

Examining Stories of the Past: *Hidden Figures*

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History is often written to emphasize the actions and accomplishments of White men and discard the contributions of women and racial minorities. In some cases, an effort is taken to combat this and display the stories of those whose actions and voices have been ignored or erased. This is important not only to facilitate a well-rounded understanding of the past but additionally to recognize the actions of those who were successful in the face of adversity.

*Hidden Figures* is a film that emphasizes the stories of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson, three Black women, whose actions contributed to the success of The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) during the 1960s. Their stories show not only their accomplishments but also the discrimination they faced as a result of being Black and women. The discrimination faced by these women was intersectional as it came from not only being Black but additionally from being women. *Hidden Figures* goes against the emphasis of White men's stories within NASA and the space race to highlight the parts that Black women played in successfully putting a man into orbit around the earth. This is integral to an accurate portrayal of the past through recognition of more than simply the accomplishments of one powerful group.

At the heart of *Hidden Figures* is this portrayal of the contributions of Black women to NASA's work. The film addresses the racism and sexism faced by Katherine, Dorothy, and Mary within their personal lives and professional careers as they were working as computers at NASA. The film showed the inherent racial discrimination occurring during the 1960s through the separation of spaces such as schools, offices, and restrooms as well as the discriminatory actions of others. Also, the film addresses the sexism that these women faced as they were women in the workforce who additionally defied gender norms through working in a scientific field. Despite this discrimination and the barriers to success these women faced, they were incredibly

intelligent and competent women who were able to be successful. At the heart of this film is the recognition of the accomplishments of these women paired with the reality of the discrimination they faced. The film gives the empowering message that despite adversity those in the past who were competent and motivated were able to combat explicit barriers to their success.

The themes of racism and sexism as present in *Hidden Figures* are prevalent themes when discussing the psychology of stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. The film deals with racism which is defined by Blaine and Benchley (2017) as “behavior and actions, whether personal or institutionalized, that create a hierarchy of races” (p. 105). This is seen throughout the movie through a mixture of explicit and implicit measures of racism; explicit racism refers to overt and conscious racism while implicit racism refers to subtle and covert measures of racism (T. Hack, PSY 3325 personal lecture notes, February 17, 2020). For example, in the film, explicit racism was shown through the racial segregation seen at the NASA facilities or the segregation of the school Mary wishes to attend in order to be an engineer at NASA. Additionally, Implicit racism is seen through many of the interactions between Vivian Mitchell and Dorothy such as when Dorothy goes into the office Vivian works in and Vivian becomes upset that she decided to come into the White office. Vivian is a prime example of a person with implicit racism because despite her discriminatory actions she does not see herself has acting in a discriminatory manner. In addition to racism, sexism is seen within many interactions in the film. Sexism is discrimination based on sex which is reinforced by gender bias which values “men and masculine traits over women and feminine traits” (Blaine & Benchley, 2017, p. 123). This is shown throughout the movie as the women are treated as less than male counterparts with similar abilities. One example of this is when Katherine is talking to Jim Johnson and he acts skeptical and surprised about Katherine's job of doing mathematics. He is showing that “women in male

jobs receive backlash” which is a common result of sexism (T. Hack, PSY 3325 personal lecture notes, March 2, 2020). Overall, the present and underlying themes of racism and sexism are present throughout *Hidden Figures*.

I think the film was very effective in showing that racial and sex-based discrimination was allowed in a recent period in American history. While many people think that racism and sexism as a thing of the distant past the movie did a great job in showing that discriminatory practices were prevalent in more recent history. The movie displayed that even in a period after separate but equal was ruled unconstitutional, there were still discriminatory and separatist practices happening even in government organizations such as NASA or public institutions such as the public library. Sex-based discrimination was also shown through the sexist dress-code policies of NASA that included wearing skirts or dresses and high heels to work every day. I think this truly set up viewers with a background that allowed them to understand the context in which the protagonists were able to succeed and why their success was important.

When thinking critically about the film, I wish that it could have been rated at a PG-13 or R rating so that it would have been able to show more explicit aspects of racism and sexism that I would expect to be a part of these women’s stories. I understand why a PG rating was ideal because it is likely the film wanted to reach a wider audience, but I cannot help feeling bothered when films about people’s lives are rated are censored in some way as I know that daily life is not rated PG. This does not take away from the meaningful things that the movie accomplishes, but it does feel that their stories are not being told completely. I understand why it would have been ideal to gain a lower rating for the film, but I doubt that these women did not face issues such as sexual harassment and inappropriate racial language which would have changed the rating of the film.

Overall, *Hidden Figures* did a great job of showing the stories of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan, and Mary Jackson who were accomplished employees at NASA. The movie showed the adversity that they faced because of their race and gender in a way that was effective and meaningful. While many movies give the experiences of White men, the film was able to show the experience and contributions of women in the field of mathematics and contributed to the success of NASA throughout the 1960s. The movie provides a new valuable perspective into a piece of the past and tells the stories of women who were overlooked and potentially discarded by others who were telling the stories they were a part of.

### Reference

Blaine, B. E., & Benchley, K. J. M. (2017). Understanding the psychology of diversity (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.