

# Do Black Families Value Education?

## White Teachers, Institutional Cultural Narratives, & Beliefs about African Americans

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### Introduction

...the value of education is different in a Black family than in a White family. And I think you gotta be aware of that...

The above quote is from an interview with an effective, caring, seventh grade math teacher in a racially and socio-economically diverse school in the Midwestern U.S. She was one of six White teachers who were participants in our study of the evolution of preservice teacher understandings about race. All six of the inservice and preservice teachers in the study expressed the belief that African American families do not place a high value on education.

The problem of negative beliefs about African American families in schools is not a new idea, and many educators, including Delpit (2012) and Ladson-Billings (2000), have written much about institutionally racist beliefs held by teachers about Black families. However, many people still don't realize it's a problem, and teacher education programs in particular need to continue to figure out how to expose the reality of racism in our schools. Also relatively little recognized is the thesis of this article: racism works via unconscious cultural narratives of which people are mostly unaware, even while those narratives have a major impact on their behavior within institutions.

Speaking recently about police shootings of unarmed Black men, FBI director James Comey (2015) acknowledged that law enforcement has a troubled history when it comes to race. Comey was speaking in relation to recent tragedies involving police officers killing unarmed

Black men. In August 2014, not far from the Midwestern schools that provide the setting for this article, a White police officer killed an unarmed Black teenager in Ferguson, Missouri. In July 2014 in Staten Island a White police officer put an unarmed Black man in a chokehold and, despite the man's cries that he couldn't breathe, several New York Police Department officers continued to assault him until he died a few moments later. Grand juries failed to indict either of the police officers responsible for these deaths.

These are just two recent high profile cases, and we know the statistics are frightening. Comey attributed some of the trouble to unconscious racial biases that research has shown are held by all people. He also said that cops are no more racist than people in other professions.

Teachers are an obvious example of another profession where unconscious bias can have profound effect on the lives of African Americans, as negative beliefs about Blacks held by school staff have very serious consequences. Schools are primarily in the hands of Whites right now in the U.S. (Boser, 2014). As we train new White teachers, they go out into schools where teachers tend to hold (mostly unconscious) racist beliefs about African American families, and where the preservice teachers themselves are predisposed to hold such beliefs. These beliefs have a negative impact on teacher expectations, school climate, and the quality of the educational experience of students of color, leading to enormous negative consequences for the lives of thousands of children and youth in the U.S.

The dynamics underlying the problems of teacher beliefs about the value of education in Black families and of police mistreatment of Black men and boys are the same, and the question in both cases is one that Michael Gerson of the *Washington Post* asked, in relation to the Ferguson events, in a recent editorial:

How people who do not regard themselves as biased can be part of a system that inevitably results in bias. How men and women who view themselves as moral can comprise an immoral society. (Gerson, 2015)

Individual beliefs and actions such as those of the teachers in our study and the police officers in Ferguson and Staten Island are individual acts and beliefs that both maintain and are maintained by institutional racism. The negative beliefs are very resistant to change partly because teachers and others in the institution think the beliefs are a rational conclusion based on logic and personal experience.

In fact, however, the beliefs actually stem from unfounded and untested assumptions about the way the world works and comprise the individual narratives that are engrained in institutional culture. In this article we illustrate the racist background stories embedded within institutions and how those background stories become expressed in individual cultural scripts about race. We use Haney López's (2000) and Bonilla-Silva's (2003) theories and some of the data from our 2010-2011 study. Specifically, we use the six teachers' expressions of the belief that Blacks place a low value on education to explicate the relationship between institutional and individual racism in schools. We also argue that greater recognition of racism needs to be acknowledged by teacher educators and by society at large.

The examples and anecdotes we describe in this article emerged from a qualitative study that we carried out in 2010-2011 focused on evolution of beliefs about race of two preservice teachers, Amber and Michelle.<sup>1</sup> We conducted about six hours of interviews each with Amber and Michelle over an eight-month period, in addition to interviews with the four inservice teachers with whom Amber and Michelle were placed for field experiences. We also did about 38 total hours of observation in the

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inservice teachers' classrooms. However, this is not an empirical research report. This article uses study data to explore the intangible place where institutions and individuals meet in propagating and perpetuating racism.

We begin below by illustrating the first theme of our argument, that racism, largely unconscious and unintentional, gets embedded within institutional background stories and expressed in individual racist scripts. Then we illustrate the power of the cultural narratives that feed the racism. Finally, we explore the role played by social class in these unconscious cultural narratives.

