

October 2021

Race, Politics, and Justice: A Clash of Interpretations

Matthew DePinho
Seton Hall University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/locus>

Recommended Citation

DePinho, Matthew (2021) "Race, Politics, and Justice: A Clash of Interpretations," *Locus: The Seton Hall Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 4, Article 3.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70531/2573-2749.1036>

Available at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/locus/vol4/iss1/3>

Race, Politics, and Justice: A Clash of Interpretations

Matthew DePinho
Seton Hall University

Abstract

*Today's climate of racial reckoning in the United States raises profound questions about the roots of racial-ethnic inequality. While protesters lament and denounce what they view as a systematically racist society that devalues Black lives, critics of the movement condemn the chaos on the streets and what they view as dangerous misdiagnoses of societal ills. The contrast in interpretations goes beyond race, however, with profound moral and emotional differences across the political divide. This essay reviews two major texts representing contrasting interpretations of racial disparities on the "left" and "right" in the United States. Applying the tools of political psychology, the essay examines Ijeoma Oluo's *So you want to talk about race*, and Jason Riley's *Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make it Harder for Blacks to Succeed*. It will be seen that the claims, counterclaims, and evidence found in each text reflect as much the political sensibilities of the left and right as they do sober analyses of the relevant evidence regarding racial inequality. The second half of the paper will engage in a discussion concerning moral and evolutionary psychology, examining the different moral foundation found in liberals and conservatives, such as Oluo and Riley, respectively, and how such foundations have developed to become part of our ideological identities and the way in which they impact our thoughts, core beliefs, and group affiliations. The findings have implications for the prospects of overcoming confirmation bias and finding common ground regarding the contentious questions*

of racial inequality and social justice.

The issue of race in the United States has been a long-standing, powerful, and controversial one from the founding of this country to this very moment in time. There seems to be consensus within the country that race has played a major role in its history and that people of certain races have been oppressed and exploited to the highest degree. African Americans, especially, have found that American history has not been very kind to them; it seems rather uncontroversial to say that from the establishment of this rather young nation until the present, Blacks have been the single most abused and victimized group in its history. To what end that exploitation and abuse has carried over into the modern day, however, remains fiercely contested. What *is* well-known and widely agreed upon is that Black Americans face a host of socioeconomic issues and that there remain a number of disparities between them and other races – namely, Whites. The roots from which these issues grow, however, is possibly the most controversial and hotly debated topic in American culture and politics today. This paper, with the assistance of two diametrically opposed texts—*So you want to talk about race* by Ijeoma Oluo and *Please Stop Helping Us* by Jason L. Riley—explore two contradictory factions in the U.S. context, whose interpretations could hardly be more distant: those who view “systemic racism” or “white supremacy” as the cause of racial disparity; versus those who attribute the blame to a decadent Black culture, coupled with misfiring progressive policies.

Needless to say, Oluo's and Riley's books contrast sharply regarding how the United States operates politically, economically, and socially. Oluo's core argument is that the United States operates as a *systemically racist country*, asserting that racism is present in every institution and apparatus in American politics, culture, society, and economy. She sees the issues facing African Americans as due fundamentally to sometimes subtle and often overt forms of institutional racism, which she contends exist to benefit the United States' established system of white supremacy. Riley's core argument, on the other hand, is that liberal Americans advocate for policies and programs which not only do not help Blacks, but actively *harm* them as regards their socioeconomic success. Just as fundamentally, Riley contends that the disparity and despair of the Black community result largely *from their own culture* – one that all too often emphasizes bad decisions and abandonment of personal responsibility and accountability. These are the basic premises of each of the books. *Could they be any further apart?* Where Oluo finds the source of the African American community's ills in social structure and racism, Riley finds it in "deficient" cultural norms and well-intentioned, but ultimately baneful, liberal policies. Analyzing this dramatic contrast in views provides a useful vantage point to understand the moral (and ultimately emotional) underpinnings of "left-" and "right-wing" knowledge claims about the plight of the Black community. This "clash of interpretations" will become apparent as we turn to the data and evidence Oluo and Riley employ in support of their contradictory and controversial claims.

Oluo's most striking piece of evidence centers around police harassment towards Black Americans. She recounts a time when she was stopped on the road by a police officer and felt intense fear. In Oluo's view, her fear was justified. "Black drivers are 23 percent more likely to be pulled over than white drivers," she points out, and "1.5 and 5 times more likely to be searched" (Oluo 86). Such "stops, searches and arrests" lead to a greater

likelihood of being killed by the police as well. Indeed, there is a "3.5-4 times" greater chance that they will be killed by the police, a statistic of which Native Americans also find themselves victims. Oluo draws attention as well to a 2016 report making clear the fact that within a period of thirteen months, Oakland police officers "handcuffed 1,466 black people in nonarrest traffic stops, and only 72 white people"—a statistic which very likely falls in line with the fact that African Americans are "almost 4 times more likely to be subject to force from police... than white people" (Oluo 86).

