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The Progressives' Prejudice

By [J. Iorand Matory](#)

Some students, faculty, and administrators believe that black people are subject to disproportionate suspicion, monitoring, and punishment—not only in America generally, where the fact is well-known, but also in the heart of educated, progressive Harvard. Although the feeling is by no means new, the Harvard campus has been reluctant or even unwilling to address this issue, even when events like last month's "Quad incident" remind many of how far Harvard has to go.

On May 12, with the full authorization of the three House "masters" in the Quad, the Harvard Black Men's Forum (BMF) and the Association of Black Harvard Women (ABHW) sponsored an early-afternoon picnic and field day on the Quad lawn. Simultaneously, a number of their non-black fellow students exchanged e-mails expressing annoyance about the students allegedly damaging the lawn and doubt that they were Harvard students with a right to be there in the first place. Then, one of the complainants called the police. That a student gathering of a similar nature, but comprised mainly of white students, had inspired no calls to or intervention by the police suggested, to black students and faculty, a familiar pattern.

It is statistically documented that police stop black and Latino drivers more often than white ones, that blacks receive longer sentences than whites for the same crimes, that black applicants for home and auto loans receive higher interest rates than whites with the same financial credentials, that white basketball referees are more likely to call a foul on a black player than a white player, and that their bias exceeds that of black referees.

Yet many will deny that racial bias occurs in progressive communities like Harvard or that it could happen when the perpetrators consider themselves modern and educated beyond the brutality often implied by charges of "racism" and "racial profiling." Moreover, some Harvard students fear that the charge, when permanently documented in reply to their suspicious e-mails about the black picnickers, could damage their professional and political futures.

I empathize with the shoemaker's concern about his reputation, but the carelessly-made shoe still hurts. One night in 1980, just a few years after the busing crisis, I was a college student walking through Harvard Square. Two white boys coming from the opposite direction parted ways, and one of them punched me in the stomach. Completely winded, I could not even shout for help.

Around 1990, a black law professor at Harvard was falsely accused of shoplifting and thrown up against a counter at Bloomingdale's. Bloomingdale's paid him \$5,000 in apology. In 1998, an incoming House "master" dismissed a tenured black faculty member whom he had never met from the House Senior Common Room, based upon insinuations of untidiness and petty theft made by a secretary who had behaved similarly toward three generations of black tutors in that House. The secretary and the new House "master" who had acted on her word were required to write apologies.

Two years ago, a high-ranking black dean at Harvard was stopped by the campus police because he allegedly "fit the description" of a perpetrator. For white Americans, who are most accustomed to distinguishing males from each other according to their height, hair color, and eye color, many black males look alike. The dean's student work-study assistants were reportedly called upon by the police to vouch for the dean's legitimacy. No more in this case than in the others does the subsequent apology erase the humiliation of a victim whose mountain of accomplishment is so swiftly reduced to rubble, based on the unreflective impulse, willful

ignorance, or hallucinations of an underdeveloped white person.

To the Cabot House students who e-mailed their suspicions to each other, 60 black Crimson editors, Institute of Politics members, Hoopes Prize winners, and Harvard insignia-wearing dormmates playing hula-hoop and capture-the-flag looked like an invasion of gang-bangers. One black male professor also reported that he has been asked for identification so often that he would hardly have thought to mention it, though it does make him feel that he does not belong. He summarizes the attitude of many whites as follows: “When you are an unfamiliar black man, you are by definition a threatening black man.” Thus, to some Harvard students, a black male student simply does not look like a hallmate, and a crowd of black students bears no resemblance to other Harvard-loving kids celebrating the completion of a semester’s hard work and saying goodbye for the summer.

Thus, after May 12, BMF and ABHW noted that the police had not been called on the noisy and largely white crowd that, without official permission, had convened “Quad Day”—a similar event on the same lawn during reading period. Some non-black students have argued, counterfactually, that the police were called simply because BMF and ABHW were making excessive noise during reading period. In fact, according to Harvard University Police Chief Francis Riley, the initial telephone complaint specifically identified the picnickers as non-Harvard affiliates, and that was the original official reason for the police dispatch. By the time the police were called, BMF had been asked to lower the noise and had done so by turning off the music and the bull horn.

Like the black students’ gathering, Quad Day made noise during reading period. Unlike the later gathering of black students, however, the white students at Quad Day had done so on a weekday, had reportedly engaged in illegal public drinking, and had muddied a significant portion of the lawn while playing “slip-and-slide.” In a dramatic indication of the double standard at play, Quad Day and the damage to the lawn were reportedly photographed and celebrated on a Facebook profile of the very student who later initiated the email complaints about the BMF and ABHA gathering.

With good reason, black faculty, staff, and students wonder whether our efforts to meet the highest standards and our human flaws will receive the same benefit of the doubt as do white people’s equally successful or equally flawed efforts. Indeed, no matter what we wear or how we act, others’ misrecognition remains, for us, a threat not only to comfort but also to life and limb.

Some part of the solution to these worries is obvious. Harvard University needs more black faculty, administrators, police officers, security guards, staff, and students, so that the 13 percent of the American universe that is black can become less of a supercharged symbol in other people’s inflated self-estimations and more a range of human beings with diverse talents and ways of making the world a better place. The other concrete need is for the entire University community to recognize that the world is not color-blind, and that a careful, self-conscious, and hyper-cautious level of procedural circumspection is sometimes necessary in order to guarantee fairness to those who “fit the description.” However, institutional action is but a potential catalyst to the social change that is really needed. On a diverse campus and in the prime of their intellectual and social lives, students of all colors, religions, genders, and sexual orientations need to take the time to look into the faces of the other, greet someone who was once a stranger, listen with empathy to her story, and daily seek fairness for all.

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