### Background Stories and Racist Scripts

Our first illustration of White teacher beliefs about African American families comes from Amber's cooperating in-service teacher during her second field placement, Mrs. James. Mrs. James's school comprised mainly middle and upper middle income students and her 4th grade class contained about 20 White students and about five students of color, who were mainly African American. The teaching episode in question occurred while Laurel Puchner was observing alongside Amber in Mrs. James's classroom in November.

Once the students had settled into their seats after returning from physical education, Mrs. James said she was going to tell them a story, and that the story was about her recent opportunity to help at a "soup bus" in a neighboring town. The following excerpt from Puchner's fieldnotes describes what Mrs. James told her 4th graders. (The quotation marks indicate quotes that Puchner felt she had written down close to verbatim, though she did not audio record the event):

She tells them that last night she went with some friends to [North City], to a "very very rough neighborhood called The Projects." And she got on a bus and they drove to the projects and served soup for a few hours to kids in this "very dangerous" neighborhood. Kids as young as three or four were there and the oldest was about 14 and they came out to the bus by themselves with no parents and it was their only meal. She stressed how these little kids were all by themselves. "We gave them food because they don't get food." "We had chili and hot dogs and buns we gave them. They don't have a family like yours that's fortunate enough. And every one of the kids said thank you and please..."

WHITE GIRL raises hand: Do they go to school?

TEACHER: Yes they do. It was really scary because there were seven or eight year old kids taking care of their little siblings.

BOY OF COLOR in back of room raises hand: What happened to the families?...

TEACHER: Well they were at home...or they didn't care about their kids. There were two moms who didn't eat because they wanted to make sure their kids got food. But lots of kids were by themselves...

TEACHER: We gave them each a book, too, so hopefully some of them will read their books to their kids but probably not because they don't have parents that read to them.

Mrs. James appears to be very well-intentioned here. In fact, she seems to be going out of her way to replace a regular academic lesson with a moral one that she feels is important for the students. At the level that we believe she was intending to communicate to the children (and also likely to Puchner) she seems to be attempting to model moral behavior (devotion of time and perhaps money to those less fortunate) and to teach the students a lesson about gratefulness and politeness. (The full transcript shows her several times comparing the soup bus children's high level of politeness to the class's often low level of politeness).

However, she was also communicating several more subtle but very dangerous messages to the students about Black people who are poor. The town that Mrs. James visited is well-known locally for its poverty and majority African American population. It is safe to assume from the story that Mrs. James did not know the children or the families of the children to whom she served food. It appears that all she witnessed was children eating food she served them. Yet her story implies that in her brief experience "in the projects" (code for Black) with them she decided the children's families were neglectful.

She communicated that to the students by stating or implying the following: poor Black parents don't care about their children; poor Black children have to raise themselves; poor Black parents don't read to their children; poor Black children need White "saviors" such as herself to survive. Each of these messages is a racist assumption that is part of a large packet of racist assumptions that are dominant in U.S. society (Delpit, 2012; Markowitz & Puchner, 2014). According to Haney López (2000), a set of assumptions embedded in a communication like this is an example of the use of a "racist script."

When people like Mrs. James use such scripts, they are not intentionally or consciously racist. Rather, Haney López argues, contrary to what is posited in rational choice theory, behavior is not determined by individuals choosing the best option for maximizing self-interest among a range of choices. Instead, people follow established patterns of behavior that are based on accepted, unquestioned, background understandings of how the world works and about what's true and not true about the world. Thus we mostly go through life with unexamined assumptions about the way things are and the way things work, and these unexamined assumptions become normal and natural for us, and in effect become reality.

Unfortunately, the unexamined assumptions or background understandings under which we behave in the U.S. are generally racist (Haney López, 2000). Similar to King's (1991) notion of "dysconscious racism," background understandings serve to rationalize discriminatory behavior and beliefs, hence most of the time individuals act in harmful and racist ways without realizing it or consciously intending to because they act according to these racist scripts.

Since these patterns are common within institutions, these background understandings are part of the culture of the institution, and to be a good member of our culture we act in accordance with them (Haney López, 2000). At times we are reflective and thoughtful to a degree, but our behavior is still heavily constrained by the background cultural understandings of the institution, which restricts our range of options (Haney López, 2000) and leads to the unintentional use of racist scripts.

There are several clues in the data from our study that support the idea that Mrs. James was not being intentionally racist in telling her story. First, Mrs. James admitted in a later interview with us that she was uncomfortable with the topic of race and believed in colorblindness:

I try and stay away from the race factor. We don't mention it in the classroom...I treat them as equal... I don't know if there is a better way to do it. I know it is a problem but I really don't touch on it.