Although the rest of Oluo's evidence may not be as dire, it covers a wide array of issues related to race and the treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. For example, when discussing the issue of affirmative action and the need for it, Oluo points to studies showing that "if you have a 'black-sounding' name, you are four times less likely to be called for a job interview" and that Black women earn a mere sixty-five cents for every dollar that a White man earns. Hispanic women earn only fifty-eight, while White women—though still technically below their male counterparts—earn a comparatively lofty eighty-two (Oluo 115). Oluo goes on to inform her readers that African American and Hispanic students have greater likelihoods of being suspended, even beginning as soon as at the preschool level. As she notes, "16 percent of black students and 7 percent of Hispanic students are suspended each year, compared to only 5 percent of white students" (Oluo 116). Oluo contends that this is racially motivated and its long-term harmful effects can be found in the fact that "black and Hispanic students are underrepresented" in higher education institutions by twenty percent and that minority enrollment in colleges and universities decreases by twenty-three percent when affirmative action policies are repealed (Oluo 116-117). Oluo's most sobering statistic relating to affirmative action is that only two American colleges with bans on affirmative action found themselves in the presence

of “representational enrollment of black students” at the time this book was written, while there was only one when it came to Hispanics (Oluo 117). As the book is part personal narrative and an invitation to dialogue, Oluo does not aim to barrage the reader with data and statistics. However, the data she does provide is especially apt to propel readers into a conversation with themselves, if not others, about the validity of the distressing arguments she proposes.

Riley’s book is, from a purely objective standpoint, more analytical and concerned with presenting data and statistics. Some of the data appears incontrovertible, some not so much. The strongest data points center around the topics of voter identification laws, Black fatherlessness, criminality, and economic and educational disparities between Whites and Blacks. His views on these matters, as we’ll see, share little common ground with Oluo. Voter identification laws have always been controversial and now, living in a world post-2020 presidential election, have become even messier and contentious. It is common for such laws to be framed—whether by social justice activists, liberal politicians, or the mainstream media—as “restrictive” towards minority communities. Riley, however, frames voter identification laws as not restrictive or racially motivated whatsoever. He presents data from a 2012 *Washington Post* poll revealing that “such requirements are favored by a large majority of all voters, regardless of race,” as well as a 2013 press release by the Bureau of the Census demonstrating that African American voter turnout “surpassed white turnout” in the 2012 election, despite the fact that “more and more states were implementing these supposedly racist voter ID laws” (Riley 12, 13).

A provocative point Riley suggests with this data does not relate necessarily to why Black Americans find themselves so disparaged in American society. It relates rather to his recurring claim that liberals and progressives in the United States do not actually have the best interests of African Americans in mind when rallying against

such “restrictive” policies. His point is that if Black Americans have favorable opinions toward voter identification laws, and these laws have in no way slowed their use of the franchise, then liberal activists, politicians, and media personnel are not actually considering the best interests of African Americans. In fact, they are merely “using” them in a politically opportunistic fashion. By making the argument that voter identification laws are restrictive and motivated on the basis of race, liberals demonize conservatives and Republicans and send a message to people of color which tells them that the other side is “racist” and attempting to infringe upon their fundamental rights. These are the reasons in Riley’s view why liberals tend to oppose voter identification laws and dismiss proponents’ emphasis on election integrity.

Riley’s next major point centers around fatherlessness in the Black community and the issues to which it leads. Disparities between the White community and the Black community have long been attributed by critics of theories of structural racism to the lack of fathers in the homes of African Americans and in the lives of Black children. Riley reiterates this argument, alerting his readers to the fact that in the year 2011, roughly one-third of the country’s children lived only with their mothers, but that for Black children specifically, that number was two-thirds—around thirty percent greater. He goes on to relate the fact that today’s America sees over seventy percent of Black children being born to mothers who are not married and that only a mere sixteen percent of African American homes include “married couples with children, the lowest of any racial group in the United States” (Riley 37). Riley’s objective in pointing out these jarring and unfortunate statistics is that, according to him, they are a major driving force behind issues facing the Black community. He even goes as far as to say that having a Black man in the White House—referring to President Obama—has never been and never will be anywhere near as important as having a Black man in the *home* of each and every Black child.

Riley feels that the issue of Black fatherlessness is an overarching one that can be seen as either fully or partially responsible for many of the issues that Black Americans face, from low levels of academic success amongst Black students to increased incarceration rates. This combustible claim contrasts sharply with today's proponents of "critical race theory," who see the United States as inherently and institutionally racist. Yet for Riley, it is not racism, whether overt or institutional, that ultimately holds down the Black community. As he stresses, Black students from "similar social class backgrounds, residing in the same neighborhood, and attending the same school" as White students do not perform as well on average. For Riley, this is due to a Black culture that *deemphasizes* fatherhood and *overemphasizes* Black solidarity against "acting white" and embracing attitudes and practices that might enhance their success. The result is a lack of cultural capital among Black Americans (e.g., working hard in school, taking honors classes, taking part in extracurricular or afterschool activities, etc.) (Riley 44, 45).

Riley's book evenly navigates the cultural aspects of the Black community, which he believes has led its members down the wrong path, and a political critique of liberal policies that despite their good intentions result in no improvement for African Americans or an actual reduction in their socioeconomic status. To support the latter contention, he cites statistics on minimum wage laws. He notes a study suggesting that "that for white males ages 16 to 24," each time the federal or a state minimum wage was raised by ten percent, employment decreased by 2.5%, while "each 10% increase in the minimum wage has decreased employment by 6.5%" for Blacks (Riley 102-103).

Riley addresses public schooling as well and what he sees as the advantage of charters schools. He discusses a charter school that was located in the same building as a New York City public school, revealing that the two schools were constituted entirely of the same racial and socioeconomic make-up of students. He finds that "29 per-

cent of students at [the public school] were performing at grade level in reading and 34 percent were at grade level in math," while—in the other wing of the building—"the corresponding figures were 86 percent and 94 percent" for the charter students (Riley 124).

