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When Race Matters: Black Men and Authority Figures

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ABSTRACT

Following the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arberry, and Breonna Taylor, Black folks sought refuge within its community to experience collective healing and demand justice. A 2020 study reported that Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) experienced racial microaggressions one to six times within 6 months time affirming the necessity for spaces that center the learning and development of Black students, like historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). This article explores the impact of racism on Black men's engagement with campus authority. The historic abuse Black men have faced by authority figures could have a direct impact on how they engage authority on campus. This study sought to identify if there were any significant mean differences in the likelihood of Black men engaging with Black authority figures versus White authority figures. An online survey collected data from 400 Black men assessing their preference in engagement with authority based on race. Analysis found a higher likelihood of engagement with Black authority rather than White authority regardless of the role they held on campus. This finding dispels the myth that Black men tend to be more disengaged from their academic pursuits and causes institutions to reflect on how representation effects students' willingness to engage. With Black educators making up 60% of faculty at HBCUs, HBCUs can serve as havens for Black men to find a village and safely engage in their academic experience.

Introduction

If the racial reckoning of 2020 taught us anything, we learned that race matters in America, as well as the rest of the world. In the midst of attempting to be responsive to the disproportionate effects COVID-19 had on Black folks, Black higher education professionals and students were forced to encounter the abusive and harmful images displayed in media of the murders of Black men and still show up for work and in the classroom. A study administered in October of 2020 reported that Black students at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) experienced racial microaggressions one to six times within 6 months (Francois et al., 2023). We know that the prevalence of racism can influence how a Black man shapes their identity during college (Brooms, 2017). This critically affirming the necessity for spaces that center the learning and development of Black students, like historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Despite many PWI's best efforts to develop programs to increase the sense of belonging of this marginalized population, there are still Black men who report feeling "invisible, isolated, and alienated on campus" (Strayhorn, 2012, p. 88). From slavery to the Black Lives Matter movement, Black men have fought for their seat at the table. With images of slain Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin to George Floyd serving as decades of societal examples of abuse of power. It is assumed that these images influence African American attitudes toward authority figures and whiteness. Black men in America arguably can come to campus with a strained perception of figures of

authority (Brooms, 2017; Harold & DeLuca, 2005). Research also shows a lack of Black male identifying role models and mentors can lead to a lack of campus involvement for Black men (Amechi et al., 2015; Cuyjet, 1997).

From a psychological perspective, if we want to change the engagement practice of Black men it recommended to start with their attitudes (Dollard, 1949; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948; Kutner et al., 1970; Lewin, 1948). Cherry (2020) states the attitudes are comprised of three components: the cognitive component, the affective component, and behavior component. For the sake of this article, we will focus on how Black men's thoughts and feelings about race impact their engagement with authority, which is behavior. Some scholars are skeptical about the existence of conclusive evidence attitudes and behavior hold correlations (Chaiklin, 2011; Mann, 1959) did a study at the onset of the civil rights movement that found a positive correlation between attitudes and behavior for Blacks when it came to prejudice, but not for White participants. We can surmise the feelings and thoughts of those subjected to racist activity by White people influence their behavior or how they responded to that prejudice. The nuance of race is critical to this study as prejudice represents an attitude and discrimination represents behavior, and as such, it is hypothesized that behavioral outcomes for Black men stems from attitudes around expectations of prejudice, resulting in overall avoidance of engagement with White authority figures. To address this lack of engagement, Chaiklin (2011) notes the importance of change agents in changing both attitudes and behaviors.

This study sought to identify if race is a leading factor in African American male engagement with authority figures. Thus, our research question seeks to find out if there is there a significant mean difference between the likelihood of engagement of Black male college students with Black campus authority figures and White campus authority figures at higher education institutions. In addition, are there significant mean differences between the likelihood of engagement of Black male college students with Black campus authority figures and White campus authority figures based on the role of that authority figure (e.g., police, faculty, Academic counselor, campus administrator, including dean of students, vice president of student affairs/services, and president, student service professionals, including EOP, financial aid, registration, multicultural centers, and housing staff, including resident advisors, community directors)?

