

Spotlight Session Reviews

The following passages are student reviews and experiences of select Spotlight Sessions during the 2018 Race & Pedagogy National Conference (RPNC). Students from the African American Studies 399 Public Scholarship course attended various spotlight sessions and were given the assignment to write a review of their chosen session. This is one of those reviews.

Spotlight Session: *The Science of Implicit Bias*

Summary of Spotlight Session:

Despite more than a century of scientific research documenting the myriad ways that racism is both an enduring fact and pervasive factor in American life, poll results consistently show that a large percentage of individuals who identify as members of the racial majority (or as socio-political conservatives) do not believe that racism is a major social problem. Why? How has public opinion been so resistant to the findings from decades of lab and field studies documenting the existence of explicit and implicit racial biases and their effects on the full range of human behavior? Combining insights from the behavioral sciences, law, media, and popular culture, this talk begins an examination of why a century of science may be less persuasive than 10 minutes of cable news.



Landon Reid has a PhD in Psychology from the University of Illinois and a law degree from New York University. He has published widely on the study of stereotypes, subtle forms of racism, bias in evaluation processes, and related subjects. He has also conducted campus climate surveys and engaged with students, faculty and staff in programmatic work to address the persistence of racism and racist behavior on university campuses.

Reviewer of Spotlight Session:

Kayla Bryson is a junior at the University of Puget sound pursuing a double major in African American Studies and Natural Science with an emphasis in Biology.

Race Does Not Exist Scientifically, but Bias Does:
a Review of *The Science of Implicit Bias* presented by Dr. Landon Reid

Written by Kayla Bryson

As I walked down one of the long, winding corridors of Thompson Hall at the University of Puget Sound, I noticed large volumes of people hurriedly scuffling around. Although this may be typical during the school week, it certainly is not at 10:30 on a Saturday morning. Much to my dismay, it seemed that everyone was headed in the same direction as me—toward room 175, the biggest lecture hall in the building. I arrived 10 minutes early to find the room packed to the brim. Volunteers were guarding the door, turning people away. I borrowed a rolling chair from a nearby classroom and found a spot out in the hallway. If I craned my neck *just right*, I could make it work.

As I sat there, waiting for the presentation to begin, I began to wonder why so many people were drawn to this particular talk. I cannot speak for them, but I can speculate. I think that people like when things can be explained scientifically. Ideally, science provides concrete answers to difficult questions and allows us to make sense of some of the hazier components of the human experience. As a student in the African American Studies Department, I was there to glean knowledge that might be useful in my conversations outside of the classroom. I often struggle with those who claim that “we live in a post-racial society,” or that they “don’t see color,” and I thought that being able to cite objective evidence might help counter these claims. With my background in African American Studies, I am able to recognize the importance of an African American male giving a presentation on race from a scientific perspective.

Dr. Reid, the speaker, has both a Juris Doctor and a Ph.D. in social psychology. And, upon entering the room, he almost immediately stated that his talk would be “really rambling and non-focused.” His goal for the day was simply to “raise topics for exploration.” However,

the talk did not strike me as rambling or non-focused at all. Rather, I think he had very clear goals—to provide evidence of bias and racism in this country, to show us that not all racism is explicit, and to illustrate why our biases often go undetected.

Dr. Reid first provided evidence of racism by pointing to a poll: only 1/4 of Americans think that racism is a major problem, yet 3/4 of African Americans report being victims of discrimination. The overwhelming attendance for this session suggests that Americans tend to value science and scientific findings, yet, the judicial system has not always regarded data highly. In 1987, Warren McClesky was convicted of murdering a white police officer and was sentenced to death.

In a writ of habeas corpus, McCleskey argued that a statistical study proved that the imposition of the death penalty in Georgia depended to some extent on the race of the victim and the accused. The study found that black defendants who kill white victims are the most likely to receive death sentences in the state (Oyez).

The supreme court decided to disregard the statistical evidence presented to them, and his sentence was upheld.

After providing evidence of racism exhibited by the Supreme Court, Dr. Reid launched into a discussion about its “different flavors.” In summary, they include explicit racism, implicit racism, and subtle racism. Explicit racism is our cultural default of what racism looks like. Think violence, racial slurs, and blatant disrespect. Implicit racism is outside of our awareness, and it is a product of our socialization. What it comes down to is this: who do you assume is the perpetrator and who do you assume is the victim? Subtle racism is the opposite of explicit racism. Dr. Reid defined it as a form of racism that “can be caused by multiple things, and it is not always clear what the cause is.” His accompanying example was non-white people receiving bad service

at a restaurant, leaving them to wonder if the staff is poorly trained or if it is attributable to race. Explicit racism being the cultural default is problematic, as it makes the other forms sort of disappear, or at least seem less valid

Dr. Reid suggests that the reason people are not recognizing prejudice is due to “unintentional blindness,” which he illustrated by showing a video. During which, we were instructed to watch a team play basketball and count how many times the ball bounced. We did—and in doing so we **all** missed the fact that a gorilla walked across the screen. He explained that this occurred because we zone in on certain components of reality and tune out others. That is, we focus on what directly impacts us and ignore what does not. He ended the presentation by showing us photos taken at college parties. They were recent, and undoubtedly racist. He then challenged us to believe those impacted by racism. And, if we cannot yet do that, then at least give them the benefit of the doubt.

Dr. Reid’s talk was both compelling and persuasive, and he did an exceptional job of presenting useful information to the attendees. Everyone, ranging from the African American Studies major to the white, middle-aged man who avoids talking about race, walked away with new intellectual tools to use while grappling with racial issues. Additionally, Dr. Reid is a Black man who wears his hair in dreadlocks, so his very appearance goes against what many people assume that a scientist looks like. Having the opportunity to learn from a Black man in a space that is predominantly controlled by White professors and faculty is *so* valuable, and it may have served as an opportunity for many audience members to challenge their own biases.

To help the audience advance further, Dr. Reid might consider adding a component to his talk in which he provides his listeners with guidance on how to engage with others using

the material presented. Recognizing our own biases and the biases of others is important, and it is vital in deconstructing them. However, if we are unable to engage with others conversationally regarding these biases, all of our growth will be self-centered. If change is to be enacted, then the education of all is vital, and who better to do the educating than individuals spending a Saturday morning in the classroom learning about racial biases?

Bibliography

"McCleskey v. Kemp." *Oyez*, 24 Nov. 2018, www.oyez.org/cases/1986/84-6811.