With regard to affirmative action, and in sharp contrast to Oluo, Riley argues that it actually harms Black and Hispanic students. Riley draws attention to the number of Black and Hispanic students at the University of California, Berkeley who graduated within four years. Remarkably, graduation rates increased "55 percent from 1995-1997 to 2001-2003," after voters in California abolished affirmative action policies in 1996 (Riley 161-162). This is only a sample of the statistically-informed claims Riley makes in his book. Whether one is swayed by his or Oluo's claims is the prerogative of the reader. Yet it is undeniable that Riley presents a wider array of quantitative evidence in making his claims than Oluo.

If we step back from the conflicting empirical claims of each book, we see that both authors indulge in what could be deemed *moral aggrandizing*. Each author views their book as standing up to false and harmful narratives of the other side. Interestingly, despite his deeper penchant for quantitative data, Riley hardly hesitates in demonizing others, as he lays heavy blame at the feet of liberals, progressives, and the Democratic party. Oluo deeply moralizes the issue as well, but for her it is less about the "false" claims of others than the urgency of standing up to white supremacy. Strikingly, Oluo never makes mention of President Donald Trump (despite writing the book in 2018), a man widely viewed to symbolically embody white supremacy; nor does she refer to his supporters, conservatives, or even the Republican party. It is clear that Oluo sees racism in the United States as everyone's problem to be fixed and as something by which everyone (regardless of political party or ideology) is affected. Riley, on the other hand, is laser-focused on exposing the lies and corruption of "well-intentioned" white

liberals, labor and teachers' unions, progressive politicians, and the media, whom he feels actively harm and disadvantage Black Americans in the guise of trying to help them.

What springs from the page in examining these contrasting texts is the language of moral emotion and a kind of tribal "us/them" narrative with regard to desired social aims. Indeed, the authors see themselves as truly being on the "right" side of a societal moral struggle. To be sure, Oluo employs a more muted "us vs. them" frame than Riley, as she appears concerned with (as her title suggests) how to properly discuss race issues with White Americans who share at least partial blame for the structurally racist problems of the country. It is plain, however, that Oluo sees herself as undeniably in the right and as a protagonist in a moral battle. Riley sees himself standing up for truth and justice as well, but also falls victim to an "us vs. them" mentality, wholly alienating himself from the liberal camp and their ideologies and policies. There appears no sign—by studying their respective writings—that either author conceives they may be incorrect or on the wrong side of the issue when it comes to identifying the problems Black Americans face, the reasons and causes of those problems, or the ways in which such problems ought to be rectified.

The moral righteousness and self-assurance of their convictions lead each author to a number of "blind spots" – holes in their arguments where they do not consider or even acknowledge alternative standpoints or contradictory evidence. Oluo makes the claim, for instance, that "police officers of color can show bias against civilians of color" without providing any statistical analysis of this (Oluo 93). Perhaps she is referring to the fact that police officers, regardless of race, arrest Black people at a greater rate than any other race—an occurrence which would fall in line with the fact that Black people commit roughly a quarter of all criminal offenses and half of all murders in the United States, according to the U.S. Department of Justice (OJJDP). Oluo does not take these

statistics into account, however, but rather considers minority police officers as being biased against other people of color as opposed to being dutiful officers who are doing their jobs and, as those on the right like to say, "going where the crime is." Oluo places a high degree of emphasis on "implicit bias," stating that when a police officer fires at an unarmed African American man and then claims it was out of fear, she believes that officer, but notes that such "fear itself is often racist and unfounded" (Oluo 93). This flies directly in the face of—and clearly ignores—Riley's theory that heightened police concentration on Black men is "based on the reality of high black crime rates;" and that because of these well-established statistically disproportionate rates of crime, encounters wherein young Black men are "hassled for the past behaviors of other blacks" are not necessarily "arbitrary or unreasonable" (Riley 64). Oluo blames disproportionate police attention and action towards Blacks in a way that ultimately exempts the Black community from accountability for crime. She either cites income and educational inequalities, meaning the Blacks harassed by the police *do* commit crimes but only because socioeconomic factors compel them to do so, or she cites racism, meaning that Blacks harassed by the police either do *not* commit the crimes or are harassed by the police due to implicit or explicit biases that target the color of their skin. Both of these explanations make it rather clear that Oluo is blind to (or merely ignoring) the fact that Black Americans commit crimes at a much higher level than other races, considering they make-up around thirteen percent of the population and commit over twenty-five percent of all criminal offenses (OJJDP).

This denial of *agency* of African Americans relates to another of Oluo's claims, where she asserts that Black and Hispanic students are suspended at greater rates than Whites due to teacher bias. For Oluo, teachers are "more likely to look for problem behavior in black children" and "more likely to call parents of children of color to report problem behavior" than they are the parents

of white students (Oluo 116). Yet Oluo ignores the fact that Black and Hispanic students are far more likely than Whites (as well as Asians) to commit offenses and violations at school, including bringing alcohol, drugs, and guns at a much higher rate (Wallace et al. 2008:53-54). Oluo does not take these facts into account and instead blames the disciplinary disparities on racism – which *can* be a factor, but quite obviously may not be the *only* factor in their disciplining. The stakes of this issue are significant as most would agree that those children who have been shown to commit more infractions in schools ought to be disciplined more than those who have been shown to commit fewer.