Further, she told the story while both the researcher and about five African American 4th graders were present. It seems unlikely that someone who tried to "stay away from race" and who was talking to such an audience would be conscious of how racist the story is. Rather, in telling that story

she was likely unreflectively following a script. The background assumptions of that script, which made up reality for her, were racist, but she was not aware of it.

What makes this a particularly clear example of an individual following an unconscious script in Haney López's theory is that Mrs. James probably did not even know that she was talking about race in the story. She didn't mention race, and undoubtedly didn't realize how much her story was fueled by what Haney López (2000) calls "racial institutions" (p. 1806), or "any understanding of race that has come to be so widely shared within a community that it operates as an unexamined cognitive resource for understanding one's self, others, and the-way-the-world-is" (p. 1808). If you asked Mrs. James whether the families were Black, obviously she'd say yes. However, although she probably thinks the details in her story were shaped entirely by her experience on the soup bus, the shape the story took emerged in large part from unconscious assumptions about poor Black people that form a particular script that she was using in telling the story.

Importantly, Mrs. James is unintentionally *individually* expressing implicit racist beliefs even without mentioning race, but her individual expression of racist beliefs is a part of institutional racism because people "both inherit and remake racial institutions," and these beliefs need "group dynamics for their perpetuation" (Haney López, 2000, p. 1806). Following Haney López's theory we conclude that such beliefs are likely a part of the culture of her organization, the school, and with this soup bus story she contributed to the collective yet mainly unconscious project of the school to pass unconscious racist cultural understandings onto the students.

Finding that a single teacher such as Mrs. James holds racist beliefs might be considered an anomaly, but the fact that all six teachers in our study demonstrated racist beliefs is alarming. It's not inconsistent with past research, but it is inconsistent with most people's beliefs about teaching and teacher education. How can teacher education be effective if institutional racism pervades schools? Individual police officer and individual teacher beliefs and actions vary. But in both professions we need to recognize that racist background stories are the prevailing truth. And, as we'll focus on more later, we need to recognize that in schools (as in policing) the intersection of race and poverty magnify the problem.

### The Power of Cultural Scripts

As mentioned earlier, all six teachers included in this study expressed views indicating that they believe African American families do not prioritize education. In the case of Mrs. James, as we've already seen, the view manifested during a story she told to her students while teaching. With the other teachers, these views came across in the individual interviews that we conducted.

In the case of the two preservice teachers (PTs), we have extensive interview evidence of their beliefs about race. In many respects, Amber and Michelle were similar. They fit the demographic of typical PTs nationally in being young, White women (both were 21 years old in Fall of 2010). They also fit the demographic of typical PTs at the university as they were both from working class families and grew up in small, homogeneous, White rural towns. Their parents had high school diplomas but did not have college degrees.

In talking about race, they both generally used racial discourse that fit within the *new racism* described by Bonilla-Silva (2003), characterized by minimization of racism, use of culturally based arguments, and blindness to structural racism. Their views were also consistent with prior research on typical White PT racial discourse (c.f., Levine-Rasky, 2000), including blindness to White privilege and a belief in "reverse racism."

However, interview data also showed important differences between the two. Michelle appeared to truly value diversity, and felt that her lack of exposure to diversity as a child had done her a disservice. She was also highly engaged in all of her courses, and particularly loved the multicultural course. Amber was less engaged in coursework, and her interview responses betrayed a very negative emotional reaction to African Americans that was not present in Michelle's discourse.

In the interest of space, we are focusing here on interview evidence that illustrates their beliefs about the specific issue of the value of education in African American families. Amber spoke to this issue in our very first interview with her. She had made a comment regarding a video about Japanese math teaching that she had seen in her math methods class, and stated that Japanese people valued education more than people in the U.S. Then Linda Markowitz asked her a follow up question:

MARKOWITZ: So do you think that it's true here for different racial groups or class

groups that there's certain groups that value education more than others or might make it easier to teach to?

AMBER: I think the Asian population would be easy to teach to because you know their parents still kind of like instill that upon them and then I would probably say the White community would be the next you know and then probably the African American community would be lowest to teach, though I don't really know why [I think that]

As can be seen in the excerpt, Michelle stated that she thought African Americans valued education less than Whites and Asians, but then indicated uncertainty about why she believed that. A similar phenomenon occurred in our interview with Mrs. Lester, a kindergarten teacher who was Michelle's second mentor teacher of the year. As seen in the quote below, Mrs. Lester said that she believed that African American students struggle more and have less involved parents, but then indicated that she didn't know why she thought that. Mrs. Lester had no students of color in her class that year:

MARKOWITZ: Have you thought about how it might be different to teach a class of students that was racially mixed?

