



ACKNOWLEDGING THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:

PROMINENT RACIAL THEMES IN CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE'S *AMERICANAH*



ESPECIALLY SINCE THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT OF THE 1950'S AND 1960'S,
RACE HAS BEEN THE "ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM" IN THE UNITED STATES...



PRESENTATION OUTLINE

- Obstacles that impede understanding how race works in the U.S.
- Points necessary for unveiling U.S. racial hierarchy
- Moving forward with this knowledge



**OBSTACLES THAT IMPEDE UNDERSTANDING
HOW RACE WORKS IN THE U.S.**



OBSTACLE #1:

MANY PEOPLE IN THE U.S. DO NOT WANT TO SEE RACE...

Chapter 12 (p. 155):

As they walked out of the store, Ifemelu said, “I was waiting for her [the cashier] to ask ‘Was it the one with two eyes or the one with two legs?’ Why didn’t she just ask ‘Was it the black girl or the white girl?’”

Ginika laughed. “Because this is America. You’re supposed to pretend that you don’t notice certain things.”

OBSTACLE #2:

MANY PEOPLE WANT TO LOOK BEYOND RACE AND FIND A NON-RACIAL REASON FOR SOMETHING THAT HAS HAPPENED...

Chapter 37 (p. 416):

And then I [Shan] write about my mom being bitter at work, because she felt she'd hit a ceiling and they wouldn't let her get further because she was black, and my editor says, 'Can we have more nuance?' Did your mom have a bad rapport with someone at work, maybe? Or had she already been diagnosed with cancer? He thinks we should complicate it, so it's not race alone. And I say, But it *was* race. She was bitter because she thought if everything was the same, except her race, she would have been made vice president. And she talked about it a lot until she died. But somehow my mom's experience is suddenly unnuanced. 'Nuance' means keep people comfortable so everyone is free to think of themselves as *individuals* and everyone gets where they are because of their *achievement*.

OBSTACLE #3:

MANY PEOPLE IN THE U.S. DO NOT WANT TO DELVE INTO CONTRADICTIONS AND COMPLEXITY SURROUNDING RACE; IN OTHER WORDS, THEY WANT TO KEEP IT SIMPLE...

Chapter 39 (p. 435):

I. Of all their tribalisms, Americans are most uncomfortable with race. If you are having a conversation with an American, and you want to discuss something racial that you find interesting, and the American says, “Oh, it’s simplistic to say it’s race, racism is so complex,” it means they just want you to shut up already. Because of course racism is complex. Many abolitionists wanted to free the slaves but didn’t want black people living nearby. Lots of folks today don’t mind a black nanny or black limo driver. But they sure as hell mind a black boss. What is simplistic is saying “It’s so complex.” But shut up anyway, especially if you need a job/favor from the American in question.

OBSTACLE #4:

OFTEN, PEOPLE TAILOR WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT RACE IN THE U.S. TO FIT THE PEOPLE TO WHOM THEY ARE TALKING...

Chapter 33 (p. 377-378):

And so, in the following weeks, as she [Ifemelu] gave more talks at companies and schools, she began to say what they wanted to hear, none of which she would ever write on her blog, because she knew that the people who read her blog were not the same people who attended her diversity workshops. During her talks, she said: “America has made great progress for which we should be very proud.” In her blog she wrote: *Racism should never have happened and so you don’t get a cookie for reducing it.*

EIBACH, R.P., & EHRLINGER, J. (2006). "KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE PRIZE": REFERENCE POINTS AND RACIAL DIFFERENCES IN ASSESSING PROGRESS TOWARD EQUALITY. *PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN*, 32, 66-77.