Another of Oluo's blind spots appears when she discusses a University of Washington study showing that the enrollment of minority students "drops 23 percent when schools enact an affirmative action ban." (Oluo 116-117). In affirming this, Oluo fails to consider data, such as that presented by Riley, demonstrating that doing away with affirmative action leads to greater Black and Hispanic student success, as such students are "more likely to attend a school where they could handle the work" (Riley 162). To Oluo's point about increased minority student enrollment due to eliminating affirmative action, Riley would no doubt affirm this is true, because it means that schools are no longer attempting to meet quotas along racial – as opposed to academic – lines. Riley discourages incentivizing students into schools where they may be outcompeted by their peers, directing all students (including Blacks and Hispanics) to schools where they can get in on their own merit and succeed independent of their racial-ethnic backgrounds.

Oluo's next major "blind spot" involves Asian Americans and what she, along with many other race theorists and social scientists, refers to as the "model minority myth." That myth, she opines, "places undue burdens and expectations on Asian American youth and erases any who struggle to live up to them" (Oluo 192). Essentially, Asian Americans are considered a "model minority" due

to their high income and education rates and their correspondingly low arrest and incarceration rates. They are "model minorities" in the sense that other racial-ethnic groups have the opportunity to succeed in America too if they, to echo the timeworn words of President Clinton, simply "work hard and play by the rules." At least that is how the theory goes. But for Oluo the claim of Asian American success is misrepresented because "Asian" is an umbrella term that references a multitude of different and highly varying countries, cultures, and class levels in American society. Oluo gives the example of "Cambodian, Laotian, Pakistani, and Thai Americans" and how they have poverty rates "of around 18 percent" (Oluo 194). What Oluo fails to recognize, however, is that certain groups of Asians Americans—Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indian Americans, for example—had, as of 2015, lower poverty rates than the rest of the United States population as a whole (especially those who were born in America as opposed to abroad) (Pew Research Center). Yes, it is a myth that *all* Asian Americans succeed socioeconomically in the United States, but on average Asian groups *do*, so the question that Oluo fails to consider is if the United States is systemically racist towards racial-ethnic minorities, and if these four groups of Asians do not have their cultural norms and values to thank for their success, how does one explain it? Oluo is either unwilling or unable to explain how certain groups of Asians, who are still people of color and racial minorities after all, ascend to higher levels of success in the United States than Whites. This fact is difficult to reconcile with the image of the United States as a white supremacist country with structural barriers in place that socially, politically, and economically oppress disadvantaged people of color.

Oluo's last major blind spot concerns the minimum wage. At the end of her book, when instructing her readers as to what they can do to further the racial justice movement, she directs them to "support increases in the minimum wage," while simultaneously providing no data or statistics what-

soever as to *why* (Oluo 233). Oluo's claim is simply that it would help impoverished or economically disadvantaged people of color, but she never takes into account, as Riley does, that increases in the minimum wage (both federally and at the state level) have been linked to *decreases* in employment for Black Americans, as well as for single mothers (who are disproportionately minority). Riley cites a 1995 study indicating that single mothers stay on public assistance "an average of 44 percent longer than their peers in states where the minimum did not rise" (Riley 108).

Oluo clearly hopes to help Black Americans by raising many of them out of poverty, but her calls for minimum wage increases reveals a lack of both economic education and research into this topic, given that there is hardly a consensus among economists on the employment implications of such increases. In fact, raising the minimum wage may not be an economically sound idea or one that provides advantages to the Black community, including the unemployed (who are not even in the workforce and will struggle with even greater difficulty to enter it if employers are forced to pay their workers more); those without steady jobs (who may lose those jobs once wages are legally increased); or those who are single mothers.

Despite his reliance on an abundance of statistical evidence, Riley falls victims to his own share of blind spots as well. For example, he gives the statistic that sixty percent of Blacks who grew up with parents earning incomes that were higher than average "fell below the average as adults" themselves, despite the statistic being only thirty-six percent for their white counterparts (56). He credits this disparity with the decadence of Black culture and misguided liberal policies designed at "helping" African Americans, but does not consider that this disparity could in fact be what Oluo and others are referring to when they point to structural racism and systemic barriers for people of color. Is it possible Black culture and its setbacks play a role? Yes. Is it possible that liberal policies play a role? Yes. But is it possible that

racist institutions, policies, and officials in positions of authority also play a role? Riley does not even consider this possibility – a glaring blind spot in his thinking for sure.

As noted above, when Riley discusses Black crime and the relationship between Black Americans and the police, he claims that police harassment towards young African American males is based, plain and simple, on "the reality of high black crime rates." He essentially concedes that Black men will be stopped by police more and met by police officers with more fear, caution, and aggression because African Americans as a race are simply the group more likely to be involved in criminal activity (Riley 64). He ignores both the fact that critics of the police and race theorists such as Oluo claim that this is actually racism – in the form of either implicit or explicit bias – which leads officers to target and harass Black men. Riley appears oblivious to the fact that even if it is true that police officers approach Black men with greater caution because they are simply more likely to commit crimes, a bad image for the police will obviously result. The police, after all, could be trained to operate on the facts and not on "statistical discrimination." Profiling and targeting African Americans for this reason will never be a sufficient argument against those who are firm in their conviction that the United States is a structurally racist and oppressive society. It is a fair argument that the other side would present: innocent Black Americans ought not to be harassed, demonized, or discriminated against for the "sin" of their skin color.

