

Finding more inclusive entrepreneurship for what is a white space



- Not all racism is overt; it can be unintended yet pernicious.
- White solipsism is the cognitive framework that considers white experiences universal and central.
- Dr Rosanna Garcia's research has found this rooted within business academia focused on entrepreneurship.
- Her three-part study with Professor Dan Baack also identified a blueprint for more inclusivity in entrepreneurship.
- The study is meticulous, critical, and sets a reflexivity call to action.



While overt displays of racism are shocking, their visibility makes them easier to challenge and isolate; it is the disguised, even unintended, racism that is more pervasive and, because it is unquestioned, is enduring and, arguably, more injurious. There's an argument that such racism would not find fertile ground within business academia – especially within institutions or programmes encouraging entrepreneurship and diversity in business. Such assumptions are naïve.

Dr Rosanna Garcia is the Paul R Beswick Endowed Chair of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Worcester Polytechnic University in Massachusetts, USA. Working with Dr Dan Baack, Professor of Marketing at the Daniels College of Business at the University of Denver, Garcia has uncovered dominating narratives in the intricate web of academia and entrepreneurship that cast shadows over racially minoritised individuals. Such narratives may not be intentional, but their harms are real. Their research, published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, titled 'The invisible racialised minority entrepreneur: Using white solipsism to explain the white space', is meticulous, critical, and sets a reflexivity call to action.

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The research draws on the work of Dr Teun van Dijk, a professor of linguistics at Pompeu Fabra University in Barcelona and one of the founding figures of critical discourse analysis (CDA), who developed a multidisciplinary approach to studying how language perpetuates racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. Garcia and Baack's published study spans three critical phases: a literature review, content analysis, and an experimental design, each crafted to unveil the subtle and overt ways racially minoritised entrepreneurs are marginalised. Powering this marginalising is a particularly subtle form of racism.

White solipsism's subtle snub

White solipsism refers to a worldview or cognitive framework wherein white experiences, perspectives, and norms are seen as universal and central, often minimalising or excluding the experiences and perspectives of non-white individuals. This concept highlights the implicit assumption that whiteness is the default or normative state, leading to the invisibility or devaluation of racial and ethnic diversity. It's not so much a racial rant as a subtle snub.

In an extensive review of existing entrepreneurship and business ethics academic literature, focusing on how racially minoritised entrepreneurs are portrayed, Garcia and Baack critically analysed the language and imagery used to describe them. It revealed a stark reality: racially minoritised entrepreneurs were often homogenised, with their unique experiences and contributions overlooked. For example, studies suggest that Black women are motivated to start businesses as a spiritual calling, finding success in social impact missions and civic-responsibility goals. The discourse reflected entrenched biases ignoring that success may come in other forms beyond just profits. To shift such biases, it would make sense for an opportunity to manifest in the fresh ideas one would expect in university entrepreneurship programmes. Again, this is not the case.

In the second phase of their research, Garcia and Baack examined over 200 university entrepreneurship programme websites. Using van Dijk's CDA framework, they differentiated the language patterns used to describe outgroup racially minoritised – non-white, predominantly female – entrepreneurs from ingroup racial majoritarian – white, mainly male – entrepreneurs. The analysis uncovered a wash of white solipsism and a disturbing trend: while the language used to describe ingroup entrepreneurs was predominantly agentic, emphasising positive traits such as leadership, innovation, and success, outgroup entrepreneurs were often portrayed through a deficiency lens, reinforcing negative stereotypes and marginalisation.

What if...?

Garcia and Baack's content analysis extended beyond language. They scrutinised the visual representation of entrepreneurs on these websites – over 500 images – finding that racially minoritised individuals were frequently marginalised or altogether absent. For Garcia and Baack, this lack of visibility not only perpetuates racially minoritised individuals' exclusion but also reinforces the dominance of white majoritarian entrepreneurs in the entrepreneurial narrative. However, their research would also unveil that diversity in such images has more than an ethical imperative for racial justice.

Academics and practitioners must critically examine their assumptions and the power dynamics that shape their work.

Wondering how much difference diversity in such images has on students, Garcia and Baack created four mock-up websites featuring student entrepreneurs of different races and genders. Knowing from van Dijk's work that universities can influence the socially shared attitudes, ideologies, and knowledge of individual recipients through communicative events, the researchers asked students to interact with the mock websites and provide feedback on their entrepreneurial interests and perceptions. The feedback was collected through surveys that assessed various aspects of their experience and interest in entrepreneurship.

The results were illuminating. Websites featuring racially minoritised women entrepreneurs had a significantly more positive impact on the entrepreneurial interests of students across the board than those featuring just men. This finding underscores the power of representation in shaping perceptions and aspirations. It highlights the potential of inclusive representation to inspire and empower future entrepreneurs from diverse backgrounds.

Eliminating the white solipsistic perspective of knowledge brokers requires significant self-reflexivity by asking, 'What groups have I overlooked? Do they approach this topic from an alternative perspective? What can I learn by taking a different lens?'