Methodology

Theoretical framework

The approach to this research is through a critical, social constructivist lens. Therefore, it is important for the theoretical framework which shapes the design of this study to position African American men and their identity as the central focus. In addition to Cherry's (2020) components of an attitude, we incorporate Bush and Bush's (2013) comprehensive glance into Black male identity through their African American Male Theory. The first of six tenets reconceptualizes Bronfenbrenner's (1992) ecological systems theory through an Afrocentric lens. Within the ecological systems, Bush and Bush (2013) intentionally divide the core system (i.e., microsystem) into two independent categories: inner microsystem and outer microsystem. For this study, it is important to explore how the inner microsystem which includes African American men's attitudes about authority figures influences the interactions with the macrosystems (i.e., larger societal culture and power structure) like racism and vice versa. In the context of a racialized society, this theory leads to posing the question: would an African American man's past experiences with White authority figures impact the likelihood to engage with campus authority figures?

Sampling

This study gathered data from students who identified as African American men attending a two or four year college, and were over the age of 18. They must also have completed at least one full year at

a postsecondary (i.e., public, private, or trade) institution in the United States. The researcher recruited participants via snowball sampling by sending the study announcement to colleagues of programs (e.g., Black male initiatives, Black student centers, etc.) that specialize in the retention and mentorship of African American college students. Outreach was also extended through professional education networks (e.g., NASPA, ACPA, CACCHE, etc.). A graphic announcement with a link was shared with these higher education professional associations' and the researcher's general network through social media (i.e., Twitter, Instagram) platforms. Since the researcher anticipated that students connected to cultural centers or programs may have a higher likelihood of engagement with authority figures, intentional effort was taken to request members from within the Black community to share the QR code (which led to the survey) with friends and members of their family. By doing this we hoped to include a greater cross-section of very engaged and less engaged students. Data was also collected during a health pandemic. Due to COVID-19, many students were no longer physically attending brick and mortar institutions, but had pivoted to learning online. Research has shown that responses to surveys are typically low (Patten, 2001). Anticipating a return rate of 50% or less (Cook et al., 2000), the researcher sought to obtain a sample size of 50–100 participants. Four hundred and forty-five Black male students responded but only 40% completed the survey. However, the participant goal was met.

Survey tool

This research intended to explore how race impacted the likelihood of Black male engagement with authority figures through an online survey designed in Qualtrics. The survey consisted of four sections: demographic/education background, trust in societal authority figures, engagement with campus authority figures, and perceptions of campus authority figures. Demographic questions gathered basic information about the participants' age, household income growing up, highest level of parent's education, political orientation, and years of education. Information was collected about the racial ethnic identity, gender identity, and sexuality through multiple-answer, multiple-choice questions. In order to gather data which displayed the richness of diversity within Black identity, participants are asked if they identify as: East African, West African, African American, Caribbean descent, Mixed with Black and another Racial/Ethnic identity and/or Afro Latinx. To gather the variance in gender identification, participants are asked to select if they identify as: gender fluid, gender queer, gender variant, intergender, intersex, male, nonbinary or gender nonconforming, queer, transgender, transexual, or two-spirit. Participants shared their sexuality identity by selecting from the following terms: asexual, bisexual, gay, heterosexual, homosexual, pansexual, queer, questioning, straight, two-spirit, or unsure. Last, we also gathered educational experience data. Participants were asked to report whether they had completed at least one full academic year at a postsecondary institution and how many years were completed. Participants were also asked to report the institution type they attended with the options being: four year public institution, four year private institution, two-year community college, and a vocational/technological institution.

