**The Racial Politics of Citation**

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[www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/04/27/racial-exclusions-scholarly-citations-opinion](https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2018/04/27/racial-exclusions-scholarly-citations-opinion)

Citation is political. Since Richard Delgado’s groundbreaking article "[The Imperial Scholar](http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3311882.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)," critical race theorists have been interested in how the politics of citation shape both disciplinary knowledge and the career trajectories of scholars of color. Delgado argued that racial exclusion deeply shaped legal scholarship on African-American civil rights. Top (white) civil rights scholars tended to rely upon a closed circle of citation that reinforced the very barriers to racial inclusion that their scholarship was ostensibly designed to undermine. Delgado identified potential problems introduced to legal scholarship by racially biased citation. White civil rights scholars may have a different set of interests than scholars of color, subtly influencing their reasoning. Or white scholars may be inadequate defenders of the rights of people of color.

Racially biased citations patterns are by no means limited to law. Scholars have also noted the deep racial inequality in disciplines such as [philosophy](https://cup.columbia.edu/book/taking-back-philosophy/9780231184373) and the history of [anthropology](https://www.ucpress.edu/book.php?isbn=9780520211681). And sociologists, for their part, have recently turned their attention to the how racial exclusion has shaped their discipline, as reflected in the omission of W. E. B. Du Bois and the [Atlanta Sociological Laboratory](https://www.amazon.com/First-American-School-Sociology-B/dp/1472467000) from the sociological canon, the minimization of racism in empirical findings, and much more. Just this week, a group of [communications scholars analyzed](https://academic.oup.com/joc/article-abstract/68/2/254/4958972?redirectedFrom=fulltext) citation patterns over the last 10 years. Looking at 12 journals, the authors found that scholars of color remain undercited and are less likely to serve on editorial boards.

Much of the bias in citation patterns may be unintentional, as a path of dependency is built into them that reflects, reproduces and legitimates racial inequality. Inequality is reflected through a veneration of the classics. In the social sciences and humanities, many of these works were written during a period when racial and gender exclusion was simply expected and taken for granted. What counts as canonical is shaped by who had access to existing knowledge and the tools and institutional resources to produce new knowledge.

Inequality is reproduced (and whiteness is institutionalized) by citation patterns as earlier periods of overt exclusion are legitimated by an almost ritualistic citation of certain thinkers. Finally, this process is legitimated when citation metrics are interpreted as simply meritorious, rather than shaped by explicit racial exclusion. For instance, on Twitter, I saw this list of the [most influential sociological books of the 20th century](https://twitter.com/victorerikray/status/924819146902310912). It is, as far as I can tell, a list of all white men. The discipline of sociology is interested in processes of racial, gender and class exclusion. Yet our citation practices may end up replicating the same types of social closure and status seeking that we condemn elsewhere.

The racial politics of citation have real effects. Citations draw our attention to the ideas that supposedly matter, they are a measure of one’s intellectual influence and they shape what we are able to think about a given field. Citations, or a lack thereof, bolster reputations and facilitate or exclude one from subsequent opportunities. Segregated scholarly networks impoverish knowledge and produce what Jennifer C. Mueller, a sociologist at Skidmore College, calls a type of [white ignorance](https://academic.oup.com/socpro/article/64/2/219/3058571) about race. Data showing that scholars of color are underrepresented in publications, citation rates or other venues can be explained away as the personal failings of unproductive researchers rather than the result of systematic exclusion. That allows whites to maintain a type of studied ignorance that furthers racial dominance and forecloses potentially valuable avenues of intellectual inquiry. Beyond this, biased citation patterns are simply bad for the accumulation of knowledge.

When I think about citation patterns, and the politics of peer review more broadly, I am often reminded that the Black Panthers argued black people in the United States were [never tried by a jury of their peers](https://www.ucpress.edu/blog/25139/the-black-panther-partys-ten-point-program/). White people nearly always controlled access to jury pools. In many disciplines, peer review, access to publishing opportunities and suggestions on whose work should be cited must pass through white gatekeepers. Intentionally or not, strong evidence shows that bias can inform the types of research that is considered valid and worthy of citation. Like the recent calls for [inclusion riders](http://variety.com/2018/tv/columns/inclusion-riders-work-opinion-column-mauricio-mota-east-los-high-1202749511/) in Hollywood to ensure minority representation, scholars and editors should take proactive measures to make sure researchers are citing relevant work by underrepresented scholars.

I anticipate objections to this argument, being that I am advocating for a form of affirmative action or that citations are an objective measure of intellectual worth. But objecting to the need to cite more scholars of color on these grounds is simply wrongheaded. First, if affirmative action is a policy of intervention aimed at lessening historical and current racial inequalities, it is hard to argue that academe has sufficiently addressed these issues. Higher education, despite some representational inroads, remains [a white institutional space](https://www.amazon.com/Reproducing-Racism-Schools-Racial-Inequality/dp/0742560066), with highly racialized patterns of access, resources and rewards. If advocating for a more racially balanced pattern of citation is unfavorable treatment, there are a lot of white scholars out there who have greatly benefited from such treatment.

Second, this history of racial exclusion in academe makes it difficult to claim that citation patterns are neutral measures. Like teaching evaluations and [tenure reviews](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2332649218756137), patterns of citation are influenced by the long -- and continuing -- history of unequal racial power in the academy.