



Common Excuses for Avoiding Engaging in Countering Racism

<http://www.counteringracism.org/>

There are a lot of potential excuses for not actively engaging to counter racism. Some minimize the impact of racism. Some divert attention. Some make racism an illegitimate topic. They are all designed to derail conversations about racism and provide an excuse for not committing to action.

For most White people many of these excuses pop up unbidden. They are natural reactions that have been built in by the systemic racism in which we were raised and in which we live. The issue isn't whether we have some of these reactions because we will. The issue is whether we catch them when they pop up and counter them.

Some we can deal with once or twice and get past. Others tend to hang on because they are based in unconscious bias. The value of dealing with those more tenacious excuses is that they can lead to unconscious bias that we can then free ourselves from.

With these excuses, as with so many of the challenges of countering racism, we need to quickly get past any guilt or shame and focus on taking responsibility for how we want to act – who we want to be.

Below are common excuses. Most will be very familiar. There are others. Each excuse has a note about how to get past the excuse and use it to reinforce efforts to counter racism.



Being Colorblind

"I don't see race"

"People are just people - we are all just human"

"I don't think of you as Black"

"We all bleed red when we are cut"

- That denies the reality of systemic racism that people of color experience every day
- Race affects the way Black people move through a day or a life, how the person is treated by society, may define much of their culture and their identity
- As White people, we don't see race because race doesn't negatively affect us every day
- Being colorblind means we don't see our Whiteness and what that means - it denies their experience of race and our privilege
- Being conscious of color is not racist - denying the reality and impact of race is
- Race has been, and is, a major factor in American life
- That does mean that color should define the person we see. There will be much more to them. But it will make a major difference in how we see who they are, and it will impact how they will see us.

We can acknowledge our common humanity and, at the same time, see how race matters a great deal. That reinforces our commitment – if race matters, then our actions to counter it matter.

Competing Victimizations

“All lives matter”

- Of course, all lives matter. Saying that “black lives matter” doesn’t mean that only Black lives matter. Unfortunately, too often Black lives don’t matter or don’t matter enough, and their value needs to be the focus.
- “Black lives matter” is not just a policing issue. Black lives matter in housing, healthcare, education, the workplace, transportation, history, etc.
- Black people get daily messages that their lives don’t matter as much as White lives. That message has to be acknowledged and consciously countered.

We acknowledge that naturally all lives matter, but that Black lives have not mattered nearly as much, and that “Black Lives Matter” is a principle that needs to be highlighted consistently to draw the required attention and corrective action.

“People of color actually have it easier than White people now”

“White people are under attack”

“Affirmative action is outdated and is now reverse racism”

- This is a myth vs. facts issue. It’s an emotional reaction and a few instances can be “cheery picked” to support it, but they are “one in a million” examples.
- It’s harder for a Black person with no criminal record to get an entry level job than a White person with a felony.
- Even when adjusted for education and experience, the Black unemployment rate is twice the White rate

- Affirmative action is designed to ensure that minorities are given the same work and college opportunities as White people. The number of reverse discrimination suits filed before the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission is small and most were dismissed as lacking any foundation
- Blacks and Latinx are more underrepresented at elite colleges than 35 years ago
- When people of privilege are asked to share some of that privilege it is often perceived as discrimination

We just need to acknowledge that these statements are simply not true and stay focused on extending the basic life privileges enjoyed by individual White people to people of color and dismantling systemic White privilege.

Making Race an Illegitimate Topic

“You’re playing the “race card”

- An accusation designed to shut down a conversation
- Race is not a card from a deck – it’s the constant experience of Black people, so it usually is about race
- Playing the “race card” to diminish an issue is actually playing a card – a privileged attempt at dismissing or diminishing a legitimate issue

We simply have to accept and acknowledge that race matters. It’s central to Black lives, so bringing it up isn’t a tactic to win a point. It’s central to life.

“Anti-Racist is a code word for Anti-White”

- 50% of White people believe this
- It’s a slogan popularized by white supremacists in the 2000s

- White genocide is a white supremacist conspiracy theory that immigration, abortion, and racial integration are a plot to destroy white dominated nations and White people

This excuse just needs to go in the trash.



“Not all White people...”

- Of course not, but so what?
- This just a distraction. Racism is systemic, so individual exceptions of White people not exhibiting some behaviors that support racism is irrelevant.

As noted, this excuse is just irrelevant.

“Confederate flags and monuments are about heritage”

- “Heritage” is a code word for slavery as is “Lost cause”
- “Heritage” is designed to support the myth that
 - Slavery wasn’t all that bad
 - The Civil War was about states’ rights

- People who fought to continue slavery were heroes

This is a tough one because slavery was central to the original Southern life and economy. There is no way to glorify it, but more of a focus can be placed on more recent aspect of Southern life that can be honored.

“I’m not political”

- It’s a White privilege to not have to worry about politics in regard to race
- For many people of color, survival is political
- Systemic racism is political, so we need to be political to counter it

We may not normally be political, but much of countering racism is political (organizational and community), so we need to stretch, go outside our comfort zones, and see how political we might be.