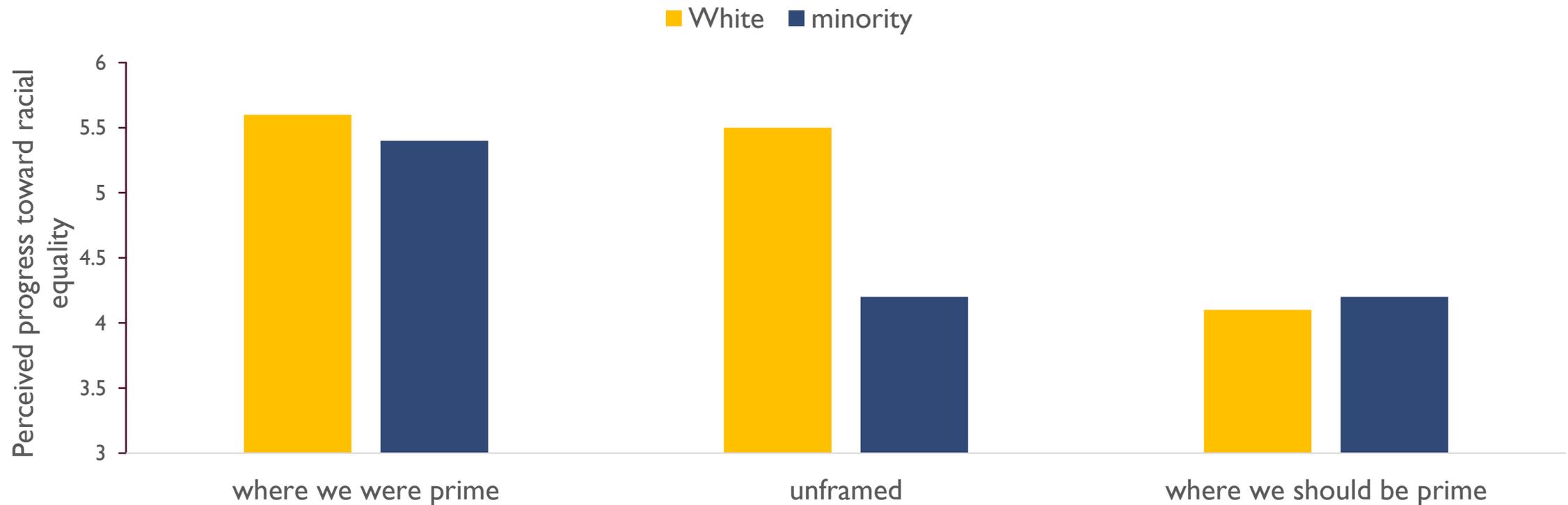


Figure 1 Means of judgments of progress toward racial equality by White and ethnic minority participants in the unframed, where we were, and where we should be conditions in Study 2.

SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL OBSTACLES THAT IMPEDE UNDERSTANDING HOW RACE WORKS IN THE U.S.

- Colorblindness blocking perception of race
- Disputes about attribution for racial behaviors and events
- Unwillingness to engage cognitive complexity of racial behavior and events
- Differing frames of reference for interpreting racial behavior and events



**POINTS NECESSARY FOR UNVEILING U.S.
RACIAL HIERARCHY**



POINT #1:

THE U.S. HAS A SOCIAL STRUCTURE THAT IMPACTS PEOPLE DEPENDING ON THEIR RACE...

Chapter 17 (p. 227):

There's a ladder of racial hierarchy in America. White is always on top, specifically White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, otherwise known as WASP, and American Black is always on bottom, and what's in the middle depends on time and place. (Or as that marvelous rhyme goes: if you're white, you're all right; if you're brown, stick around; if you're black, get back!) Americans assume that everyone will get their tribalism. But it takes a while to figure it all out.

POINT #2:

THE U.S. SOCIAL STRUCTURE DETERMINES WHO RECEIVES ATTENTION...

Chapter 3 I (pp. 365-366):

“So three black women in maybe two thousand pages of women’s magazines, and all of them are biracial or racially ambiguous, so they could also be Indian or Puerto Rican or something. Not one of them is dark. Not one of them looks like me, so I can’t get clues for makeup from these magazines. Look, this article tells you to pinch your cheeks for color because all their readers are supposed to have cheeks you can pinch for color. This tells you about different hair products for *everyone* – and ‘everyone’ means blonds, brunettes, and redheads. I am none of those. And this tells you about the best conditioners – for straight, wavy, and curly. No kinky. See what they mean by curly? My hair could never do that. This tells you about matching your eye color and eye shadow – blue, green, and hazel eyes. But my eyes are black so I can’t know what shadow works for me. This says that this pink lipstick is universal, but they mean universal if you are white because I would look like a golliwog if I tried that shade of pink. Oh look, here is some progress. An advertisement for foundation. There are seven different shades for white skin and one generic chocolate shade, but that is progress. Now, let’s talk about what is racially skewed. Do you see why a magazine like *Essence* even exists?”