MRS. LESTER: I don't want to be prejudice but I think there would be more behavioral problems if I had a class that was more racially mixed. Those kids tend to struggle more and it's harder to get hold of parents and I don't know why I think that. Because I know compared to the neighbor next door, the teacher next door, she has three [low performing] kids and hers are the African Americans...

...That's why I think that. Because I'm not racist. I think I would have more lower kids if I had more African Americans. And she's always talking about how parental involvement isn't high but I had an African American kid last year and her parents were involved. So it's not always across the board...

In the above quote Mrs. Lester says she'd have lower achievement, more behavior problems, and less parental involvement with a racially mixed class than she does with her all White class. Mrs. Lester's claim is not directly about value of education—rather, it's about the related topic of parent involvement. But as with Amber's quote, Mrs. Lester's statements fit with the culture of low expectations for African American students that is institutionalized in U.S. schools (Delpit, 2012). Interestingly, Mrs. Lester and Amber's statements about Black families/parents are followed

by expressions of uncertainty about why they believed what they had just said. We contend that this uncertainty provides a particularly clear example of individuals making decisions based on unconscious and unexamined assumptions about the world. When answering the question about race, they didn't make a thoughtful, rational decision; rather, they followed a cultural script, and hence were not even sure why they'd said what they said.

Yet after making belief statements people don't usually express puzzlement about why they hold the beliefs, so why did Mrs. Lester and Amber wonder about their own beliefs? We speculate that the taboo nature of the topic of race meant that Mrs. Lester and Amber expressed ideas they were not even fully aware of. In other words, although people generally don't recognize the unconscious assumptions underlying their beliefs, they are usually accustomed to expressing their beliefs, so the beliefs don't come as a surprise. But since race is a taboo topic in much of U.S. society, Amber and Mrs. Lester probably very rarely, if ever, spoke directly about race, so some of their own racial ideas might not have been completely familiar to them.

Indeed, Amber's statement about values was in response to our first direct question about race in our very first interview with her. Likewise, Mrs. Lester's similar comment came in response to the interviewer's first question about race. Even though Amber and Mrs. Lester stated they did not know why they believed what they said they believed, they both quickly found a rationalization for their belief, with Amber saying "I think it's something I've seen in my [field placement] observations" (though in the next interview she claimed not to have noticed any racial differences in achievement or behavior), and Mrs. Lester deciding her belief came from reports from the teacher next door. Interestingly, Mrs. Lester appeared to place more stock in hearsay from next door than in her own personal experience with her actively involved African American parent from the year before, likely because she unknowingly held the beliefs she expressed long before she expressed them during the interview and long before she met the involved African American parent.

As Bonilla-Silva (2003) has argued, "cultural" arguments about deficiencies of African American families are currently relatively socially acceptable, and have replaced biological arguments about inferiority. So although many underlying

assumptions that are part of the culture of institutions have no basis and are largely unconscious, we are not arguing that Whites are unaware of all of their negative beliefs about blacks. Indeed, Bonilla-Silva's research indicates that most are aware of their own cultural arguments about inferiority of Blacks (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The unconscious part in many cases likely comes mainly in where they think the origin of those beliefs lies.

In other words, people believe their beliefs are based on evidence, when in fact they are simply part of an unconscious cultural narrative. Excerpts from two different interviews with Michelle provide a clear example of this phenomenon. In an excerpt from the April 2011 interview (at the very end of the study) Michelle told Markowitz that she felt the achievement gap between White and African American children was caused by family life in African American families and specifically the fact that African American parents are not as involved as White parents:

MARKOWITZ: Why do you think there is an achievement gap?

MICHELLE: I don't know. I think going off of my experience I have seen in placements a lot of it has to do with family life. I don't know why it is. Why just because you are of a certain color your family is just, but that is what I have noticed in Ms. [Rain's] class.

MARKOWITZ: What do you think families are doing differently, white families versus families of color?

MICHELLE: I don't think the parents are that involved as the parents that are white. ...I am basing this off of the parent conferences I had with Ms. [Rain]. Many of them [African American parents] she had to give packets for and say go over this at home and that is going to help your kid in the classroom and she didn't have to do that with a lot of the parents that were White.