To assesses the likelihood of engaging with authority figures, scenarios were provided for Black men to determine whether they would reach out to figures of authority in varying circumstances. The identified figures of authority for each scenario were campus police, faculty, campus administrators (deans of students, vice presidents, presidents), student support professional staff, and housing staff. The scenarios include questions about the likelihood of engaging in certain behaviors such as whether Black males would report a crime to these authority figures or seek help from authority figures for personal issues. These questions are asked twice based on whether the authority figure was White or Black and the participant was prompted to select likelihood for each position on a 7-point Likert scale coded 7 = *extremely likely* to 1 = *extremely unlikely*.

Description of sample

There was a high response rate of participants who were outside of the traditional undergraduate age; 69% of respondents were aged 22–60. While California was the state that had the highest response rate

(19%), there were responses from regions across the country. Sixty percent of respondents identified as African American as opposed to solely from African, Caribbean or Afro-Latinx descent. The majority of the participants grew up in middle to low incomes homes, considered to be \$120,400 or less (Snider, 2020), but only 22% were first generation college going students. There was a generous sample of queer identifying Black men, even though a majority identified as male and heterosexual. Fifty-nine percent of the participants were attending four-year public institutions, 26% four-year private institutions, and 15% two-year or vocational institutions. Sixty-two percent were pursuing undergraduate degrees and 38% were pursuing graduate degrees. Seventy-eight percent shared that they were engaged in a club, organization, Greek letter organization, or some sort of student leadership.

Data analysis

Since multiple variables were combined to create composite scales, it was necessary to conduct an exploratory analysis to test the reliability of the newly formed scales. Our goal was to demonstrate a score of .70 or higher for reliability measures. Our analyses indicated that our tool had strong internal consistency for engagement with campus authority figures.

Independent *t*-test served to determine if there are significant differences in perceptions of engagement with campus authorities when considering if the authority figure is either Black or White. Seven independent *t*-tests were run on the following variable combinations:

- (1) engagement with Black campus authority figures and engagement with White campus authority figures;
- (2) engagement with Black Campus Police Officers and engagement with White campus police officers;
- (3) engagement with Black faculty and engagement with White faculty;
- (4) engagement with Black academic counselors and engagement with White academic counselors;
- (5) engagement with Black campus administrators (president, vice presidents, dean of students) and engagement with White campus administrators (president, vice presidents, and dean of students);
- (6) engagement with Black student service professionals and engagement with White student service professionals;
- (7) engagement with Black housing staff and engagement with White housing staff.

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the following limitations connected to this research. This data only reflects those who have selected Black/African American as their primary racial identification. Our final sample reflected a participant pool highly involved on campus, which might impact the levels of engagement these men have with authority. We also recognize that some men that we study may not have interacted with the roles we have identified as figures of authority. There is also a variance in ways student conduct offices interact with their students. Approaches to sanctions by student conduct offices and housing staff may vary in harshness and philosophical practice (traditional model vs. restorative model). Some of the campuses we are studying may not have an on-campus police department. Thus, the data may reflect the students' interaction with local police instead of campus police. Further, the survey was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that participants likely had greatly decreased interactions with any authority figures and responses may not have referred to current experiences. There were no age requirements for this study, therefore, the result may lack the ability to generalize experience of traditional aged undergraduate students (18–21). Finally, as previously mentioned, during the time of this study, there was an increase of media coverage about the deaths of Black men. It is possible that these images could influence African American

attitudes toward authority figures. By assessing questions on likelihood to engage with White authority figures and Black authority figures, we will better understand how race and representation can positively or negatively impact the experiences of Black men in college. We will also unpack the assumption that all students naturally trust those in power. While a greater majority of professionals in higher education likely see themselves as supporters of student success, race may be an invisible barrier that may hinder Black men from utilizing the services intended to ensure their success. The intentional methodology within this chapter was helpful in gathering data that helped give understanding to Black men's trust in, perceptions of, and willingness to engage with authority.

