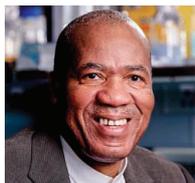


Black scientists matter



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The recent murder of George Floyd by police in the United States, the Black Lives Matter protests around the world, and racial inequalities everywhere that have been exposed by the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic—such as the disproportionately high vulnerability and mortality in African-American, Afro-Caribbean, and Afro-Latin communities—are a wake-up call for humankind to recalibrate, restructure, and reimagine its beliefs and behaviors. It's important to recognize that beneath overt racism are subtle forms of structural and institutionalized racism that have existed for a very long time, unabated, across communities—in homes, hospitals, churches, schools, governments, and so many other institutions—throughout the Western world. Now, societies are being provoked to ponder fundamental questions about racism. What about the scientific world? Do Black scientists matter?

My perspective is based on my experiences as a Black and African scientist in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States, as well as in African nations through the African AIDS Vaccine Program. I've had the opportunity to interact with a range of Black African colleagues, from young African scientists to African scientific leaders in their fields or in their institutions. We often discussed our dreams, aspirations, and passions as well as work environments in the Western world where Black scientists (African or otherwise) are not well-represented or valued—where Black scientists have felt like aliens of the scientific enterprise.

One problem in the Western world is that the scientific enterprise is in denial about its inherent racism. Black scientists encounter discrimination when they embark on a science career in Western countries. The overwhelming message from their experiences is that the culture of academic science where Black scientists are underrepresented is riddled with deeply entrenched racism of various forms and subtleties. For example, although science is supposed to be objective, many white scientists who are part of the enterprise refuse to believe and acknowledge the racism and alienation that is articulated by Black scientists regarding their work and career. I have experienced, and have heard of, some white scientific leaders who feel that the problem is not the system, but how Black

scientists fail to adapt to and cope with the discipline, standards, and work ethic demands of the science establishment. White scientists may think that they know what racism is and that they can better explain to Black scientists the experiences that those Black individuals have endured. This dismissive attitude ignores the reality of discrimination and alienation experienced by Black scientists. These realities include differences in the way young people are encouraged (or discouraged) to pursue scientific careers, the lack of role models, not having access to meaningful career guidance and mentorship, and not being plugged into influential career networks. Consequently, even the best and brightest can fail to be recognized and admitted into top scientific programs.

Research and academic institutions, scholarly academies, and scientific publications in the Western world all show a paucity of Black scientists in leadership positions, on editorial boards, and as authors. And although the Western scientific establishment has several recognition systems for meritorious scientific discoveries, rarely are Black scientists represented among the awardees. In fact, some young Black African scientists have told me that their research was credited to their superiors and even patented and sold without their involvement. Sadly, Black scientists who do not assimilate or conform, or who abandon their African or Caribbean

or Latin American identity altogether in exchange for the so-called superior white Western identity, can become intellectually and socially isolated. Identity changes and health crises can cause some Black scientists to suffer alienation even within Black communities in these Western nations.

Racism in science has a long history throughout the world and manifests largely through systems of evaluation, recognition, funding, and promotion. The scientific community can postpone confronting this pernicious reality, but it cannot stop the train of change—it has left the station. For equality in the global scientific enterprise to be addressed, meaningful change should start in the Western world's scientific system, where a new environment must be created in which not only Black scientists but all scientists can thrive—one that values human dignity, equity, and social justice.

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Science

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