Combatting Racial Bias in Graduate Admissions

How to give P.E.E.R. applicants a fair review

P.E.E.R. (Persons excluded from science because of ethnicity and race)

[Cell article](#) explaining P.E.E.R.

Holistic view of the applicant

To give P.E.E.R. applicants a fair review, it is essential to understand the applicants holistically.

That means we must consider the applicant's achievements and qualifications within the context of their life experience.

Compared to non-P.E.E.R. applicants, P.E.E.R. applicants face challenging systemic barriers within their educational and life experiences. For applicants, this may manifest as:

- Limited research experience
- Less convincing LORs
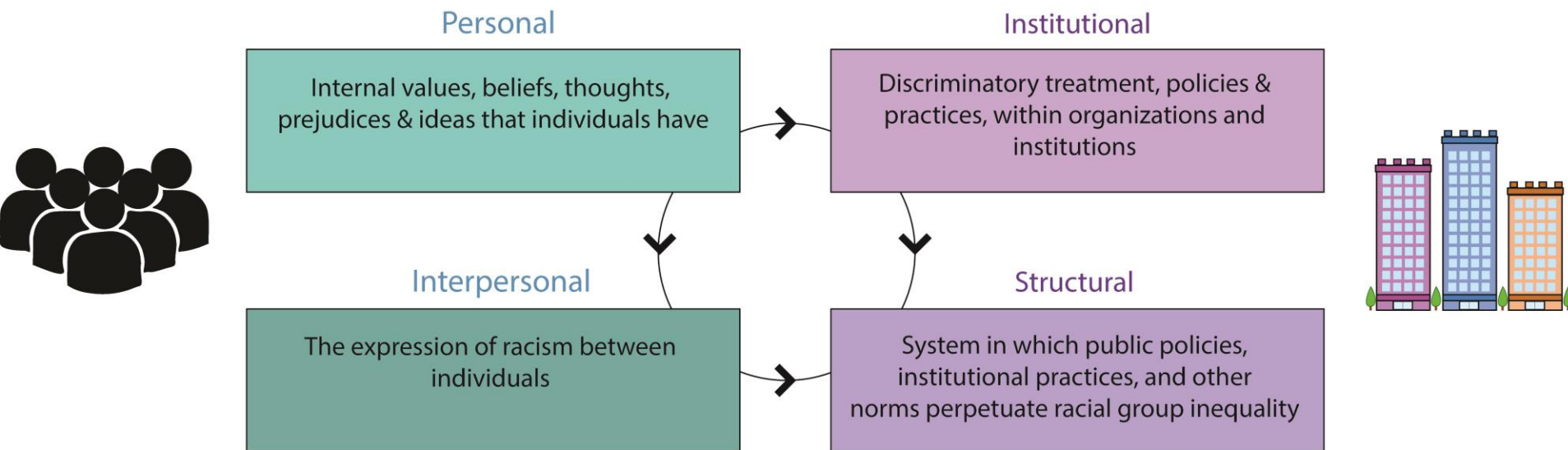- "Substandard" academic performance

To become equitable application reviewers, we need to consider that applicants from different racial backgrounds may have had access to different opportunities and resources. **Therefore, we must challenge our definition of an "ideal candidate".**

To understand how P.E.E.R. applicants are systemically affected, we must understand systemic racism

Systemic racism includes:

Who we are within ourselves and with each other

Personal

Internal values, beliefs, thoughts, prejudices & ideas that individuals have

Interpersonal

The expression of racism between individuals

How we build who we are into what we do

Institutional

Discriminatory treatment, policies & practices, within organizations and institutions

Structural

System in which public policies, institutional practices, and other norms perpetuate racial group inequality

PREREVIEW

We also must understand how [our beliefs](#) are tied into systemic racism within academia

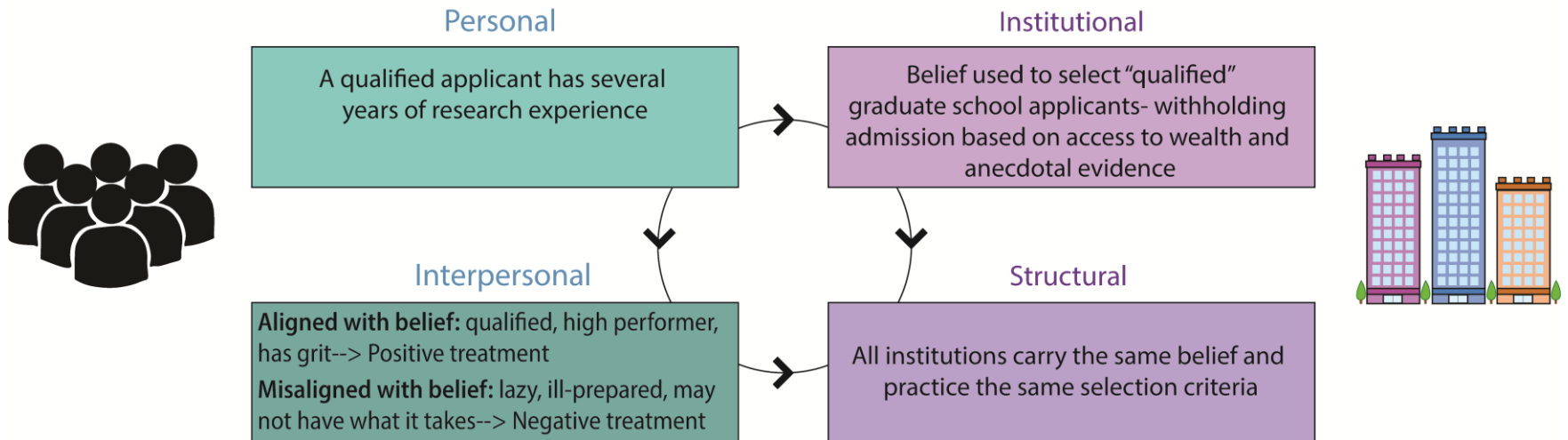## How can a simple belief support *systemic* racism?