Findings

Engagement with Black authority vs. White authority

In this section we will examine the findings of the likelihood of Black men's engagement with campus authority figures disaggregated by the race. Dependent *t*-tests comparing the means of the sum of likelihood of engagement with Black authority figures and the sum of White authority figures will be presented followed by a comparison of each of the means for likelihood of engagement of authority disaggregated by roles (i.e., police, faculty, academic counselors, campus administrators, student service professionals, and housing staff). To give perspective on the scales and individual rankings of Black men's likelihood of engagement with campus authority figures, Table 1 offers descriptive statistics of participants' scores for engagement with authority roles in general, Black authority by role, and White authority by role. This section is rounded out with a comparison of Black men's perceptions of Black authority figures and White authority figures.

General authority

The likelihood of engaging with a Black authority figure ($M = 61.07$, $SE = 1.225$, $SD = 15.972$, $n = 170$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White authority figure ($M = 45.31$, $SE = 1.302$, $SD = 16.983$, $n = 170$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(169) = 14.541$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.96$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black authority figure than a White authority figure on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's *d* was large (0.96).

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of engagement with authority.

	N	Minimum	Maximtum	Mean	Std Deviation
Police_Sum	175	4.00	28.00	15.7314	5.68643
Faculty_Sum	173	4.00	28.00	17.9653	5.32097
AcaCouns_Sum	174	4.00	28.00	18.7241	5.43631
Admin_Sum	174	4.00	28.00	17.7586	5.83782
SSP_Sum	171	4.00	28.00	18.1871	5.93792
Housing_Sum	173	4.00	28.00	17.9884	5.95330
Police_White	177	2.00	14.00	6.8644	3.07182
Faculty_White	175	2.00	14.00	7.4857	3.26221
AcaCouns_White	176	2.00	14.00	7.9943	3.32694
Admin_White	176	2.00	14.00	7.5341	3.42912
SSP_White	173	2.00	14.00	7.8844	3.49559
Housing_White	175	2.00	14.00	7.7600	3.30092
Police_Black	177	2.00	14.00	8.9096	3.22680
Faculty_Black	176	2.00	14.00	10.5284	2.77731
AcaCouns_Black	176	2.00	14.00	10.7670	2.925211
Admin_Black	176	2.00	14.00	10.2727	3.15767
SSP_Black	176	2.00	14.00	10.3352	3.09213
Housing_Black	175	2.00	14.00	10.2971	3.21146
Valid N (listwise)	170				

Campus police

The first of six authority figure roles analyzed was campus police. This role had the lowest mean out of the six roles overall (15.73), as well as, among Black authority figures (8.91) and White authority figures (6.86). Out of any authority figure researched in this study, White campus police officers are the authority figure Black men wish to engage with the least. The likelihood of engaging with a Black campus police officer ($M = 8.86$, $SE = 0.245$, $SD = 3.238$, $n = 175$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White campus police officer ($M = 6.86$, $SE = 0.232$, $SD = 3.073$, $n = 175$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(174) = 9.848$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.65$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black police officer than a White police officer on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was medium (0.65).

Faculty

The second of six authority figure roles analyzed was Faculty. Overall, this role was fourth (17.97) in likelihood of engagement for Black men out of the six roles. Faculty ranked second (10.53) among Black authority figures and fifth (7.49) with White authority figures. The likelihood of engaging with a Black faculty ($M = 10.53$, $SE = 0.213$, $SD = 2.799$, $n = 173$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White faculty ($M = 7.43$, $SE = 0.247$, $SD = 3.244$, $n = 173$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(172) = 14.058$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.02$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with Black faculty than White faculty on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was large (1.02).

Academic counselors

The third of the six authority figure roles analyzed was academic counselors. This role had the highest mean out of the six roles overall (18.72), as well as, among Black authority figures (10.77) and White authority figures (7.99). The likelihood of engaging with a Black academic counselors ($M = 10.78$, $SE = 0.223$, $SD = 2.939$, $n = 174$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White academic counselor ($M = 7.95$, $SE = 0.252$, $SD = 3.318$, $n = 174$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(173) = 11.952$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black academic counselor than a White academic counselor on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was large (0.84).