Riley's next blind spot concerns Congress' 1986 Anti-Drug Abuse Act, a measure that created "harsher penalties for crack cocaine offenses than for powder cocaine offenses" (Riley 72). He readily admits that crack cocaine is a drug predominantly used by African Americans, while powder cocaine is favored more heavily by whites. Yet he contends that the basis for this law, which "stipulated that one gram of crack cocaine be treated as equivalent to 100 grams of powder cocaine," was

not racially motivated or designed to increase the incarceration of Black Americans (Riley 72). Riley's main premise for asserting this is that it was Black elected officials who led the charge in passing this legislation and that it received the support of eleven out of the twenty-one African American House of Representatives members who voted on this bill (Riley 72). Riley seems confident that this law was not motivated on the basis of race, but fails to consider that eleven out of twenty-one Representatives hardly suggests overwhelming support. Moreover, it would inevitably be seen as targeting Black Americans considering the blatant disparity in punishment meted out to users of crack versus powder cocaine. It is not surprising in this light that those who view the country's institutions as steeped in systemic racism would cite this law and put it on top of their list of grievances.

Lastly, Riley claims that there is no data to prove that affirmative action works, and actually marshals data showing that it has a negative impact on the whole for Blacks and Hispanics. He does not consider, however, the possibility that affirmative action is simply not being implemented properly or to a wide enough degree, or with enough safeguards in place to ensure that it is done fairly. Perhaps appropriate implementation would prevent racism, on either the structural or interpersonal level, from interfering with its noble intentions and potential.

Being blind to evidence or arguments which threaten or contradict our own is natural but dangerous. We, as humans, rarely want to admit or even conceive that we may be wrong and so we all too often engage in confirmation bias. That is, we seek out (typically unconsciously) evidence that confirms what we already believe; and ignore information that runs counter to our preconceived beliefs (Haidt 93). Moreover, as renowned scholar Jonathan Haidt notes, when we engage in "motivated reasoning," we tend to "reach the conclusions" that we "want to reach," by interrogating studies that contradict our own interpretations or evidence; and we often question the truthfulness

or even motives of researchers themselves if their claims and evidence go against our moral or ideological beliefs (Haidt 98, 99). These psychological tendencies, sharpened in the context of an intergroup or "us/them" framework, underlie the blind spots of writers such as Oluo and Riley, whose conclusions are no doubt biased by their respective "moral intuitions" and resulting political sensibilities.

The apparent influence of each author's moral orientation on their thinking, writing, and framing of the problems they discuss is striking. Oluo's writing makes clear that she is overwhelmingly influenced by her own moral intuitions, presenting very little genuine data or evidence. Her main focus seems to be moral preaching and expressing personal feelings and experiences, which are valid, of course, but hardly probative. She frames every problem as being due in some way to racism and hence proposes solutions centered on diversity training, equitable quotas for hiring and academic enrollment (along the lines of race, gender, sex, etc.), and social programs rooted in progressive economic philosophy.

No doubt if Oluo's moral intuitions were more akin to Riley's, she would arrive at quite distinct empirical assessments and policy proposals. In both cases, reasoning appears to express underlying emotions; rationality reveals moral intuitions. As Haidt would say, our moral emotions come first and our strategic reasoning second (Haidt 106). Oluo's passionate adherence to the view that the United States is a systemically racist country spurs all manner of data deployment demonstrating that stark reality. Humans may believe we come to our conclusions about political issues or the way the world ought to be by engaging in rational thought and reasoning, but this could not be further from the truth. We feel certain emotions and then do whatever we can to back-up those emotions by finding, cherry picking, even inventing evidence that justifies and renders sensible these underlying emotions. Oluo is guilty of this and so is Riley. Riley is clearly right-leaning on the political spec-

trum and, as such, does not criticize conservatives or the Republican party in any way. The title of his book points specifically to how it is *liberals* that are preventing Blacks from achieving success in the United States. Surely, if Riley were a political *centrist* instead that still felt it was social programs and political policies which put Blacks at a disadvantage, he would find reasons as to why both parties *share* blame—at the very least a little—for the problems Black America faces. Riley frames all problems, however, as the result of a failing Black culture, liberal policies, or both, while all solutions center around “fixing” Black culture (e.g., putting fathers back in the homes, making it socially acceptable among Blacks to put effort into academics) and ending or preventing government initiatives aimed at the Black community with the intention of reducing racial disparities (e.g., minimum wages laws, affirmative action). Each of these authors are clearly blinded and massively influenced by their moral foundations, ideological orientations, and political affiliations.

Despite *both* authors engaging in confirmation bias and motivated reasoning and being greatly affected by their own orientations, emotions, and beliefs, on balance one of their arguments and evidence is more convincing than the other: I refer here to Riley. I consider myself on the political right myself, and naturally, I feel inclined to agree with the things Riley asserts, both his central claims and the evidence he marshals. I like to imagine, however, that even if I ideologically leaned towards Oluo and her arguments, that I would find it hard to ignore the vast contrast between the amounts of evidence she and Riley respectively employ. Riley’s book includes one-hundred-ninety-six endnotes, while Oluo’s had only thirty-seven. That is, Riley has over five times more credited sources, statistics, and pieces of evidence which he pulls from, quotes, and presents to buttress his points than does Oluo.

Of course, these two books are quite different in their natures. In fairness to Oluo, her aims were both more personal and interpersonal, offering es-

entially a guidebook to broach sensitive conversations about race both within and across the ideological divide. Not geared toward a scholarly audience, Oluo’s data and statistical evidence are only sprinkled in on occasion to help elucidate a specific point along the way. Riley’s book, on the other hand, is more explicitly scientific and relies heavily on statistical analyses and the views of experts and scholars.