Belief: *"A qualified applicant has substantial research experience."* (Assumes more research experience predicts greater academic success-- a belief usually supported by anecdotal evidence rather than empirical evidence. Views shorter internships (like summer internships) as "not enough" research experience to predict success.)

Belief excludes: Those with less financial resources/family support who cannot afford to participate in unpaid research. These candidates may need to work 1+ job(s) just to survive. Volunteer research is less of an option.

Belief selects: Those with more financial resources, family support, more unrestricted time, or those who have less of a financial need to work 1+ job(s).

Who we are within ourselves and with each other

Personal

A qualified applicant has several years of research experience

Interpersonal

Aligned with belief: qualified, high performer, has grit--> Positive treatment

Misaligned with belief: lazy, ill-prepared, may not have what it takes--> Negative treatment

How we build who we are into what we do

Institutional

Belief used to select "qualified" graduate school applicants- withholding admission based on access to wealth and anecdotal evidence

Structural

All institutions carry the same belief and practice the same selection criteria

PREREVIEW

P.E.E.R. applicants have had to cope with systemic racism throughout their lives

Some of the impacts include:

- Fewer Black role models in the sciences
- Fewer academic opportunities
- Socio-economic disadvantages
- Less social capital (Smaller or less empowered professional network)

This may affect their application in the following ways:

- They may not have had the "ideal" research experience (e.g. less years of research, less access to "influential" labs and institutions)

- The necessity of 1+ job(s) during undergraduate training may have impacted GPA. (e.g. unpaid or lowly-paid undergrad/post-bac research positions exclude P.E.E.R. applicants with socio-economic challenges.)

- Less enthusiastic LOR (e.g. mentors may be uniformed of the impact of systemic oppression or/and their own internalized racism, resulting in less enthusiasm which may not accurately represent the applicant's research success.)

- Standardized test scores may be lower or unavailable (e.g. GRE poorly predicts academic success and is a better predictor of socio-economic status. Only certain students have access to expensive and time-consuming test prep programs.)

P.E.E.R. applicants may have experienced systemic racism in academia via:

- Few P.E.E.R. faculty and students in STEM departments
- Personal experiences of racial discrimination
- Emotional impact of Black oppression and intensity of the BLM movement is much greater than experienced by their white peers

This includes daily covert racism, such as:

- Microaggressions
- Neglect
- Exclusion
- Hostility
- Being underestimated
- Having achievements doubted, denied, minimized

Application committees typically *value* self-promotion, however P.E.E.R. applicants may be less likely to self-promote.

Factors that influence this may include:

- **Differences in culture and values** (e.g. Western white-dominant culture values self-promotion as a positive characteristic while many other cultures see this as a negative characteristic. Holding P.E.E.R applicants to Western white-dominant cultural values and standards excludes P.E.E.R. applicants based on personal preference or cultural similarity, not merit.)

- Throughout history, P.E.E.R. applicants have been socialized to minimize themselves and their accomplishments to appear appear non-threatening to non-P.E.E.R.s. (e.g. P.E.E.R. self-promotion can be perceived as "being uppity", arrogant, overbearing, or aggressive by non-P.E.E.R.s.)

- P.E.E.R. applicants may be more likely to experience "imposter syndrome" that is compounded by race.

Be aware of unconscious racial bias in letters of reference.

- LOR for P.E.E.R. applicants are often shorter and employ veiled praise rather than ringing endorsements.

- Praise tends to be more restrained with words like "diligent", "reliable", "well-liked" rather than more powerful words such as "excellent", "accomplished", "ambitious".

- They often emphasize background and obstacles over academic accomplishments, thereby minimizing the applicant's academic readiness.

When a excellent candidate is in an unsupportive environment, their excellence may be perceived as mediocrity.

When a mediocre candidate is in a supportive environment, their qualifications may be perceived as excellent.

Environments can include many levels: the local environment (labs, PI), university environment, and larger national environment.

A holistic approach to evaluating all applications

Admissions reviews are complicated and multi-faceted. It is imperative to use a holistic view for **both** P.E.E.R. and non-P.E.E.R. applications to ensure racial equity.