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STARBUCKS AND THE ISSUE OF WHITE SPACE

What's most crucial isn't whether a company can diminish bias among its employees. It's the acknowledgment that bias is so pervasive it has to try.



By Jelani Cobb

Elijah Anderson, a professor of sociology and African-American studies at Yale, has spent much of his career exploring the dynamics of African-American life in mostly black urban environments. Three years ago, however, he published a paper, titled “The White Space,” which looked at the racial complexities of mostly white urban environments. “The city’s public spaces, workplaces and neighborhoods may now be conceptualized as a mosaic of white spaces, black spaces and cosmopolitan spaces,” Anderson wrote. The white spaces are an environment in which blacks are “typically absent, not expected, or marginalized.”

Academics are commonly dogged by questions of how their research applies to the real world. Anderson has faced the opposite: a scroll of headlines and social-media posts that, like a mad data set liberated from its spreadsheet, seem intent on confirming the validity of his argument. The most notable recent case in point occurred on April 12th, when a white employee of a Starbucks in Philadelphia called the police on two young black men, Rashon

Nelson and Donte Robinson, who asked to use the rest room before they had ordered anything. They were arrested on suspicion of trespassing; it turned out that they had been waiting for a business associate to join them.

The incident was both disturbing and disturbingly common. A few days later, an employee at a New Jersey gym called the police, on the suspicion that two black men using the facility had not paid; they had. A couple of weeks after that, a woman in California called the police on three black women who she thought were behaving suspiciously. They were actually carrying bags out of a house they had rented on Airbnb. Earlier this month, a white student at Yale called the police on a black graduate student for exhibiting behavior that struck her as suspicious: napping in a common area. Thousands of social-media users have since shared their experiences as persons of color in a “white space.”

Starbucks didn't press charges against the men, but protests followed, along with the requisite hashtag directive, in this case, #boycottStarbucks. The men, though, settled with the city for a dollar apiece and a promise to invest in a program to assist young entrepreneurs. They also negotiated a settlement with Starbucks that included an offer of a free college education. (And the company announced that anyone can now use the rest rooms without buying anything.) In the tempest of race in America, the resolution was marked by an impressive degree of good faith. Yet Starbucks' attempt to address the larger issue—the racial assumptions that lead to such incidents—has met with skepticism.

The company's C.E.O., Kevin Johnson, announced that, on the afternoon of May 29th, Starbucks will close its eight thousand coffee shops across the country, in order to conduct “racial-bias training” for its employees. This isn't its first foray into race concerns. In 2015, after the protests in Ferguson,

Missouri, the company encouraged its employees to write the phrase “Race Together” on takeout cups. The idea was widely ridiculed, but asking customers to contemplate the most consistently radioactive topic in American society while savoring their preferred combinations of soy, mocha, and caramel was certainly noteworthy.

For the May 29th training, Starbucks has gone deeper, consulting with, among others, former Attorney General Eric Holder; Sherrilyn Ifill, of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund; Bryan Stevenson, of the Equal Justice Initiative; Heather McGee, of the Demos Center; and Jonathan Greenblatt, of the Anti-Defamation League. A video preview of the curriculum released last week featured messages from the company’s executive chairman, Howard Schultz, and from Common, and a film by the veteran documentary-maker Stanley Nelson.

The concept of “implicit bias”—the subtle, unconscious responses that we’re conditioned to display—has lately become familiar, for reasons relating both to its valence among academics and to its ability to bridge a particular chasm in the dialogue about race. The popular perception of racism as mostly the product of the kind of monstrous people who, say, would drive into a crowd of pedestrians in Charlottesville, Virginia, makes it difficult to address the more pervasive daily practices of it. In fact, the bar for perceived bigotry has been set so high that, last week, an attorney caught on video railing against Spanish-speaking employees at a restaurant in New York, and threatening to have them deported, could release a statement earnestly declaring himself not to be a racist.

Implicit bias disassociates racism from overt villainy and, as a consequence, engenders less defensiveness in the dialogue. A series of events in recent years sparked conversations about implicit bias among the police, but, as the

Starbucks situation and others like it have demonstrated, there is a companion issue: the ways in which the police can serve as a vector of the biases of individual citizens. The question isn't simply whether an officer displays bias in carrying out his official duty but whether the call that led to his presence in a given situation is itself the result of bias. The crucial aspect of the Starbucks story isn't whether a company can, in a single training session, diminish bias among its employees. It's the implied acknowledgment that such attitudes are so pervasive in America that a company has to shoulder the responsibility of mitigating them in its workforce.

It would be possible to see the recent incidents as a survivable pestering—racism as nuisance—were it not for the fact that the denial of the unimpeded use of public space has been central to the battles over civil rights since Emancipation. In 1883, the Supreme Court heard five cases, collectively known as the Civil Rights Cases, involving the harassment of African-Americans in theatres and hotels and on trains. The Court ruled against the plaintiffs, finding that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was an unconstitutional violation of the rights of private businesses. In a famous dissent, Justice John Marshall Harlan noted that “today it is the colored race which is denied, by corporations and individuals wielding public authority, rights fundamental in their freedom and citizenship.” He added, “At some future time, it may be that some other race will fall under the ban of race discrimination.”

Not only was Justice Harlan prescient about the current treatment of other races; he also foresaw a Presidency that strives to make the United States itself feel like a white space. Implicit biases often have a way of becoming explicit ones. ♦

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