Haidt explains in his lecture at Duke University in the fall of 2016 that American colleges and universities can have one of two *teloses* (the Greek word for “goals,” essentially): social justice *or* truth. This concept falls directly in line with the dichotomy between these two books: Oluo’s is a guide for achieving racial equity and social justice (e.g., supporting affirmative action because racial disparities on college campuses are immoral); while Riley puts greater emphasis on the truth (e.g., *not* supporting affirmative action because the data does not attest to its success). Oluo’s book was comprised of anecdotes, personal experiences and feelings, and theoretical arguments, explanations, and philosophies. Riley’s book was a more technical and empirical expedition into the issues facing the Black community and the reasons for those issues. In the end, however, if writers such as Haidt are correct, readers will embrace or reject either Oluo or Riley less for the empirical merits of their work than for the resonance of their respective moral arguments with their own political sensibilities. Given the political psychology sketched in this paper, I cannot be sure my endorsement of Riley’s view is free of such “political” motivation.

Jonathan Haidt’s *The Righteous Mind* is a groundbreaking text which delves into the roles that social, moral, and evolutionary psychology play in relation to the way in which human beings think, develop their systems of beliefs and values, and interact with one another politically and ideologically. In his book, Haidt introduces the reader to “moral foundations theory,” which he believes helps explain how our

minds are “organized in advance of experience” and how this “first draft,” which is provided by nature and then revised by worldly experiences, produces “the diversity of moralities that we find across cultures—and across the political spectrum” (Haidt 153). He makes the claim that human morality is based upon five major foundations (including a sixth later on in the book which is not as significant or relevant to this paper): care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. I will seek, below, to show how three of them (care/harm, fairness/cheating, authority/subversion) are related to Oluo and Riley and their personal ideological orientations and political leanings, as well as the way in which such moral foundations present themselves in each of these authors respective books. First, let us take a look at the ways in which these moral foundations developed and their relevance to our current world and the social and political structures in the United States.

The care/harm foundation “makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need;” the fairness/cheating foundation “makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism;” and the authority/subversion foundation “makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position” (Haidt 178, 179). Each of these foundations, Haidt explains, were adapted in prehistory in order to confer humans advantages in their struggle to survive (and ultimately, reproduce and pass on genes). This is the crux of evolutionary psychology: explaining current psychological propensities by examining how certain behaviors and philosophies could have been adaptive in prehistory in order to increase one’s chance for survival and reproduction.

As concerns the care/harm foundation, Haidt asserts that humans met the “enormous adaptive challenge” of passing on one’s genes despite

the “big wager” humans engage in by essentially putting all of their genetic eggs into one basket (meaning nine months of pregnancy and large sums of time, energy, and finances to care for a single child) by developing the psychological traits which cause us “to care for the vulnerable and expensive child, keep it safe, keep it alive, keep it from harm” (Haidt 154). Babies need to survive in order to pass on the genes of their parents; to survive, they need nurture, nourishment, and safety. The care/harm foundation in our minds attunes us to feeling sensitive towards those innocent, weak, or defenseless beings who cannot care, look after, or protect themselves (e.g., babies, polar bears, refugees of war, etc.).

The fairness/cheating foundation evolved from the human tendency to reciprocate favors and, as Haidt puts it, “play ‘tit for tat’” in order to reap benefits (Haidt 159). The fairness/cheating foundation allowed human beings to face “the adaptive challenge of reaping” certain benefits—such as sharing a portion of food with another member of your tribe, knowing they will return the favor—“without getting suckered” (Haidt 159). Humans have become attuned to making sure that everyone pulls their weight and provides their fair share in their society, community, or group. How does it benefit our survival, and ultimately our reproduction, if we are giving away food or providing other benefits to others if they will never repay us? Take, for example, a prehistoric tribe made-up of several dozen people. Imagine a member of the tribe who takes but does not give; who eats without contributing to the hunt or the gathering of food; and who enjoys the security provided by other men but does not act bravely when called upon to defend the group. Why should such a group continue to support, associate with, or shelter this man? This member’s lack of reciprocal altruism towards his group means that he is accounting only for his own survival and reproduction and doing nothing to help the group. The fairness/cheating foundation sensitizes human beings to care strongly about equal-

ity and proportionality and causes us to root out those who are taking advantage of us for their own personal gain while doing nothing to benefit the group or help us further our own survival and reproductive ends.

The authority/subversion foundation allows humans to “meet the adaptive challenge of forging beneficial relationships within hierarchies” (Haidt 168). Haidt claims that human beings will register it immediately “when people within a hierarchical order act in ways that negate or subvert that order”—such as a high school student referring to one of their teachers by their first name (Haidt 168). Within all societies and groups, as well as between groups, there are pecking orders. In his pathbreaking text, *The Lucifer Principle*, Howard Bloom discusses sociobiology, which examines how biological forces impact social interactions between humans (as well as animals), and the way in which it relates to the formation of pecking orders—“known technically as dominance hierarchies” (Bloom 196). Bloom centers his discussion around farm hens, examining the research of Thorlief Schjelderup-Ebbe, which found that, during mealtimes, chickens will always approach the feeding troughs in the same exact order, with the most powerful and respected hens going first and the rest of the totem pole following in their predetermined order. Additionally, when a new hen would be introduced to the community, violence would ensue, as the freshmen would set out to establish their place in the dominance hierarchy, pushing whomever she could beneath her to obtain a greater level of power, privilege, and authority. Bloom makes the case that for hens, as well as for monkeys and yes, humans, pecking orders are extremely important, asserting that one’s position within them directly affects and/or readjusts one’s “life-style, [one’s] chances of survival, [one’s] sex life, and [one’s] physiology” (Bloom 196). Just as with Schjelderup-Ebbe’s hens, “people track and remember who is above them,” and so our authority/subversion foundations are triggered by “anything that is construed as an act of

obedience, disobedience, respect, disrespect, submission, or rebellion”—as relates to authorities which we perceive as actually legitimate (Haidt 168). Human societies are absolutely reliant on structure and order; the authority/subversion foundation attunes human beings “to signs of rank or status,” as well as to signs that people are not acting in ways that they ought to be, provided their social position (Haidt 179). We need determined social hierarchies in place in order to establish mutually beneficial relationships within them; within these hierarchies, there will always be those who hold authority, who are submissive to said authority, and who act in subversive manners, whether in an attempt to obtain such authority for themselves or out of a belief that such authority is not legitimate, fair, or just.

