger support for policies designed to promote racial justice.

**Beyond Prejudice: Dismantling Structures of Domination**

Another important idea that promotes beliefs about the colorblind fairness of American society concerns the definition of racism. Mainstream institutions typically portray racism in terms of a “prejudice problematic”:[[3]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftn3) that is, a matter of individual bigotry rather than a broader system of oppression. This portrayal not only resonates with White American experience (i.e., a “perpetrator perspective” on racism[[4]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftn4)), but also has a number of important consequences that reproduce faith in the colorblind fairness of American society. With respect to perception, the prejudice problematic leads people to understand racism as a relatively limited problem of individual bias rather than a broad problem of enduring systemic injustice. With respect to action, the prejudice problematic channels anti-racism efforts into changing individual hearts and minds while leaving intact the systemic oppression through which a privileged few benefit at the expense of an impoverished majority of humanity.

In contrast to the prejudice problematic, a cultural psychology approach locates the foundations of racism beyond individual bias in the structure of everyday worlds. This perspective suggests that the important place to look for racism in education is not the prejudices of people who operate the education system, but instead in the practices and ideas that define mainstream educational institutions ***regardless of individual prejudices***. Rather than unbiased or “natural” standards, mainstream practices and ideas—including celebratory representations of history, emphases on multicultural tolerance (versus social justice), or ideas about intelligence and merit—not only bear the understandings and desires of people who wield power, but also direct subsequent action in ways that reproduce domination.

To illuminate the implications of this perspective, consider a teacher who uses readily available mainstream artifacts (i.e., with an emphasis on tolerance and celebration of diversity) to produce a display for Black History Month. The teacher may genuinely intend for this display to promote antiracist action and social justice. However, to the extent that the products she deposits into the classroom resonate with the prejudice problematic (and remain silent about the enduring history of racist violence that characterizes U.S. society), they may reflect and promote a quite different purpose. Specifically, a cultural psychology perspective suggests that these products are likely to arise and persist because they are compatible with dominant beliefs and desires, afford ignorance about the extent of racism in U.S. society, and reduce support for urgent measures to address ongoing racism and injustice. Rather than changing hearts and minds to make people more tolerant or less prejudiced, a cultural psychology perspective suggests that a more effective strategy for antiracism education is to draw on marginalized forms of knowledge[[5]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftn5) both to dismantle the epistemologies of ignorance that afford inaction about racism and to develop conceptual tools that better afford antiracist action. Indeed, a cultural psychology analysis suggests that this strategy may be especially appropriate among people, like the teacher in this example, who genuinely strive to promote social justice, but who unwitting draw upon conceptual tools that are suboptimal (or even counterproductive) for that purpose.

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[[1]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftnref) Mills (2007)

[[2]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftnref) A timely example is the use of racial identity as a consideration in admission decisions, as in policies that were recently the subject of a U.S. Supreme Court case  (*Schuette v. Coalition to Defend Affirmative Action*, 2014).

[[3]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftnref) See Wetherell & Potter (1992)

[[4]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftnref) See Freeman (1978).

[[5]](http://www.niusileadscape.org/bl/beyond-prejudice-the-cultural-psychology-of-racism-in-education-by-glenn-adams/#_ftnref)A clear example is the sort of marginalized knowledge that  was the focus of the attack on ethnic studies programs in Arizona H.B. 2281.