Mrs. Rain was the teacher for Michelle's first field placement, several months earlier, and in this excerpt Michelle is referencing parent teacher conferences that she participated in during her time in that placement. In Mrs. Rain's third grade class 22 of 27 students (81%) were students of color, mostly African American. In the interview above, from April 2011, Michelle appears quite conscious of her belief that Black families are not involved in their children's education. She believes the reason she holds this belief comes from personal experience with the parent teacher conferences. However, we have

good evidence that her belief does not come from the personal experience she cites. First of all, the Black/White student ratio in the class was such that even if the teacher had given homework packets to one White parent and six Black parents the proportion would be about the same, indicating that she wasn't using logic or rational thinking.

However, the clearest evidence that her belief about low involvement among the African American parents did not come from her observation of parent teacher conferences is that five months earlier she had used the same parent teacher conference experience, at that point much fresher in her memory, to argue that African American families did value education as much as Whites. Here is an excerpt from the November 2010 interview in which she is responding to a direct question about whether African American families value education less than White families:

I'm going to relate back to the parent teacher conferences because that was really eye opening hearing how they [African American parents] think of their kid as a student and how they think of the homework and things like that. I don't think they value it any differently at all. I didn't see a difference the entire time I was there. All of them want their children to get good educations and learn.

The quote indicates that directly following the parent teacher conferences the experience had convinced Michelle that African American parents valued education as much as her White students. The quote betrays the fact that she held low expectations for the families prior to meeting them; yet, the experience had proven her wrong. By the April interview, however, five months later, the underlying cultural assumptions of the institution apparently proved stronger than her memory of the actual behavior of the African American parents.

As indicated earlier, the belief that African Americans don't value education is a prominent part of the institutional racism package experienced by African American children in schools. Since this belief is a focal point for the current analysis, here we describe prior research on the topic as well as the relationship between this focal issue and some of the related ideas that play important roles in institutional racism of U.S. schools and society.

Beliefs about the value of education are linked to beliefs about the heavily researched topic of parental involvement. Parent involvement is related to student achievement (Banerjee, Harrell, & John-

son, 2011; Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993), and studies show that when people perceive low parental involvement, they assume parents are not motivated and don't value education (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

However, teacher perceptions are not always accurate, and teachers often assume low parental involvement when it is not the case (Msengi, 2007; Wong & Hughes, 2006). Empirical research indicates that the belief that African American families are less involved than White families simply isn't true. For example, Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) analyzed data from the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study, which included a U.S. sample of 26,000 8th graders, their parents, teachers, and administrators. They found that controlling for SES, African American and Hispanic families were more involved than White families, and that especially with African American families, involvement was much higher.

Parental involvement can take many different forms, including parents' home interactions with children that tell them what the parents' expectations are and what they feel is important; parent-initiated contact with the school; and participation in parent-teacher organizations at the school (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993). The first type of parental involvement is generally invisible to teachers, and parents who communicate high levels of expectations and values toward school might not communicate with school. Hence even when teachers and administrators don't see involvement in school it does not necessarily mean it isn't happening (Kerbow & Bernhardt, 1993; Lee & Bowen, 2006).

A further complicating factor is that the relationship between visible school involvement and value of education is not always direct. For example, school personnel often don't consider the multiple factors other than "value of education" that influence school involvement. Especially with low income families, low involvement often means lack of time and resources, and lack of comfort with school personnel, rather than low value placed on education (Geenen, Powers, & López-Vazquez, 2005; Wong & Hughes, 2006).

Kerbow and Bernhardt (1993) found that single parenting, being low income, and working full-time were the most significant variables negatively impacting parental involvement. For poor parents who are less comfortable in a school environment, the difficulties are compounded. Structural barriers to school involvement,

such as time and transportation, may lead teachers to believe the parents lack motivation and do not value school (Lee & Bowen, 2006). This perception may lead school personnel to treat those parents in a negative manner, thus exacerbating the lack of comfort those parents felt with school involvement to begin with (Lee & Bowen, 2006).

One of the best predictors of a child's achievement is teacher expectations for that student (Brown & Medway, 2007; Hauser-Cram, Sirin, & Stipek, 2003), and the perception on the part of schools that African Americans don't value education is closely linked to low expectations for Black student performance that characterize U.S. schools (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2007). Indeed, research indicates that the teacher's perception of the parental value of education influences teacher expectation of that student (Msengi, 2007; Tyler, Boelter, & Boykin, 2008).