The three moral foundations which I have just discussed relate to Oluo, Riley, and the controversies each examines and discusses. This is because all human beings are prewired with these foundations; this is where *morality* comes from—we need these foundations in order to feel sympathy for and a desire to defend children, in order to root out, shun, and punish cheaters, and in order to respect hierarchy and authority in a way that allows society to be structured, ordered, and functional. Liberals and conservatives *both* have these moral foundations; the difference between them is that they experience them differently or at different levels (as we will see later). Let us look at the care/harm foundation first. Liberals tend to concern themselves with such issues as the environment, saving animals from extinction, or being tested on, eaten, or hunted, as well as third-party victims of American military conflicts abroad or immigrants seeking asylum or better lives. Conservatives tend to concern themselves with unborn babies and wounded American soldiers. In terms of the fairness/cheating foundation, the main concerns for liberals center around social justice and equality, as “wealthy and powerful groups are accused of gaining by exploiting those at the bottom while not paying their ‘fair share’ of the tax

burden.” Conservatives, on the other hand, are inclined to stress *proportionality* as opposed to equity, vilifying liberals and Democrats who they perceive “as ‘socialists’ who take money from hardworking Americans and give it to lazy people... and to illegal immigrants” (Haidt 159, 160). With regard to the authority/subversion foundation, Haidt notes, “it is much easier for the political right to build on this foundation than it is for the left, which often defines itself in part by its opposition to hierarchy, inequality, and power.” Conservatives, however, support a strong military and police force and very often make themselves highly subservient to God (Haidt 168).

It is clear that both liberals and conservatives formulate their political ideas based on moral principles and a desire to do what is right. A clash presents itself between said moral principles; neither side lacks morality, as they will both claim about each other—it is simply that they are wired to care deeply about different things. For example, the vast majority of human beings (excluding psychopaths), are deeply sensitized to the suffering of others—this is the triggering of our care/harm foundation. Different people, however, will be triggered by different victims of said suffering; so, while the hearts of liberals bleed for the polar bears impacted by climate change, the hearts of conservatives bleed for the oil and gas workers laid off from their jobs due to policies aimed at combatting ecological issues. While liberals care deeply about immigrants crossing the United States’ southern border in search of safety and better lives, conservatives care deeply about the victims who have been harmed by gang members or drug smugglers arriving in the United States with villainous intentions. I will explain later how these sensitivities that we feel are beyond our control and not, as we humans love to imagine, arrived at through rational deliberation. The fact of the matter is merely that we feel more deeply responsive towards the suffering of certain victims as opposed to others and that we cannot control what we feel; we can only attempt to rationalize and justify such

feelings.

Oluo and Riley embody sharply contrasting politics. As such, their views on and interpretations of the same issues and controversial topics (high Black crime and incarceration rates, affirmative action, Black unemployment, the minimum wage, etc.) are drastically different. This is because their *minds* are different. Despite both being African Americans and born and raised in this country, they perceive the world around them and the problems of that world—more specifically, of the African American community—in quite dissimilar ways. As a liberal, Oluo’s moral principles are solidly anchored in the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations, while Riley’s are influenced more by the loyalty/betrayal and authority/subversion foundations.

For Oluo, the care/harm foundation presents itself as care for African Americans and all people of color, as well as other minorities (members of the LGBT community, religious minorities, people with disabilities, etc.). She cares deeply about shielding these “victims” from racism, economic disparities, or social, cultural, or political ostracism or inequalities. Riley cares deeply about Black people as well, though he tends to do so from a different emotive standpoint. His sentiments are especially with Black students, who he perceives as being at a major disadvantage due to both a degrading Black culture which works against the success of African American students, as well as public school systems, affirmative action, teachers unions, and a multitude of other liberal or progressive programs, policies, or groups. Oluo’s care/harm foundation is so strongly triggered by the issues facing the Black community that it appears she is incapable of laying any blame whatsoever at the feet of African Americans. Riley, on the other hand, is not afraid to claim that many problems which Black people face are the result of their own wrongdoings and shortcomings, from the normalization of absent fathers to a culture which teaches Black students that doing well in school is synonymous

with acting as a White person would and is therefore bad. Hence, both Oluo and Riley are influenced by the care/harm moral foundation, just in different ways. One can surmise that it is stronger for Oluo than it is for Riley, as she seems trigger-ready to protect those who are “victims” in her eyes by any means and for any reason, while Riley seems primed to “victim blame” and call for responsibility and accountability, despite also caring about African Americans and the issues that they face. While Oluo stresses the need to protect minority “victims” from racism, white supremacy, structural barriers, etc., Riley stresses the cultural norms and behaviors of the “victims” themselves resulting in part from paternalistic and short-sighted, progressive policies.

