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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4md2f11g>

Journal

Technicalities, 41(3)

Author

Riemer, John J

Publication Date

2021-05-01

Some Reflections on Antiracism

Technicalities Column

March 9, 2021

by John J. Riemer

Head, UCLA Library Resource Acquisitions & Metadata Services

Introduction

In the wake of the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others, many in this country and in our profession have seriously reflected on how poorly we are faring in the struggle for racial justice in the United States and soul-searched to identify concrete actions we can take to make things better. As part of a new Antiracism Initiative¹ in the UCLA Library, I have been part of recent department heads group meeting discussions of Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist*.² This column is not a book review, but an effort to engage with some of the significant ideas found in the book and to validate, integrate, and connect them to past experiences in my own life.

Some Things in Life Really Are Either-Or

Kendi is a solid thinker from a philosophical perspective who carefully defines terms and thoroughly looks at things, from multiple perspectives. Particularly attention getting was the opening pair of definitions he offered: "Racist: One who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea. Antiracist: One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea."³ He reinforces the idea that there is no in-between, "There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every

institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups.”⁴

One almost never encounters a strong case for a binary claim like that. Usually one hears pushback that it’s not all one way or the other, that the situation is more nuanced, there are gradations, etc.

On reading this central tenet from Kendi, I flashed back to an occasion in my past where I encountered another jarring case for a binary perspective. In my first year working at University of Georgia, I attended a presentation by Gloria Steinem. When she was asked about the seeming discomfort of some young women with the label Feminist, she matter-of-factly pointed out, “Well there are not a lot of choices —either you are a feminist or you are a masochist.”⁵ Both of those quotes powerfully resonated with me and they seem to validate each other.

The Imperative to Judge People as Individuals

Kendi decries the wholesale comparison of groups regardless of the individuals comprising them. “A racist idea is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior or superior to another racial group in any way.”⁶ That admonition to judge people as individuals took me back to my freshman college class Women in U.S. History, where the instructor recounted the challenging question once put to Samuel Adams, “Who is more intelligent, men or women?” and the instructor in an approving tone shared with us Adams’ thoughtful response, “Well, which man and which woman?”⁷

I also recall my late uncle relating to me a story from his grade school class:

*Gloria Rosenberg, a onetime favorite of mine, as part of a fifth-grade oral report, which I paraphrase for contextual reasons, said: "We have all seen or heard of blacks and gentiles and Chinese and individuals of almost every group we can think of acting like scoundrels or performing some dastardly deed. And we condemn them and punish them as individuals. But when a Jew misbehaves or commits a crime, Jews as a group are blamed. That is not reasonable. Jews, too, must have the privilege, the right, to include within their ranks a few unethical or immoral persons, and they should be judged on their behavior as individuals, not on their membership in a group. Neither should the group be blamed for the behavior of any one individual." The idea is not new, you see, but it certainly needs periodic reiteration.*⁸

What more memorable reinforcement of this concept is there than MLK's words "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."⁹

Race as an Artificial Social Construct

Kendi recounts the history of discerning different races, dating back to Prince Henry the Navigator in the 15th century, serving as a basis for initiating and justifying the slave trade. He summarizes, "From the beginning, to make races was to make racial hierarchy."¹⁰ Kendi then recalls the White House celebration in 2000 for the completion of the decade-long project to map the human genome. Bill Clinton stated that when scientists "... stepped back and looked at the map, one of the 'great truths' they saw was 'that in genetic terms, all human beings, regardless of

race, are more than 99.9 percent the same'. What that means is that modern science has confirmed what we first learned from ancient faiths. The most important fact of life on this Earth is our common humanity."¹¹

Against that backdrop, it seems incomprehensible that Mildred and Richard Loving had to fight "anti-miscegenation laws" in Virginia all the way up to the Supreme Court in 1967, in order to be married.¹²

I remember stating to friends when I was in my 20's that we as a society needed to get the point where we regarded racial differences as neutral categories, "with all the significance of having freckles—no big deal!" Given the long-standing and pernicious problems that have stemmed from needlessly perceiving and acting on racial differences, I have often imagined the haunting question asked loudly in the Garden of Eden was not really "Who told you that you were naked?"¹³ but rather "Who told you that you were different?!"

While working in Georgia in the 1980s and 1990s, after growing up in California, I would take time to observe how people in the workplace reacted to others who were different from them. In my mind I saw a hierarchy of the different reactions. At the lowest level, people would *tolerate* others who were different. At the next level people would *accept* the other person. At what seemed like the highest level, people would actually *like* and *support* the other person. In more recent years, I came to see that there was actually one more level on top of the others.

The ultimate would be the ability for people to *identify* with the other person. As one example of what this means, I recall the reaction at the creation of the MLK

holiday during the Reagan administration. Some were only willing to view it as a concession to one demographic group. Instead of thinking that MLK is a hero to black people, we should be viewing him as a remarkable human being who did a lot of good for all of us. Another major example was the significance of the 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama. A souvenir t-shirt I acquired shortly after the inauguration captured it in a beautifully poetic fashion. “Rosa sat so Martin could walk, Martin walked so Barack could run, Barack ran so we all can fly.” That historic event could be embraced as an accomplishment by all of us.

Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

The three of those concepts are interrelated and go hand-in-hand. In an undergraduate philosophy class I still remember a reading in which an initial statement of “everyone is equal,” was carefully taken through a succession of refinements with an end result of “The freedom and well-being of every person is of equal value.”¹⁴ The context was distributive justice and how the goods and services in society are appropriately divided up. In class we were asked to consider the case of a child lost in a wilderness and the obviously very unequal distribution of resources spent on one individual in the form of search and rescue mission expenses incurred. Was that appropriate? Yes, since such an uneven distribution of resources was necessary to bring the freedom and well-being of that child up to an equal level with others.

Thinking along those lines, what seemingly uneven measures and efforts would we support in order to achieve roughly equal opportunities for others from underrepresented groups to enter and advance within our profession?

Kendi raises the inimical effect of microaggressions, defined by psychologist Derald Wing Sue as “brief everyday exchanges that send denigrating messages to certain individuals because of their group membership.”¹⁵ Kendi dislikes usage of the term, explaining, “A persistent daily low hum of racist abuse is not minor. I use the term ‘abuse’ because aggression is not as exacting a term. Abuse accurately describes the action and its effects on people: distress, anger, worry, depression, anxiety, pain, fatigue, and suicide.”¹⁶

If anyone is sufficiently aware of the corrosive effects that such abuse has on an individual and is able to *identify* with the person involved on the receiving end, my thought is this: Could they not in a purposefully uneven manner go out their way to do small things to make such a person feel wanted, appreciated, and welcome? If a caring individual cannot think of any means to create or enhance opportunities for others to enter or advance in our profession, it would still represent a valuable contribution to remove or diminish the *discouragement*!

The Imposter Syndrome

I had the fortune in the recent past to spot a student assistant with aptitude for leadership and interest in learning about the larger picture of the work she was doing. After her graduation, I wrote letters of reference for her and followed with interest what she accomplished in the internships she landed. When one of the internship supervisors stated that what she accomplished in 12 weeks would have taken any other employee at the worksite an entire year to finish, it reinforced the

sense that this was someone quite special and I shared the joy of the moment with her.

It became possible for her to get a temporary job in my department as staff member, followed by a permanent one. She decided to apply to an iSchool to obtain a library degree. When we talked about what this meant to her, I learned that she would become the first person in her family tree to obtain a Master's degree. In further discussions, I learned a lot from her about the "Imposter Syndrome." She pointed out she faced that both as a woman and as an African-American. I felt this would be a critical factor in whether or not she succeeds. Was there anything I could say or do that would help push aside the sense of doubt and questions about legitimacy? I wondered. After thinking hard about it for a couple of weeks, I recalled a poem "Desiderata" that was put to song.¹⁷

There is a lot of wisdom packed into the lyrics, but the most overwhelmingly important line in the song is this one: "You are a child of the universe. No less than the trees and the stars, you have a right to be here." I had a lot of self-doubt in my 20's and it helped me a lot to fall back on that perspective and the memory of what it sounded like when sung powerfully. I sincerely offered it to her as something I hoped she could "feel" in her bones as she goes through life. In return I received genuine appreciation.

Conclusion

I have tried to show how it is possible to take the concepts in Ibram Kendi's book and connect them to your own personal life experiences. I believe everyone is

capable of plugging into human universals. Once you do so, there are definitely things you can do to address the issues of justice that Kendi raises. As I put it in the eulogy I gave at my mother's funeral,¹⁸ "Sometimes all it takes for goodness to happen is for good people to *do* something!"

- ¹ UCLA Library. "Anti-Racism Initiative Update," January 25, 2021. <https://www.library.ucla.edu/news/ucla-library-anti-racism-initiative-update>
- ² Ibram X. Kendi. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: One World, 2019.
- ³ Kendi, page 13.
- ⁴ Kendi, page 18.
- ⁵ Presentation made summer of 1982. A similar quote was captured by Shelly Morris Mumma, "'How do you address anti-feminists in one phrase?' Her response, 'You have a choice. You're a feminist or a masochist. There is nothing else'." in the blog of NASPA, Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, April 22, 2025. <https://naspa.org/blog/you-re-a-feminist-or-a-masochist-gloria-steinem>
- ⁶ Kendi, page 20.
- ⁷ Ms. Rose Drummond teaching at Santa Monica College, fall 1973.
- ⁸ William J. Riemer, personal communication, November 15, 1995, recalling a classroom experience from 1934-1935.
- ⁹ Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. "I Have a Dream: Full-Text March on Washington Speech," August 28, 1963. <https://www.naacp.org/i-have-a-dream-speech-full-march-on-washington/>
- ¹⁰ Kendi, page 40.
- ¹¹ Kendi, page 52.
- ¹² "Mildred and Richard Loving." In a Wikipedia article https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mildred_and_Richard_Loving covers the Loving v Virginia case, which was the subject of the 2016 film *Loving* <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4669986/>
- ¹³ Genesis 3:11. <https://biblehub.com/genesis/3-11.htm>
- ¹⁴ In my best efforts to retrace my way back to a citation, the closest I have come is John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice*. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971.
- ¹⁵ Kendi, page 46.
- ¹⁶ Kendi, page 47.
- ¹⁷ Max Ehrmann wrote the poem "Desiderata" in 1927. The album by Les Crane was published in 1971 [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desiderata_\(Les_Crane_album\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desiderata_(Les_Crane_album)) and the song can be heard on YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gc0tXVD8TAc>
- ¹⁸ May 9, 1989.