Hauser-Cram et al (2003) found that when teachers perceived there to be a large difference between their own educational values and the values of students' parents, they had lower expectations for the students, even when students' actual skills were controlled. There was a trend toward greater discrepancy when children were African American as opposed to White or Hispanic (Hauser-Cram et al, 2003).

The research cited above indicates that the value of education is likely not lower among African American families than White families, but another question to consider is whether it would in fact be appropriate if it were. In other words, should African American children and families, especially if they are poor, value education as much as White families? Job discrimination, poverty in the community, and lack of models of individuals from the community who have used education to get ahead may mean that not valuing education would be an appropriate response to the life situation of many African Americans (Philipsen, 1993). Thus not only should teachers not assume a low value of education, but if they do perceive it to be true, it probably should be considered a rational and logical response to the reality of being poor and Black instead of as a character flaw or an aberration.

Another factor that may be linked to teacher beliefs about the value of education in Black families is student resistance. Resistance is "opposition with a social and political purpose" (Abowitz, 2000, 878). In the context of schools, resistance occurs when students struggle against the

authority and organizing structures and norms of schools because of their own marginalization, lack of power, and poor treatment (Abowitz, 2000; Hendrickson, 2012; McLaren, 1985). Resistance theorists see resistance as a logical and often unconscious reaction to the recognition that instead of being the democratic institutions they are purported to be, schools are in fact places where social reproduction occurs.

In other words, contrary to dominant ideology, school is not a system that provides knowledge and opportunities equally to all, but rather a system in which higher social classes get what they need to maintain their position of power and lower classes are kept in their place (McLaren, 1985). Resistance can take active forms of misbehavior and overt defiance, but it also takes more passive forms such as sleeping in class, and failure to do assigned work. Either way, it is often interpreted by teachers and others "as their culture not valuing education" (Abowitz, 2000). Unfortunately, while adults who think outside the box and challenge marginalization are sometimes considered heroic, students are not, and resistance tends to make it even less likely that they will get any benefit from school and education (Abowitz, 2000; Gilmore, 1985; Hendrickson, 2012).

### Race and Social Class

One question that often comes up in discussions of racial bias is whether the bias is about race or social class. The comments and observations that have been discussed so far, as well as past research, indicate that the beliefs held by the teachers in this study are likely about both. In the U.S., negative beliefs (conscious and unconscious) about poor people abound, and negative beliefs (conscious and unconscious) about Black people abound—these beliefs and assumptions are part of the dominant narrative.

When these categories are combined, negative narratives stringing negative sets of beliefs and assumptions tend to be magnified. Thus, for example, in their study of special education Harry, Klingner, and Hart (2005) found that families who were victims of unwarranted negative assumptions and mistreatment by teachers and administrators were not those who were poor and White, or those who were Black and middle class, but those who were both poor and Black.

The families that were the subject of Mrs. James's soup bus story were both poor and Black, and the script she followed in

talking about them was likely a script that combined the two characteristics in a way that would be difficult to untangle. However, although students in our university courses sometimes argue that claims of racism are entirely about social class and not race, research indicates that race does act independently of social class.

This is supported by research, as in Skiba et al (2014), who studied the discrepancy in suspension and expulsion rates in schools, and who wrote: "Multivariate analyses have consistently demonstrated that race remains a significant predictor of suspension and expulsion even after controlling for poverty" (p. 646). Interview responses of the remaining two teachers in our study also clearly illustrate the independent role of race above and beyond social class in their beliefs about families.

Mrs. Blair, Amber's first mentor teacher in Fall 2010, was a 7th grade math teacher. At Mrs. Blair's school, Whites made up almost two-thirds of the student body, and the rest were mainly African American, with Hispanic and Asian students each making up around 2% of the population. Fifty-four percent of the students qualified for Free or Reduced Lunch. A White teacher with 21 years of teaching experience, Mrs. Blair taught three regular and three honors sections of math each day. Our observations led us to believe she was a caring and effective teacher. Below Mrs. Blair was responding to a question about whether she believes one should try to ignore race as a teacher or to take it into account:

MRS. BLAIR: I try not to ignore [race], obviously fru fru White female and I try to stay up with the hip hop world, try to make sure I can at least relate some way. Obviously I don't fall in their same socioeconomic background either, I was raised by two parents that lived together, I raised my kids by two parents so that part of it, I think because there are so many single parents there, and that's something you have to pay attention to and it's not necessarily just the Black community, that's probably all of the kids, but then the value of education is different in a Black family than in a White family...

PUCHNER: And why do you think there's that difference in education?

