



Credit: Oliver Rollins

Towards an antiracist (neuro)science

Oliver Rollins is a sociologist interested in how neuroscience research deals with and is informed by racialisation, racism, and other social processes of inequality. Here, he discusses how (neuro)scientists can engage in antiracist research practices and contribute to an antiracist science.

The biological sciences have a long and indelibly entwined history with racism. The inescapable residue of scientific racism continues to impact how, and even whether, today's researchers will engage the thorny question of race. Recently, the 'neuroscience of race' has shrewdly sought to overturn the negative perception of 'race science'. Neuroscientists in this subarea seek to neurobiologically map the underpinnings of implicit racial bias. Nevertheless, as Black, indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) disproportionately endure the devastating impacts of COVID-19, we are reminded that effective scholarship on race must go beyond unpacking the ideological foundations of prejudice to expose interconnected social institutions and practices that systematically discriminate against certain bodies, mitigate life chances, and tacitly reproduce racial inequity. Science, then, must account for structural racism. This will require a new (neuro)scientific initiative—one that connects macro- and micro-level practices of racialisation, acknowledges lived experiences of race, and challenges the consequences of racism.

The path towards antiracism will require neuroscientists to take insidious racial dynamics seriously, even in presumably 'non-racial' research. Combining neuroimaging technologies with facial photo stimuli, researchers have detected significant differences in amygdala activity for white individuals viewing Black faces. However, this also suggests that racial prejudice may impact all research using facial stimuli. Findings from the neuroscience of race demonstrate that normative research practices can reconstitute fixed understandings of difference. Therefore, researchers must excavate how 'optimally working' technological practices insidiously encode normative ideas about racial worth without need for a specific racist intent. Whilst support from the Human Brain Project and the BRAIN Initiative has prioritized

the development of innovative brain technologies, perfunctory applications of seemingly objective research tools contribute to structural racism. Thus, neuroscience will benefit from a critical introspection that reassesses existing modalities, techniques, and ontologies retained and relied upon to measure and visualise the brain.

For the neuroscience of race itself, moving towards antiracism will mean delineating whether and how existing neurobiological framings of prejudice capture the sociological, economic, and political dimensions of racism. Neuroscientific research on implicit racial bias may shed light on individualised causes of racialised police violence—the so-called 'bad apples'—but such explanations fail to capture how seemingly race-neutral law enforcement policies and political agendas, such as stop-and-frisk surveillance practices, disproportionately facilitate harmful and life-ending confrontations between police and BIPOC communities. Neuroscientists, then, should appreciate how the seemingly natural biological correlates that activate a brain region or 'get under the skin' can reflect the deeply embedded, and often sociopolitically productive, realities of racial inequity. Furthermore, it is imperative that scientists pay better attention to social policy scholarship. An immediate aim should be addressing the potential ways neuroscientific knowledge may stimulate new or undermine existing social policies, and researchers should reflect on these potentials in their publications and public talks.

Although neutrality is seen as a virtue of scientific empiricism, science is always already political. Neutrality, too often, yields an inability, or unwillingness, to truly engage with sociopolitical realities. The path towards antiracism, therefore, must include an engagement with the effects of race—the dynamic and often embedded ways in which

the sociohistorical investment in and present-day realities of systemic racial inequality are realised and lived, through quotidian societal activities and relationships. I stress that the essence of racism resides in the everyday mechanisms of both social and laboratory life, not only when race is explicitly evoked, targeted, or performed. As an African American man, my blackness is viewed axiomatically as social proof of dangerousness and, therefore, enough to warrant law enforcement to stop and frisk my body, or end my life, without recourse, in the name of public safety. Yet, my sociological examination of the neuroscience of violence shows that neuroscientific risk models for violence fail to account for such experiences. This science is ill-equipped to capture the effects of race; thus, researchers risk reproducing scientific racism through the omission of racial experiences that do not fit or are too tricky to understand, in neurobiological calculations. Critical epistemologies of race recognize not only that institutions and persons are responsible for generating and perpetuating racism, but also that scientists are liable for their ostensibly neutral and empirical brain theories that ignore and neglect racism.

As embodied through the Black Lives Matter protests, particularly in the wake of the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, social justice is not a choice but a requisite for antiracism. The path toward antiracism, then, must revolutionize the very ethical bonds of accountability between (neuro)science and society. More than a (neuro)ethics of race, I'm calling for a new politic—a purposeful, unyielding commitment to social justice. This new politic must pressure colleges and universities to rethink their own investments in racial capital. Moreover, this collective restructuring of scientific polity should extend to academic journals, professional organizations, funding agencies, private sector industries, and lab

venders, scientific cooperatives that too often leave a deafening mark of silence on matters of racial social justice. It is well past time for a commitment to antiracism in science. Now is the time for (neuro)

science to join the collective struggle for social justice. □

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