In terms of the fairness/cheating foundation, Oluo is triggered by a desire for racial equality, social justice, and the abolition of disparities along the lines of race, sex, sexuality, etc. Riley’s approach is not so much based on *equity* as it is *proportionality*. He values hard work, dedication, and a willingness to follow the rules. Like most conservatives, Riley is likely a “meritocrat,” meaning that he believes that *anyone* can achieve *anything* in the United States if they work hard and play by the rules. However, Riley also believes that Black students need to be given a fair chance to succeed. For Riley this means allowing Black students to partake in school choice, allowing them to attend charter or voucher schools, abolishing affirmative action policies, and disrupting a culture which causes Black students fear of ostracism for performing well in school. Both Oluo and Riley are strongly influenced by their fairness/cheating foundations: for Oluo, Black people need to be given a fair chance by breaking down the system of white supremacy which continues to exploit Black people and does not give them an even opportunity to climb the socioeconomic ladder; for Riley, Black people need to be given a fair chance by putting an end to the liberal policies and programs which have held back Black students from succeeding (affirmative action, the public school

system, etc.).

Regarding the authority/subversion moral foundation, it is clear that Oluo views the United States and its systems and institutions as racist and in need of dire change, restructuring, or abolition. She sees racism in the police, higher education, and the political realm, and makes the claim that all of these institutions oppress, marginalize, and disadvantage Blacks and other people of color in myriad ways. For Riley, authority, the law, and the police ought to be respected by Black people. Riley feels a strong need to challenge a culture which he sees promotes criminal behavior, fatherlessness, and apathy or opposition toward school achievement. Oluo, along with most liberals, sees authority as being *meant* to be questioned, while Riley, along with most conservatives, sees it as being meant to be respected. Oluo sees authority (politicians, schools, the police) as holding Black people and people of color down. Riley might agree with some of this—he certainly feels that *progressive* politicians, as well as the *public* school system are not doing much of anything to help Blacks (he actually thinks they are hurting them)—but generally, in true conservative fashion, he sees authority as important. He claims very early on in his book that having a father in the house is extremely important for Black children. Riley also maintains that Black people—specifically Black men—need to respect the law and the police, and he finds surprising common ground with CNN’s Don Lemon in saying that Black men would do well to “pull up [their] pants, finish high school, stop using the n-word, take better care of [their] communities, and stop having children out of wedlock” (Riley 82). While Oluo sees questioning, straying from, and possibly even completely abolishing America’s systems of authority as aiding the causes of Black people, Riley sees adhering to and respecting authority as the true path to success, happiness, and safety for African Americans.

The findings I have just laid out, which come after careful examination of the two texts, fall

properly in line with the principles of Jonathan Haidt's moral foundations theory. Data from a survey that Haidt posted to his website "Your-Moral.org," the intent of which was to gauge the accuracy of his theory, found that the moral principles of care and fairness are indeed very strong with liberal-minded people, but not as strong with conservatives, while the principles of loyalty and authority are very strong for conservative-minded people and not especially strong for liberals (Haidt 187). As noted above, in their own ways, Oluo and Riley are triggered by issues related to care and fairness. They both aim to protect Black people from the issues which they feel harm Black people and they both aim to give African Americans a fighting chance in relation to education and socioeconomic factors. Authority, however, is the one moral foundation that offers the sharpest contrast between the two writers. Riley is highly attuned and sensitive to this (more conservative) foundation, while Oluo, echoing many progressive thinkers, reveals little sense of obligation, susceptibility, or responsiveness towards this moral principle.

These two authors embody the left-right division we see so sharply in today's political landscape. Human beings are the products of their social environments, but they are also heavily influenced by biological factors. It is clear that human beings simply feel different from one another about a multitude of issues and that each different side of these issues is absolutely convinced that they are the "right" ones and that they are on the side of "good" in the fight against "evil." What Jonathan Haidt tells us, however, is that we do not actually come to our conclusions about the way the world ought to operate primarily through rational thought. The fact of the matter is that we *feel* emotions first (anger, fear, joy towards a certain presidential candidate, political policy, etc.) and then *justify* those emotions through "strategic reasoning," on par with "a press secretary who automatically justifies any position taken by the president" (Haidt 106). Such a phenomenon is not only

difficult to avoid falling victim to, but surrounds our everyday experiences and influences so much about who we are, the way we make decisions, and the way in which we see the world and others. It is my conclusion that we could all benefit from stepping outside of this matrix and by attempting to see the world through the eyes of someone who was simply not born with the same genetically influenced predispositions that we happen to have. It was Henry Ford who said that the secret to success "lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from that person's angle as well as from your own." Ijeoma Oluo and Jason Riley, along with each and every one of us, would do well to follow this advice.

Bibliography

Bloom, Howard. *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition Into the Forces of History*. New York, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1995.

Haidt, Jonathan. "How two incompatible sacred values are driving conflict and confusion in American universities." *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gatn5ameRr8>. Accessed 15 Oct. 2016.

Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York, Pantheon Books, 2012.

OJJDP Statistical Briefing Book. Race profile of arrests by offense, 2019.

Oluo, Ijeoma. *So you want to talk about race*. New York, Seal Press, 2018.

Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org. Accessed 4 May 2021.

Riley, Jason L. *Please Stop Helping Us: How Liberals Make It Harder for Blacks to Succeed*. New York, Encounter Books, 2014.

Wallace, John M et al. "Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Differences in School Discipline among U.S. High School Students: 1991-2005." *The Negro educational review* vol. 59,1-2 (2008): 47-62.