

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Dangerous Belief That White People Are Under Attack

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(THE CONVERSATION) In August, the Justice Department decided to investigate instances of bias against Whites in university admissions. Since then, campuses have been flyered with “It’s okay to be White,” and in November, violence erupted at the University of Connecticut during a speech about discrimination against whites.

Are White people actually under attack?

After all, in the U.S., whites have historically been viewed as perpetrators of bias, and racial minorities as the victims.

But perceptions of this relationship have shifted. According to a recent survey, the majority of Whites — 55 percent — now believe that Whites experience racial discrimination.

What’s more, Whites believe bias against

their group is increasing, while believing bias against Blacks is declining.

What’s behind this dramatic change in attitudes?

Research from my lab and others has found that social changes are a big reason. We’ve also found that these perceptions of bias — despite not being grounded in reality — can have real consequences.

The threat of social changeThere’s comfort in predictability, and people have a psychological tendency to favor the status quo.

For some, a preference

for the status quo also means a preference for a social order in which whites have more status, power and wealth than racial minorities.

This reality — still ingrained in American society — was seemingly interrupted by Barack Obama’s historic presidential win in 2008.

After his election, many started believing racial progress was taking place. There was the sense that more racial minorities were occupying the high-power, high-status positions historically reserved for whites.

For many, this was a good thing. But for the subset of White Americans who think that they rightfully deserve to have a higher status than racial minorities, it was unsettling: Were they falling behind? Was society becoming stacked against them? Had Whites become victims?

In a series of studies

conducted while Obama was president, psychologist Cheryl Kaiser and I were able to show how this phenomenon played out.

We asked participants to either read an article about racial progress or a neutral article. Then we assessed whether they believe Whites experience racial discrimination. We also assessed the extent to which they endorsed the racial hierarchy.

Among White participants who endorsed the racial status hierarchy, those that read about racial progress believed whites experience more bias than those who read a neutral article.

It’s important to note that this wasn’t the case for all whites: If participants rejected the racial hierarchy, they didn’t increase the belief that whites are discriminated against after reading about racial progress.

Essentially, this study

indicates that some whites don’t welcome social progress — they actually respond by seeing themselves as victims of discrimination.

The country’s growing racial diversity is also likely fueling perceptions of anti-White bias. While Whites currently comprise the majority of the U.S. population, recent census projections suggest that within the next several decades, whites will become a numerical minority.

According to recent research, if Whites are alerted to this trend, they are more likely to fear being discriminated against.

In sum, social change — whether it’s racial progress or increasing demographic diversity — has caused some White Americans to see themselves as victims of racism.

My other research with psychologist Joseph Wellman suggests that

this phenomenon isn’t benign. It leads some to adopt perspectives that could, ultimately, exacerbate social inequity.

For Whites who are particularly eager to maintain the racial social order, the idea of anti-White bias is particularly alarming. It implies that the entire social system is unstable, and they are eager to restore it.

These people might attempt to “reestablish” the group’s position because they believe it has been damaged.

This could play out in a number of ways.

One way is through support for other White people who claim to be victims of racial discrimination. There’s a tendency to respond negatively to Black people who claim to be victims of discrimination: People see them as complainers who use racism as an excuse for their shortcomings.

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