MRS. BLAIR: ...I don't know why the parent won't say education is the best way to go and that you need to stay in school and that you need to get the education, not drop out and work ...

In the excerpt above, Mrs. Blair begins by referencing cultural differences ("the hip hop world") between herself and her

Black students that necessitate her effort to make sure she can "relate in some way" to the students in order to be a good teacher. Then she explores the social class and family configuration differences and notes that single parent families are not unique to the Black community. However, she finishes the response by emphasizing that although single parent families are White and Black, there is a White-Black difference in "value of education."

The comments indicate that Mrs. Blair sees social class as an issue, but that when it comes to the specific question of value of education, in her reality there is a Black-White difference that transcends social class. As with the previous examples of teacher statements, Mrs. Blair likely does not realize the extent to which that idea is an untested background assumption that permeates the institutional culture of the school.

Mrs. Rain's interview even more directly addresses the role of race above and beyond social class. Mrs. Rain was a 3rd grade teacher for Michelle's first field placement. Seventy-five percent of the students in the school qualified for free or reduced lunch, and, as indicated earlier, 81% of Mrs. Rain's students were students of color. Mrs. Rain had been teaching for eight years, and had a friendly, open personality. Our observations of her classes indicated that she had a very difficult time with behavior management, primarily due to weak teaching skills, a conclusion also expressed by Michelle in our interviews with her.

In our interview with her, Mrs. Rain did not directly say that African American families don't value education, but this belief underlay much of what she said. The views that she expressed in the interview were in general quite disturbing, and because of space we are sharing just a few very brief excerpts from a much larger narrative. During the interview she derided two nearby school districts that are almost 100% African American, she derided families "on public aid" who request not to pay textbook fees, and she derided children who spoke African American dialect. (Regarding student use of the phrase "that's mines" instead of "that's mine," among other things she said: "...you can't say words that aren't real. And he's like, 'but that's just my language', and I said, 'so your language is unreal words?'" )

We speculate that Mrs. Rain was very frustrated by the difficulties she had with behavior management, and that one way that she dealt with the frustration was to denigrate and blame her students'

parents and families. We also speculate that because of institutional racism and classism, even though she admitted during the interview that one of her most difficult students was White, she placed the blame entirely on the families of her Black students and by extension on Black families in general, who she implied were irresponsible, selfish, and neglectful in how they raised their children.

At one point she lamented the fact that when she was growing up, parents volunteered in school and in the classroom, but that it's different now.

I don't want to say that parents don't care, but sometimes it seems like that. Sometimes it seems like they have other priorities, and their kids aren't at the top of that priority list.

A little later Markowitz picked up on that statement:

MARKOWITZ: You were saying you think parents have another, sometimes the kids aren't their first priority. Like what is their first priority, like in your experience?

MRS. RAIN: Themselves. They want to dress nice, they want to look nice, they have other kids, maybe one other kid, or multiple other kids, so there's just so many kids I've seen, it's like let the kids fend for themselves, and the oldest one can deal with everybody else, and I'm going to sit back and do what I want to do.

We see here a repeat of one of the salient themes in Mrs. James's story, cited earlier, about bad parenting in African American families, illustrating commonalities among institutions. Mrs. Rain's responses demonstrate an underlying belief that African American students tended to have worse behavior and lower achievement than White students, and that it was due to family acceptance of bad behavior at home, selfishness of the parents, and low value placed on education. At one point Mrs. Rain acknowledged that since most of her students were African American, it's hard to tell whether race is the cause "...when the majority of your class is African American, it's hard to say." However, later in the interview this exchange occurred:

MARKOWITZ: Like if this whole class was full of White kids who were just from a lower SES, do you think you'd see some of the same issues?

MRS. RAIN: I think I would see some but I think it plays part with race, I really do. Just because of, like I said, because of their background, because of what they grow up with, and what they see at home, and what their parents are saying at home...

MARKOWITZ: So what else...do you think would be different in [an all-African American] classroom?

MRS. RAIN: Academics I think. I think that the way they perceive school would be different. I know that some kids come to school just because they have to, because their parents say they have to, because their parent brings them. It's like a daycare, here you go, keep my kid until you possibly can. I think that it would be different just because I think that the backgrounds of the people, or of those kids' families, really play a part of how they act here.

Mrs. Rain's interview responses show very negative beliefs about Black families in general, with the low value of education a prominent theme. Further, Mrs. Rain felt that the problems she experienced with some students were more likely to occur with lower income children, but she did not feel that being poor was the complete explanation.

