Higher Education and Public Health: Structural Racism at the Core

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Abstract

Despite the proliferation research showing the intersectionality of racism and health disparities in the United States, both seem likely to persist into the next decade. Structural racism is comprised of reinforcing systems of social inequality in accommodations, academia, labor, health delivery, media, and criminal justice. This essay observes the intersectionality between academia and health, and argues an overlap particularly within Schools of Public Health reflects a contradiction in their mission or purpose. The top ten Schools of Public Health are located within states representing political and racial ideologies. Such academic research institutions should not be viewed as independent agencies that are divorced or separated from the people, policies and practices that contain them. This essay is a call for all Schools of Public Health, whether in the alleged “top ten” or not, and their respective universities, to lead in abolishing structural racism.

INTRODUCTION


The Health of Black Folks: In 1985, Secretary of Health and Human Services Margaret Heckler [7] issued The Heckler Report, also known as The Secretary Task Force on Black and Minority Health which detailed the dismal health of Blaks and other minorities compared to whites. By 1992, Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal, from Andrew Hacker reiterated Du Dios’ racial divide. By 2003, the Institute of Medicine’s Unequal Treatment: Confronting Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Care questioned if there was equal access to health, why did racial disparities persist? Such consistent racial disparities in society and health stem from overlapping systems of inequalities inherent in structural racism.

STRUCTURAL RACISM

Baily et al [8] define structural racism as the totality of ways societies perpetuate racial discrimination and the consequent negative health status through mutually reinforcing systems of housing, education, employment, earnings, benefits, credit, media, health care and criminal justice. Structural racism goes beyond these demographics to apply a critical analysis of social, physical, and emotional determinants of health [9-12]. This essay attempts to weave an articulation of structural racism through the lens of Schools of Public Health.

AN ACADEMIC DILEMMA

Academic research institutions should be the vanguard of combating racial injustices [13-17]. Higher education may have a history of ameliorating social, political and economic disparities, but a critical indicator of structural racism stems from within such institutions themselves [18,19]. Most striking is the incredible lack of faculty diversity in higher education. In 2016, whites were approximately 76% of all full time faculty in degree granting institutions, with 41% males and 35% females [20,21]. Within this predominately white milieu, faculty and students-of-color experience alienation, isolation, depression and anxiety [22-25].

Higher education is not isolated from structural racism. Schools of Public Health are charged with preventing, intervening...
and treating health disparities [26, 25, 14]. The numerical ranking of the 177 accredited Schools of Public Health listed in US News and World Reports 2020 [27] imply their efficacy in combating inequalities in health. Health scholars Gee and Ford [10] used the apt metaphor of the submerged ice-berg to illustrate the interrelatedness of structural racism, institutions and health disparities. What lies below the surface and unseen are powerful forces that sustain and reinforce societal racism. These social determinants often escape direct scrutiny, unless when under the fleeting gaze of the popular press [28]. These critical events can be dismissed as anecdotes but reveal disturbing patterns that relate directly to the intersectionality of structural racism and inequalities in health.

PAST INVADING THE PRESENT

Johns Hopkins University, located in Baltimore, Maryland, is a private research university. It has the Bloomberg School ranked as number one. But for many African Americans, this prestigious institution is more likely remembered as the place that confiscated body cells from the impoverished African American woman, Henrietta Lacks (1920-1951) [29] the irony is the institutions’ 19th century founder, Johns Hopkins (1795-1873) was an abolitionist. Students staged protests about perceived campus racism into the 21st century [30]. Similarly at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with the number two ranked Gillings School of Global Public Health, the Unsung Founders Memorial that honored people of color was defaced when it was thought an agreement between the North Carolina Division of the Sons of the Confederacy to keep the infuriating bronze statue off the campus fell through [33].

SEGREGATION TODAY... SEGREGATION TOMORROW

The racial divide Du Bios wrote about a century ago remains today. At the prestigious Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts has the T.H. Chan School of Public Health rank at number two. Harvard, like Johns Hopkins, is a private and Ivy League. In 2014, an “I, Too, Am Harvard” a photo campaign had to be launched by African American students to express what they perceived as Harvard’s racial insensitively [34]. Five year later in July, 2019, Black Harvard Law School students received emails stating: “We all hate you”, “You know you don’t belong here” and “You are here because of affirmative action” [35]. Latinx students have also questioned Harvard’s commitment to diversity due to the denial of tenure to a popular ethnic studies professor [36].

IMPOSTER SYNDROME

Higher education is not a haven from racism. In 2009, Harvard was not a shield for the highly celebratory Henry Louis Gates, Jr. a popular African American professor. Gates was arrested in the dead of night in front of his own house after a heated exchange with a white Cambridge cop [37]. Similarly in 2019 at Columbia University in New York City, which has the Mailman School of Public Health ranked number four, 23 year-old African American student, Alexander McNab, endured a similar fate of being physically restricted by campus cops as he walked through the Barnard College gates on his way to the university library. McNab reportedly refused to show identification [38, 39]. Remarkably similar was in 2018 at University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, a public research institution with a School of Public Health ranked at number five, African American Reginald Andrade, a 14-year employee of the University of Michigan - Amherst, found himself also in a confrontation with campus cops because he reportedly looked “agitated” [40-41].