POINT #3:

THE U.S. SOCIAL STRUCTURE CONSTRUCTS STEREOTYPES...

Chapter 31 (p. 367):

White Girlfriend and I are Michelle Obama groupies. So the other day I say to her – I wonder if Michelle Obama has a weave, her hair looks fuller today, and all that heat every day must damage it. And she says – you mean her hair doesn't grow like that? So is it mean or is that the perfect metaphor for race in America right there? Hair. Ever notice makeover shows on TV, how the black woman has natural hair (coarse, coily, kinky, or curly) in the ugly “before” picture, and in the pretty “after” picture, somebody's taken a hot piece of metal and singed her hair straight? Some black women, ..., would rather run naked in the street than come out in public with their natural hair. Because, you see, it's not professional, sophisticated, whatever, it's just not damn normal.

POINT #4:

THE U.S. SOCIAL STRUCTURE REINFORCES NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS...

Chapter 16 (pp. 204-205):

She [Ifemelu] went to the door. A burly, red-faced man stood there, carrying cleaning equipment, something slung over his shoulder, something else that looked like a lawn mower propped at his feet.

He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility.

“You need a carpet cleaned?” he asked, as if he did not care, as if she could change her mind, as if he wanted her to change her mind. She looked at him, a taunt in her eyes, prolonging a moment loaded with assumptions: he thought she was a homeowner, and she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with the white pillars.

“Yes,” she said finally, suddenly tired. “Mrs. Turner told me you were coming.”

It was like a conjurer’s trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be.

“How are you doing? Know where she wants me to start?” he asked.

“Upstairs,” she said, letting him in, wondering how all that cheeriness could have existed earlier in his body. She would never forget him, bits of dried skin stuck to his chapped, peeling lips, and she would begin the blog post “Sometimes in America, Race is Class” with a story of his dramatic change, and end with: *It didn’t matter to him how much money I had. As far as he was concerned I did not fit as the owner of that stately house because of the way I looked. In America’s public discourse, “Blacks” as a whole are often lumped with “Poor Whites.” Not Poor Blacks and Poor Whites. But Blacks and Poor Whites. A curious thing indeed.*

SUMMARY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH U.S. RACIAL HIERARCHY...

- Hierarchical status greatly determines racial experiences
- Image salience is primarily shaped by media instruments that reflect hierarchical status
- Stereotypes frequently underlie what is valued and lauded
- Norms and expectations govern interracial interactions, especially in ambiguous situations



MOVING FORWARD WITH THIS KNOWLEDGE



LISTEN AND ENGAGE!

Chapter 36 (p. 406):

So after this listing of don'ts, what's the do? I'm not sure. Try listening, maybe. Hear what is being said. And remember that it's not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don't understand, ask questions. If you're uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It's easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding.

BROWN, K.T., & OSTROVE, J.M. (2013). WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN ALLY?: THE PERCEPTION OF ALLIES FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PEOPLE OF COLOR. *JOURNAL OF APPLIED SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY*, 43 (11), 2211-2222.

- Study 1 participants reported that creating a feeling of connection and interest or having a respectful, non-judgmental attitude represented how an ally would make them feel comfortable and understood.
- Participant statements:
 - “They understand ‘where I am coming from’ and are respectful.”
 - “They could compare how they feel about certain issues that deal with race with how we feel...if there is a disagreement, it would help to discuss why there is and what could be done about it.”

TAKE-HOME POINTS

- *Americanah* is an amazing, brave book meant to inspire difficult conversations, even as we appreciate its effectiveness as a novel.
- Many obstacles stand in the way of understanding how race works in the U.S.
- Despite the obstacles, we should work to unveil how racial hierarchy works in the U.S.
- We must be willing to listen and engage each other around difficult, often charged, racial issues.