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JANUARY 29, 2016

# Oscars So White: an Institutional Racism Perspective

 by [JAWAD SYED](#)

For a second year in a row, all of the 20 acting nominations for the Academy Awards went to white actors. Not unlike 2015, this has resulted in a heated debate about racial bias in the Oscars, and the opinions of film artists and activists vary from an almost blatant denial of racial bias to an outright allegation of racism.

Given the socio-cultural and economic significance assigned to the Oscars, the notion of institutional racism may be useful to examine this issue. Such examination may focus on (1) the process and (2) the outcome of the Oscar nominations.

Institutional racism is the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their race or ethnicity. It may be observed in processes and outcomes which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance or racist stereotyping.

## The process

It is a fact that in contrast to its blatant and crude forms in the past, racial bias in the current era is subtle, refined and hard to prove at the level of individual worker or artist. For instance,

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in the world of business, it may be almost impossible to prove that an individual employee was discriminated against on the basis of race and ethnicity. However, macro-economic statistics make the bias quite obvious. In the UK, for example, the unemployment rate (2014-15) for ethnic minority people is 10.2%, which is more than twice the 4.9% rate for white people. Moreover, in July 2013, the access to justice system – despite the fact that only a fraction of discrimination cases are upheld – was made difficult through the introduction of a hefty fee of up to £1,200 to access the Employment Tribunal. In the six months from Oct 2013 to Mar 2014 there was a 73% drop in claims on the same period the previous year. This may be seen as an example of institutional obstruction in the way of diversity and equality.

Similar evidence of racial disadvantage is found in the U.S. For example, about 27% of black Americans are living in poverty today compared with 10% of white Americans. Black American men are 6 times as likely as their white counterparts to be incarcerated. Moreover, 8.3 % of black Americans are unemployed in contrast with 4.5% of white people.

In regards to the Oscars, the nomination process appears to reflect institutional bias given that racial privileges, choices and networks seem to perpetuate a dominantly white organisation in which the inclusion of non-whites is either an exception or a token. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Science is by its very construction and perpetuation, an overly White organisation. Its membership is limited to mostly white actors, writers, directors and other professionals. New members must be sponsored by two current members from within their own field or be nominated for an Oscar. There is further scrutiny involved and the final decision lies with the Board of Governors. According to a 2012 study, with more than 6,000 voting members, the Academy is predominantly white (94% of members) and predominantly male (77%). Black members account for just 3%. Moreover, within its various

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branches, whites represent 98% of producers, 98% of writers and 88% of actors. 33% of members are previous winners or nominees of Academy Awards. In other words, the dominance and perpetuation of whiteness are hard to ignore.

## The outcome

Only 35 Oscars were awarded to black artists out of more than 2,900 winners in the Academy's 87-year history. While 95% of nominations went to white film stars, less than 4% of the acting awards were given to African Americans.

There is a recurring pattern of whitewashing. No non-white actor was nominated between 1975 and 1980 or in 1995 and 1997. It is in this backdrop that for the 20 actors nominated for an Oscar, all to be white, for past two years is to be contextualised. *The Economist* suggests that it is hugely unlikely that current "whiteout" is a statistical glitch. "A 2013 survey of the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), an American union for film performers, suggests that 70% of its members are white. If all of the Guild's members were equally likely to receive Oscar nominations, regardless of race, then over a two-year period 28 out of 40 nominations would be of white actors. The chances of no single person of colour being nominated across two ceremonies would be exceptionally small—even during a 15-year span, the odds of seeing at least one sequence of back-to-back whiteouts are around one in 100,000."

Indeed, these imbalances are industry-wide. The whitewashing is also a characteristic of drama schools, casting offices, mainstream media and wider society. Blacks account for only 6% of directors of the top 600 films. Black women account for only two directors of the 600 films. Only one woman of colour has ever won the Academy Award for Best Actress. This is an example of multiple disadvantages facing minority women due to intersectionality of race and gender.

It is in this backdrop that the Scandinavian model of

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increasing diversity through affirmative action may be seen as a way forward for the Oscars. If the aim is to correct an injustice of the past and to put an end to perpetual whiteness, this seems to be a reasonable solution.

On 23 Jan 2016, the Academy announced a number of measures through which it “hopes” to double the number of women and minority members by 2020. However, the list of the Academy members remains a secret and the Academy’s image has suffered a great deal due to its unacceptably slow response to address diversity. It is high time for the Academy to acknowledge institutional racism within its processes and outcomes and take transparent steps to be more inclusive. Perhaps a sincere apology to all those who were wronged in the past may be an appropriate starting point.

[Join the debate on Facebook](#)

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