# Addressing racism through ownership

To the Editor — A year ago, I wrote an article on systemic racism in the geosciences[1]. At the time, none of us could have known that just a few months later the United States and other countries would be rocked by protests against racism and injustice. So far, the most common institutional response has been to issue statements of support, a feel-good but largely empty gesture. Only a sea change in mindsets and attitudes, backed by real changes in policies, procedures and outcomes, will address the problem. We must move from simply acknowledging racism to taking ownership of it.

In response to my article, I received e-mails from people of colour in various countries — the United States, United Kingdom, the Netherlands, France, Canada, Brazil — and a common theme expressed was frustration. Frustration at being labelled a troublemaker for pointing out racism; at colleagues who ignore racism while self-identifying as non-racist; and at the cognitive burden of having to deal with systemic bias every day.

Systemic racism cannot be isolated from everything else around us; it is embedded in our attitudes, perceptions and institutions, and often rooted in unconscious biases. It's why Black and Latinx scientists get mistaken for janitors and administrative staff[2]; why women of colour experience the most harassment in science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields[3]; and why the most progress made in geoscience diversity has been the advancement of White women[4,5]. There are systemic biases that favour White people. That 96% of presidents at the top 25 universities in the United States are White[6], despite White people accounting for 60% of the population (United States Census Bureau; https://www.census.gov/data.html), is a result of such systemic bias.

Sometimes even well-intentioned efforts can reflect bias. I've heard faculty say that they want to devote a percentage of faculty positions to under-represented groups but cannot get approval due to legal reasons. Such thinking is problematic. As we look around us, we see that geoscience faculty are predominantly or even entirely White[7], meaning that when departments want to hire White faculty, they just do it. Why, then, do they need to seek special permission to hire faculty of colour? Viewing hiring White faculty as normal but faculty of colour as 'other' is inherently damaging; it reinforces a perception that someone was hired due to political reasons rather than competence.

Given the monumental importance of climate change and environmental racism, we need to actively foster a sense of inclusion so that under-represented groups and stakeholders can engage meaningfully with these challenges. Here are some things that geoscience departments can do.

First, departments should invest in pipeline programmes. Key factors influencing whether under-represented groups will pursue geoscience are[8–10] a sense of belonging; self-confidence and seeing oneself as a scientist; positive experiences in the field or classroom; having role models to look up to; adequate mathematics preparation; knowledge of career prospects and college admissions processes; and support from family, friends and peers. Investing in pipeline programmes will eventually limit the practice of 'poaching', where departments recruit under-represented scientists from other institutions in order to boost their diversity numbers, but don't actually contribute towards building a diverse talent pool.

Second, hiring and promotion criteria should be expanded to include diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) activities. Current criteria typically include publications, funding and teaching. Since under-represented groups often shoulder the burden of DEI work[11], its recognition as a formal criterion will send a positive signal about the value placed on DEI work by the department and will help recruit and advance under-represented groups.

Third, each research group should submit a DEI plan that outlines actions they will undertake. Activities could range from collaborations with minority-serving institutions, to DEI seminars, workshops and coffee hours for brainstorming these issues. To promote transparency and accountability, these DEI plans, along with regular progress updates, should be made available to everyone in the department.

Fourth, departmental leadership must take ownership of DEI efforts. While individual actions are important, support for DEI must come from the highest levels of leadership as only they have the power to allocate resources and revise policies and procedures. Institutional leaders should take the time to educate themselves on race and racism.

Finally, in the geosciences, where we study the physical Earth and environment, it is vital for us to acknowledge the history of lands, rocks and monuments, and the oppression and racism that is part of that history. Ignoring those aspects amounts to whitewashing history.

At an individual level, we need to ask what actions we have personally taken to combat racism. We all like to believe that we are objective and unbiased. However, the reality is much more complex. Unless we consciously take action, we will default to upholding the existing systems, with their embedded and systemic biases.

What matters now is how we choose to respond to this moment of racial reckoning. We must ensure that we leave an anti-racism legacy for future generations of young scientists and leaders. To get there, we have to ask: what example are we setting, and what steps are we taking, to ensure that we recruit the best talent to address era-defining issues such as climate change and environmental racism? It is our actions at this time that will determine the direction of the geosciences and set the tone for years to come. ❐

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## Competing interests

The author declares no competing interests.