Campus administrators

The fourth of six authority figure roles analyzed was campus administrators (dean of students, vice president of student affairs/services, or president). Overall, this role was fifth (17.76) in likelihood of engagement for Black men out of the six roles. Administrators ranked fifth (10.27) among Black authority figures and fourth (7.53) with White authority figures. The likelihood of engaging with a Black campus administrators ($M = 10.28$, $SE = 0.241$, $SD = 3.174$, $n = 174$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White campus administrators ($M = 7.48$, $SE = 0.259$, $SD = 3.415$, $n = 174$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(173) = 12.023$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.85$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black campus administrator than a White campus administrator on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was large (0.85).

Student service professionals

The fifth of six authority figure roles analyzed was student service professionals (EOP, financial aid, registration, multicultural center staff). Overall, this role was second (18.19) in likelihood of engagement for Black men out of the six roles. Student service professionals ranked third (10.34) among Black authority

figures and second (7.88) with White authority figures. The likelihood of engaging with a Black student service professionals ($M = 10.35$, $SE = 0.238$, $SD = 3.107$, $n = 171$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with a White student service professionals ($M = 7.84$, $SE = 0.267$, $SD = 3.487$, $n = 171$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(170) = 11.367$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.76$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black student service professional than a White student service professional on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was medium (0.76).

Housing staff

The sixth authority figure role analyzed was housing staff (resident advisors, community directors, etc.). Overall, this role was third (17.99) in likelihood of engagement for Black men out of the six roles. Housing staff ranked fourth (10.30) among Black authority figures and third (7.76) with White authority figures. The likelihood of engaging with Black housing staff ($M = 10.28$, $SE = 0.245$, $SD = 3.223$, $n = 173$) was higher than the likelihood of engaging with White housing staff ($M = 7.71$, $SE = 0.250$, $SD = 3.288$, $n = 173$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(172) = 12.799$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.79$], meaning Black men were more likely to want to engage with a Black housing staff member than a White housing staff member on college campuses. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was medium (0.79).

Perceptions of authority

Black college men's perceptions of White authority figures ($M = 14.05$, $SE = .397$, $SD = 5.203$, $n = 172$) were lower than the perceptions of Black authority figures ($M = 22.20$, $SE = .348$, $SD = 4.565$, $n = 172$). This difference was statistically significant [$t(171) = 19.735$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.67$], with Black men holding more negative perceptions of White authority figures than Black authority figures. The effect size of this difference, as assessed by Cohen's d was very large (1.67).

Does race matter: The likelihood of Black men's engagement with Black authority figures vs. White authority figures

We found that race has a profound influence on Black men's engagement with authority figures. Black men in this study held lower perceptions of White authority figures than they did of Black authority figures and were more likely to engage Black authority figures, regardless of the role, than White authority figures. Descriptive analysis showed a variance in rankings of the identified authority figure roles. Overall Black men ranked the six authority figure roles as followed (from most likely to engage to least likely): academic counselors, student services professionals, housing staff, faculty, campus administrators and campus police. You will notice that those providing service and those who are least likely to need to assert power are the figures for which Black men wish to engage. The following reflect the rankings among Black authority figures (from most likely to engage to least likely): academic counselors, faculty, student service professionals, housing staff, campus administrators, and campus police. We notice here that Black men wish to engage with Black figures who have direct impacts on their academic success. Finally, the rankings for White educators are as follows (from most likely to engage to least likely): academic counselors, student service professionals, housing staff, campus administrators, faculty, and campus police. It is important to note that on a 1–7-point Likert scale where 1 = *extremely unlikely* to engage, 4 = *neither likely or unlikely*, and 7 = *extremely likely* to engage, all White educators fell in the unlikely to engage range with the exception of academic counselors who landed on neither likely or unlikely. This is in glaring contrast to the Black educators who all fell within the likely to engage range, including Black campus police. Based on these findings the next sections discuss the importance Black educators have in supporting Black men's academic success via the concept of the village found at HBCUs; validating the current relevance of these institutions.

