

Editorial: Reverse racism, myth or reality?

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Abigail Fisher is pictured outside the U.S. Supreme Court in Washington, D.C. Fisher challenged the use of race in college admissions, particularly affirmative action, saying that she was discriminated against for being white. Photo by: AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

Editor's Note: This story discusses issues around race and identity. It is important to note that depending on your background, you may experience this article differently from other readers. Newsela encourages students to always be respectful and empathetic when discussing these sensitive subjects.

In the 21st century, many white Americans feel that they suffer more race-based discrimination than their fellow Americans of minority backgrounds. A 2011 study by researchers at Tufts University's School of Arts and Sciences and Harvard Business School found that whites believe that anti-white bias, or "reverse racism," is at an all-time high. But is this perception accurate? Sociologists and social activists are among those who argue that reverse discrimination is actually not on the rise: it's more of a myth than a reality.

They acknowledge that some people of color may be prejudiced against whites. Still, they don't have the power to discriminate against whites in the manner that whites have historically discriminated against racial minorities. Some socially progressive thinkers believe that reverse racism is actually not widespread, and that complaints about it are mistaken. They note that as

society moves to make things more equal, those who complain about reverse discrimination fear losing racial privilege.

People Of Color Do Not Have The Power To Discriminate Against Whites

Anti-racist activist Tim Wise wrote the essay "A Look at the Myth of Reverse Racism." He said U.S. society has been organized in such a way that people of color can't oppress whites in the same way that whites have historically oppressed minorities.

"When a group of people has little or no power over you institutionally ... they can't limit your opportunities," he said. "You needn't worry much about the use of a slur to describe you and yours, since, in all likelihood, the slur is as far as it's going to go," Wise wrote. "What are they going to do next: deny you a bank loan? Yeah, right. ... Power is like body armor."

"Not all white folks have the same degree of power," he said. Still, white people have more than enough compared to people of color. Wise said even poor whites have advantages over middle-class blacks. For example, poor whites are more likely to be employed and own homes than blacks are. This is mostly because they don't experience racism in the workplace and they've inherited property from family members. Blacks, on the other hand, have long faced barriers to employment and owning homes that continue to affect their communities today.

"None of this is to say that poor whites aren't being screwed ... they are," Wise said. The economic system, which is the complex connection between money, businesses and jobs, makes their lives harder. But whites still have a certain advantage over equally poor or even some richer people of color thanks to racism. This advantage makes any prejudice from other races less threatening overall.



Minorities Can Be Prejudiced, But Can They Be Racist?

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva wrote the book "Racism Without Racists." In a 2010 interview with the website The Grio, Bonilla-Silva said, "When whites talk about reverse discrimination, I feel that they are making a silly argument." He added that "What they really want to say is that we, people of color, have the power to do to them what they have done to us from the 13th century."

Bonilla-Silva says that some people of color are prejudiced against whites but points out that they lack the power to discriminate against whites on a massive scale. "We do not control the economy. We do not control politics — despite the election of Obama. We don't control much of this country."

The Idea That Minorities Of Influence Seek Revenge Against Whites Is Dangerous

Washington Post writer Eugene Robinson notes that political conservatives, who believe in keeping the old ways, often make claims of reverse discrimination. They do this to push the idea

that people of color in positions of power are out to get whites, for revenge.

Not only is this idea false, he said, but conservative politicians are pushing it just to win over white voters. He doubts that most conservatives actually believe that powerful minorities are using their influence to hurt whites.

Calls of anti-white racism are being deliberately exaggerated, Robinson said, to make whites fearful. It won't work with most people, but it works with some. "This is really about tearing Barack Obama down," Robinson said. Cries about reverse racism could be enough, perhaps, to help reduce Obama's reputation and damage his party, the Democrats.

Reverse Racism Denies The Minority Experience With Discrimination

Comedian Bill Maher said that reverse racism ignores that people of color continue to experience unfair treatment today. Maher particularly objected to conservative Republicans making more of an issue of reverse racism than they do of racism against minorities. In 2011, Maher remarked that for today's Republicans, "there is only one correct answer to the discussion about racism. And that is: There is no racism in America anymore. Except reverse-racism against whites."

Moreover, Maher pointed out that Republicans have offered up no solutions to combat reverse racism. He suggested that this is the case because reverse racism isn't real. Instead, reverse racism functions to deny the racism that people of color in U.S. society have long endured.

He explained, "Denying racism is the new racism. To not acknowledge those statistics, to think of that as a 'black problem' and not an American problem. To believe ... that reverse-racism is a bigger problem than racism, that's racist."

Quiz

- 1 Which selection from the article provides the BEST evidence to support the idea that the concept of reverse racism intends to maintain racial privilege for whites?
- (A) They acknowledge that some people of color may be prejudiced against whites. Still, they don't have the power to discriminate against whites in the manner that whites have historically discriminated against racial minorities.
 - (B) For example, poor whites are more likely to be employed and own homes than blacks are. This is mostly because they don't experience racism in the workplace and they've inherited property from family members.
 - (C) Washington Post writer Eugene Robinson notes that political conservatives, who believe in keeping the old ways, often make claims of reverse discrimination. They do this to push the idea that people of color in positions of power are out to get whites, for revenge.
 - (D) Moreover, Maher pointed out that Republicans have offered up no solutions to combat reverse racism. He suggested that this is the case because reverse racism isn't real. Instead, reverse racism functions to deny the racism that people of color in U.S. society have long endured.

- 2 Read the sentence from the section "People Of Color Do Not Have The Power Discriminate Against Whites."

He said U.S. society has been organized in such a way that people of color can't oppress whites in the same way that whites have historically oppressed minorities.

Which sentence from the section provides further support for the idea that whites have historically oppressed minorities?

- (A) "When a group of people has little or no power over you institutionally ... they can't limit your opportunities," he said.
 - (B) "Not all white folks have the same degree of power," he said.
 - (C) Blacks, on the other hand, have long faced barriers to employment and owning homes that continue to affect their communities today.
 - (D) This advantage makes any prejudice from other races less threatening overall.
- 3 Which of the people quoted in the article would be MOST likely to agree with the following idea?

Claims of reverse racism are most often ploys for political gain rather than deeply held personal beliefs.

- (A) Tim Wise
 - (B) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva
 - (C) Eugene Robinson
 - (D) Bill Maher
- 4 Why do social activists and others think that reverse racism is impossible?
- (A) because people of color do not hold enough power to be prejudiced against white people
 - (B) because whites are protected by social advantages they have built into society
 - (C) because anti-white ideas are being deliberately exaggerated by some politicians
 - (D) because historical evidence shows that racism is a problem for all Americans

Answer Key

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