Mrs. Rain also told us in the interview that parents have accused her of being racist, and although she denied that she is, it's not hard to understand why many parents would feel that way. Importantly, the fact that Mrs. Rain felt comfortable expressing the beliefs she did to the researcher is likely an indicator of the nature of the institutional culture.

### Implications

The data we've provided from the six teachers portrayed in this article do not prove that schools are institutionally racist, but they show us the faces of institutional racism that we know exists from other research (Levine-Rasky, 2000; Sleeter, 1994; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). An important message from this material is that teacher education has a bigger challenge than most of us realize. Both preservice teachers and teacher educators need to understand better the institutional background stories of the schools we are sending our teacher education students to, and figure out how to wrestle with it.

In Ferguson Missouri, although the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in August 2014 was not charged, U.S. Justice Department investigations found widespread abuse of African American citizens. This abuse was not usually lethal, but it caused great harm. The context of teaching and the context of policing are very different, but the underlying institutional dynamics are not.

School cultures permeated by a belief that African American families do not

value education have multiple negative effects on students of color. Two of the most commonly discussed problems are low teacher expectations for students of color and disproportionate punishment (Hauser-Cram et al, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Skiba et al, 2014).

Social trust, or the extent to which the students, teachers, administrators, and parents of a school maintain relationships with each other characterized by respect, personal regard, competence, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, pp. 41-42), is also effected. Social trust has been found to be more important to school improvement than many other frequently-cited factors (Bryk & Schneider, 2003), and of course when teachers don't value or respect parents and their opinions or hold them in high regard, social trust is low. Preservice teachers who do field experiences in schools with institutional cultures characterized by low social trust are likely to have a harder time moving away from that pattern.

Although the unintentional racism causes great harm, and lack of intention does not equal lack of responsibility, understanding intent is important in planning anti-racist education. Haney López's theory helps us see the need to factor in the role of agency but in a way that also keeps in mind the institutionalized nature of the racism.

One avenue is helping people understand how all of our thinking in daily life relies on unexamined assumptions about the world, and that we act with unconscious patterns of cognition and scripts in all areas, not just race. Haney López (2000) cites examples from prior research of non-race related assumptions people hold as they go through life. One such assumption is that communication is always meaningful, and one experiment showed how people go to great lengths to create meaning out of communication that is actually entirely random (Garfinkel, 1967, as cited in Haney López 2000).

Relatedly, Haney López's theory helps us see the role of attempts to change individual beliefs. Although "group interaction generates racial institutions, and...such institutions influence individual behavior through widely shared cognitive processes" (Haney López, 2000, p. 1808), not all individuals within an institution must act in accordance with the group.

Hence in the area of teacher education, educating individual teachers to resist a racist institutional culture could certainly change to a certain degree the experience

of students within an individual teacher's classroom. The punishment for violating cultural norms often makes it very difficult to behave in ways outside of the normative background stories, but the closed doors of U.S. classrooms make some deviation possible. Thus quality teacher education for diversity will be useful, since even mild disruptions made by individual teachers can make a difference to the students they are teaching (Khalifa, 2012; Marriott, 2003).

Further, a critical mass of individuals with background assumptions that are less racist or anti-racist will alter the institutional culture; obviously there are some schools that meet the needs of all students better than others. That being said, though, the theory also helps us understand the limitations of attempting to change beliefs.

### Conclusion

In this article we illustrate a major problem in education and in teacher education, the underlying dynamics of which are a national problem. The Ferguson unrest has spurred a spate of newspaper editorials addressing unconscious racial bias. However, although the bias part is somewhat well-known, it is not well-accepted, and neither is institutional racism.

What Haney López's and Bonilla-Silva's theories show is how individual unconscious bias and institutional racism fit together to decrease the odds of African American students succeeding, especially if they are poor. In teacher education most people tend to think we are already doing what is necessary to deal with racial issues by incorporating multicultural education into our courses. However, the current study shows what happens when you scratch the surface.

The national reform agenda for the past 20 years has focused on test scores and teacher evaluation, with no improvement in educational equity (Lee & Wong, 2004; Ravitch, 2010). Addressing the problem illustrated by the teachers profiled in this article would arguably have a greater positive impact on student learning and student achievement than recent or current major reform efforts.

In the case of policing, the very unfortunate recent events have placed a national spotlight on racial bias, which for the moment has the public's attention and might lead to some positive change. In teaching, negative beliefs about Black families don't directly kill people, and it's hard right now

to get the public to pay attention to it. So we need to work harder to raise the alarm and take action.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of study participants.

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