“Everyone has a right to their opinion”

- Hate, racism, and prejudice might be opinions, but they are not opinions that can be left unchallenged
- Opinions rooted in oppression, that diminish others, and that deny others’ humanity are not just opinions – they are attacks

We do not need to give anyone protected space for these attacks and, in fact, must confront them for what they are – aggressive acts to diminish others

Tone Policing

“You’re too angry”

- As opposed to what in the face of racism/oppression?
- Black people don’t have the luxury or privilege of distancing themselves from racism and being “nice” or “appropriate” or “polite” when hurt or diminished (again)
- Anger is not hate, nor is it an indictment. It’s a reaction to harm that has been done – repeatedly over time with little or no correction
- This is a common reaction to our discomfort in the face of a Black person’s reaction to the experience of racism
- The anger is part of our education – our understanding of what we are committing to counter
- Emotions don’t invalidate the issue - anger is valid and can drive attention and change
- This reaction is designed to derail or deflect dealing with racism – anger becomes the issue vs. racism
- It shifts the focus from us and racism to others and their “problem”
- Anger is not necessarily counterproductive. It in fact often brings the energy needed for attention and action. Being nice is more likely to be counterproductive

We can provide space for anger without feeling personally attacked and indicted. We can avoid making this about us and instead acknowledge that the anger is a reflection of the depth of harm of racism and use that focus and energy to mobilize to counter that racism.



Putting it in the Past

“We’ve made tremendous progress”

“Slavery was over a long time ago”

“Racism was fixed in the 60s with civil rights legislation”

- We have made tremendous progress from slavery – but we are not even close to done with a systemic reality of American life built in over 500 years.
- Those embedded systems have been confronted, but still operate generating the racial wealth gap, educational and healthcare gaps, unequal justice, employment and housing discrimination, etc.
- Unconscious bias is still prevalent
- Black people have never stopped suffering from racism

We can build on progress without using it as an excuse to back off. Obviously, progress has been made and that can be celebrated and used to drive efforts to close the gaps that remain – gaps that are large, tough, and complex. American greatness is not based in never having erred or in being perfect now – it’s based in the fact that we keep grinding to “get it right” and fully realize our founding vision and values.

Black Exceptionalism

“If Obama and Oprah can succeed...”

Examples of exceptional Black achievers doesn’t mean that:

- Other Black people can overcome the barriers of systemic oppression
- They didn’t have to work harder than White people at the same level
- They didn’t have to face and overcome systemic racism

We can celebrate exceptional Black achievements without using them as an excuse for not acting to counter racism.



Innocence by Association

“I’m not racist, I have Black friends, voted for Obama, etc.”

“I don’t own slaves (nor did my ancestors) or vote for David Duke (KKK)”

- Not being a racist is not the same as being an anti-racist
- “Not” being or doing something doesn’t counter systemic racism - We still benefit from systemic racism
- Hiding in “not” is a way to avoid acting with focus and intent to counter racism

We can take the focus off of us – what we are not or did not do – and focus on making a difference – what we will do.

Focus on being Positive

“Love conquers all”

“Why focus on the negative?”

- Love and positivity are useless without action – particularly in dismantling systemic racism
- Love and positivity are a luxury for White people vs. the harm being done by racism
- Racism is profoundly negative and the negative leads to what need to be changed
- Positive (progress and vision) are critical – so is the negative

We can act with love and positivity, but we must act with focus and perseverance.

Blaming the Victims

“They should have followed police commands”

“If people worked harder, they would do better”

What about Black on Black crime?”

- Black people cannot act in ways that won't incur the impact of racism
- The playing field is not level – oppression and privilege are in play
- Blaming the victim avoids the real issue – systemic racism and/or individual racism
- There is no crime that requires police brutality or murder
- Blaming the victim is an emotional response that justifies racism.
- Crime tends to focus on neighborhoods and economics – not race

We can follow our “blame the victim” reaction to uncover our racial bias and free ourselves to make a difference.

Intentions vs. Impact

“I didn’t mean that”

“It’s only a joke”

- There is often a difference between intent and impact – sometimes a matter of being unaware, sometimes other factors make a difference, sometimes actions are misinterpreted.
- You don’t have to be a bad person to support racism. Racism isn’t who we are. It’s things we do, often unconsciously and without thought or intent, that impact people of color.
- The intent wasn’t racist, but the impact supported racism.
- It’s not that we are racist or not racist. It’s that we can engage in actions that have a damaging impact. These are often what are termed microaggressions.
- Even unconscious or unintended, there will be some bias behind the comments or actions that needs to be highlighted so that it can be dealt with.

We can learn a lot and increase our ability to self-manage and have the impact we want by focusing on the sometimes-surprising impact of our actions – or inactions.

“We’re a nation of laws – Lady Justice is blind”

- As long as there is systemic racism, Lady Justice will never be blind
- Despite efforts by individual police officers, officers of the court or social workers people of color are more likely to be stopped by the police, experience police brutality, arrested, convicted, and given longer sentences for the same crimes as White people
- Isolated incidents of people of color “deserving” the treatment they got are used to defend the systemic bias and unjust treatment
- This is an issue that goes beyond laws to how policies are applied, rules are interpreted, etc.

We can track how laws, policies, rules are applied and challenge the bias to align intention and impact. That, however, means getting clear that the intent is for equal justice.