Garcia and Baack aim to unveil the subtle and overt ways racially minoritised entrepreneurs are marginalised.

Therein lies the requisite change. The finding suggests that increasing the visibility of racially minoritised entrepreneurs can counteract the cognitive biases perpetuated by white solipsism and inspire a more diverse generation of entrepreneurs.

A blueprint for more inclusive entrepreneurship

Garcia and Baack's research not only uncovers the biases and marginalisation faced by racially minoritised entrepreneurs but also offers a blueprint for creating a more inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem. It calls for an acknowledgment that the racially minoritised should not be homogenised and a recognition that solipsism is blind to diversity.

Another crucial lesson is the need for reflexivity in research and education within business academia. Academics and practitioners must critically examine their assumptions and the power dynamics that shape their work. This involves being open to new questions, categories, and interpretations that can illuminate the experiences of racially minoritised entrepreneurs.

Ultimately, Garcia and Baack's study is more than an academic exercise. It is a clarion call for change, urging us to build an entrepreneurial world where diversity is acknowledged and celebrated, and every entrepreneur, regardless of their background, can fill the void that is currently white space.

Personal response

Were you surprised by your research findings?

Having collaborated with female and racially marginalised entrepreneurs for years, I was not surprised that their unique contributions to entrepreneurship have often been overlooked by academic researchers. Many of these startup owners prioritise communal goals focusing on contributing to their local ecosystems. Their success is measured by familial, social, and civic impact, not just profits. Traditionally, entrepreneurship has been researched as a domain dominated by men, particularly white men, with success often defined by financial gains and the speed of reaching an initial public offering (IPO). This is not to say that women and underrepresented populations should not pursue the 'traditional' path. Instead, our research aims to highlight that success can take many forms beyond monetary accomplishments.

What was surprising was the outcome of our experiments. Latina entrepreneur spokespersons generated the most interest from the university student respondents. This demonstrates that diversity in entrepreneurship is well accepted by students and putting forth white males as examples of success is not warranted.

How can academics and practitioners critically examine their assumptions and the power dynamics that shape their work?

Van Dijk (1993), who discusses dominance through discourse structures, identifies institutions that control scholarly discourse as 'symbolic elites'. The producers, managers, or brokers of knowledge, such as the media, universities, and

governments, are among the most prominent symbolic elites in contemporary society particularly capable of exerting social power and shaping beliefs through discourse. This necessitates critical reflection by those who control the discourse, such as website managers and marketing communication departments, on their power relationships relayed in the words they use. Symbolic elites should recognise the questions they are not asking, consider the categories they are not using, and explore the interpretations they have overlooked. Eliminating the white solipsistic perspective of knowledge brokers requires significant self-reflexivity by asking oneself, 'What groups have I overlooked? Do they approach this topic from an alternative perspective? What can I learn by taking a different lens?'

Real change must be systemic and may take time; what can be done immediately?

Inclusivity begins with discourse. I encourage universities, and indeed all institutions that disseminate knowledge, to evaluate their own discourse. Do their websites reflect diversity in language, images, and goals? Our research found many university websites prominently feature white males in photos and emphasise competitions, IPOs, and other agentic content when describing entrepreneurship. Instead, website and marketing materials should appeal to a broader audience and be more balanced. For instance, Kirsten Quigley, co-founder of Lunchskins, compostable sandwich bags, once stated, 'The kitchen table is to women entrepreneurs as the garage is to men: the legendary birthplace of some of the best ideas.' Notably, Quigley's language – 'kitchen table', 'birthplace', 'ideas' – differs

from the typical words men use to describe their entrepreneurial journeys, which would more likely be 'garage', 'epicentre', and 'inventions'. Entrepreneurship-focused websites tend to use more agentic words, though women and racial minorities often align more with communal approaches in entrepreneurship. To be more inclusive, entrepreneurship programmes should emphasise words like 'care', 'passion', 'social', and 'team' to reach a broader audience that may not aspire to be 'first', 'powerful', or 'forceful'. All brokers of knowledge, not just universities, should assess how their language might perpetuate racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination.

How would you like to see your research approach applied elsewhere, and why?

As van Dijk suggests, discourse is powerful and the symbolic elites, as the purveyors of knowledge, must accept responsibility of perpetuating white solipsism as an unintentional bias. However, solipsism does not have to be 'white'. It can come as black solipsism or LGBTQ+ solipsism or any other form. It happens unintentionally as an individual interacts with a structured community and becomes blind to 'others' outside this community. This is why self-reflexivity becomes so important. In academic and professional contexts, self-reflexivity requires individuals to reflect on their role in the production and dissemination of knowledge, acknowledging how their position and power dynamics can affect their work. This practice promotes greater self-awareness and can lead to more inclusive and equitable approaches by considering perspectives that might otherwise go unnoticed.

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Bio

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Collaborators

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Further reading

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