FREE VERSES HATE SPEECH

In 2016 when Donald J. Trump was elected president of the United States, the University of Washington, located in Seattle, Washington with a School of Public Health ranked at number seven, was the site of a shooting. Right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos spoke on the campus, using incendiary language about race, class and gender [42]. The First Amendment was also tested at Emory University, a private research university in Atlanta, Georgia with the Rollins School of Public Health ranked at number five, when pro-Trump messages written in chalk appeared around the campus [43,44]. Emory took a proactive hint from Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, accused of appearing in black-face in his 1984 Eastern Virginia Medical School yearbook [38], by scanning their own history of year-books. Emory found racist references and anti-Semitic imagery [45]. In 2018 at George Washington University, a private research institution in Washington, D.C. with has the Milken Institute School of Public Health ranked at number twelve, two white Alpha Phi Sorority women posted an online picture of one of them holding a peeled banana with the caption: “I’m 1/16 Black.” African American students responded by holding a town hall meeting to express their frustrations with free speech masquerading as a college prank. George Town University found blackface photographs in their yearbooks as well, dating back to the 1960s. In 2015 on at George Town, a regurgitation of Hitler’s Nazi Era was apparent when three swastikas were found drawn on the wall of university’s International House [46].

WHITE SUPREMACY ABOUNDS

In 2017, the boundaries of the First Amendment continued to be tested. At the University of Michigan’s Ann Arbor, a public university with a School of Public Health ranked at number five, white supremacy posters appeared stating: “We must secure the existence of our race and future of white children.” “Make American White Again,” and “Jew Die,” was spray-painted in a skate park in downtown. “Fuck Latinos” and “MAGA” (from the Trump campaign of Make American Great Again) were painted on a landmark rock. In the West Quad Residence Hall on the Michigan campus was the vile epithet, “Nigger,” found written on the doors of three African American students [Mount Holyoke News, [47]. In 2018 at Boston University, a private research university with a School of Public Health ranked at number eight, racist graffiti was found scrawled inside one of the university’s dorms. In 2017, someone defaced a Black lives Matter poster, causing students to walk out of class in protest [48,49].
TOXIC HISTORY

University of California, Berkeley is a public research university with a School of Public Health ranked at number nine. The campus has the esteemed Boalt Law School, named for founder John Henry Boalt (1837-1901), a 19th century San Francisco attorney. In 2017, a researcher inadvertently discovered how Boalt was an open vitriolic racist, particularly toward Chinese-American immigrants. Boalt was instrumental in formulating the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Discussions ensued as to whether such bigotry, racism and a xenophobia now so indicative of Boalt’s name should be removed from law school [50]. In 2016, the issue of name recognition emerged with the 18th century Antiguan plantation owner and slave trader, Isaac Royall Jr’s (1719-1781) family crest, a glorification of American’s sordid history of human bondage, should be removed from Harvard’s Law School [51]. Celebrating, acknowledging or legitimizing historical bigotry emerged at the University of Minnesota: Twin Cities, a public research university with a School of Public Health ranked at number nine, when it became evident that several campus buildings were named for openly racist and anti-Semitic administrators. In 2019, a 125 page report revealed that the Coffman Memorial Union, Coffey Hall, Middlebrook Hall, and Nicholson Hall, all honored white men who supported racial segregation and anti-Semitism. Lotus Coffman (1875-1938), the 5th president from 1920-1938, prevented Black students from residing in the Pioneer Hall dormitory. Walter Coffey (1876-1956), the 7th president from 1941-1945, sustained these racist policy by working to create the International House, a Black-only student residence hall. William Middlebrook (1892-1974), a campus administrator from 1929 to 1959, kept the institutionalized racism alive with his active maintenance of Coffman and Coffey’s bigoted housing policies. Edward Nicholson (1873-1949), dean of student affairs from 1917-1941, vigorously engaged in the political persecution of Jewish students he labelled as Communists and un-American [52,53].

PEDAGOGY AND OPPRESSED

The Karin Fielding School of Public Health is ranked number seven located at the University of California, Los Angeles, a public research university. In 2013, an obvious classroom miscommunication between instructor and students led to several students-of-color walking out at the Graduate School of Education’s Information’s Social Science and the Comparative Education division [54]. The protest echoed a myriad or reports of students-of-color reacting to perceived classroom insensitivities on predominantly white campuses [26,24,19]. In November, 2017, three UCLA Black student-athletes were arrested in China for shoplifting. A flood of emails condemned their alleged behavior, with many tainted with racist language [55].

IMPLICATIONS

Structural racism is just as evident within academic institutions as in the general society. White faculty comprises 75% of the US professoriate [56]. They have the power to decide what is taught, who will teach, what is worthy of research, and the interpretations of findings. Reports of micro-aggressions on predominantly white campuses [19]. reflect this demographic dominance. The responses of cultural awareness workshops are limited, simplistic, and produce unintended consequences [57]. West’s [58] has shown how cultural insensitivities are due less to ethnic minorities being more sensitive than having to experience the insensitivities more often.

Neblett [59] and other health scholars have observed the overlap of academia and health. Bobo [60] cut directly to the chase in the general society with regard to the “laissez faire racism” ushered in by the Trump Administration. Schools of Public Health must mount more of a collective will to combat structural racism in society and in health [8,10,11,13,14,16,17].

REFERENCES