Importance of the Black educator

This study found that Black men desired to engage with Black professionals nearly two times more than White professionals. These findings are similar to a study done in the 1970s, exploring how having a Black mayor impacted Black Atlanta citizens' trust in government (Abney & Hutcheson, 1981). They found that while Black Atlantans showed a decline in trust of national government from 1970–1976, there was no change in trust in their city government during this term of the first Black mayor. While Abney and Hutcheson found a general mistrust for societal authority figures, their research highlighted how Black leaders in local settings can still be held in high regard. We find here that representation in the make-up of the campus faculty, staff and administration is an imperative factor to Black men's campus engagement. However, Wolfe and Freeman (2013, p. 1) name underrepresentation of administrators of Color as the “most ethical dilemma facing colleges and university.” According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), Black professionals only make up 10% of those working at colleges and universities. A statistic that pales in comparison to the 75% of White professionals who work on college campuses. This study's findings exposes an opportunity for HBCUs to outreach to Black men, as 60% of their faculty are Black.

While throughout this study we have referred to administrators, faculty and staff as authority figures, it is imperative that we reimagine this collective, particularly for Black higher education professionals, as educators. When it comes to the Black educator, Palmer and Gasman (2008) urge faculty and administrators to move beyond the roles of teaching and administration to support student success as a “village.” Understanding the Black male student and their success, is understanding the critical nature of the adage, “It takes a village to raise a child.” Black culture is about embracing the extended family and the shared interest that family holds for the success of that child, in this case the Black student. Within this village, the Black educator serves as the primary resource for African American men to increase their social capital. Black educators not only provide direct service as prescribed by their role, they also provide Black men with mentorship and connections to peer groups that will sustain the social capital, which has been found to have positive correlations to academic performance and success (Brown & Davis, 2001). Modeled after research done on African American men at HBCUs, “the village” is a holistic approach to education that infuses care in interactions and experiences that generates a nurturing and supportive climate for Black men (Palmer & Gasman, 2008). The academic success of Black men necessitates the vital need to increase the recruitment of Black educators. Many Black educators carry the innate ability to “discern (Black) student's difficulties and offer them the social, cultural and psychological support” needed to persist academically (Green, 2000, p. 16). This study clearly outlines Black men's desire to engage with the Black educator.

Administrators at HBCUs must see the demands imposed upon the Black educator to cultivate the village and not only acknowledge the excessive work being done, but also consider ways to compensate them for the labor and additional benefits for the sake of retention. If the overarching tenet of antiblackness is the systemic and perpetual effort of dehumanizing the Black educators, it is necessary to acknowledge how antiblackness impacts the work provided by Black educators and in turn serves as a daily act of violence for students (Dumas, 2016). When it comes to committing to initiating change for educators of Color, Levin et al. (2015) suggests the following: leaders must cultivate and model a climate that embraces diversity and offer ongoing professional development for all practitioners to maintain the climate.

Conclusion

HBCUs are in a unique position to assist in academic success of Black men, and HBCUs must take an active role in recruiting and retaining them. Black men desire to be actively engaged in their learning and have a fondness to engage with educators who look like them. And they need educators who understand their lived experiences. Historically Black colleges and universities have served as villages for generations. May this research support the amazing work that can be furthered on their campuses.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Author bio

A. Pierre Sherrill II With over 15 years of experience working with college students and as a nonprofit executive, Dr. A. Pierre Sherrill's passion to see people engage in their own path towards liberation has charted an exciting journey of constant learning, fun and fulfillment. Pierre received a BA in Deaf Studies & African American Studies and a MA in Educational Leadership from CSU, Northridge. He obtained his doctorate from San Diego State University, where he is studied the impact of race on Black men's engagement with campus authority figures.

In 2023, Pierre founded EduLib Consulting; a service company that offers life and professional coaching, training and facilitation, as well as keynote speaking. For nearly a decade, he has served as a lecturer. He has facilitated equity-focused learning at his alma mater, CSU, Northridge, Fresno State, and the University of San Francisco. He makes critical conversations about social justice issues palatable for baseline understanding.

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