

Racism

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Racism

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Sociology, Psychology, Political Science, History, Anthropology, Critical Race Theory

1. Core Definition

Racism is fundamentally understood as a pervasive behavior pattern that causes an individual or an entire society to discriminate against persons of other races or ethnic/social groups that the racist individual or group considers inferior. This complex phenomenon extends beyond mere individual prejudice, encompassing a system of advantage and disadvantage based on the social construct of race. It involves not only personal beliefs and attitudes but also institutional practices and societal structures that perpetuate racial hierarchy and inequality. At its heart, racism asserts the superiority of one racial group over others, leading to the subjugation, marginalization, or oppression of those deemed "inferior."

The definition of racism is critically intertwined with concepts of prejudice, discrimination, and power. Prejudice refers to preconceived negative judgments or opinions formed without sufficient knowledge, often based on stereotypes about a racial group. Discrimination involves the actual behaviors or actions that disadvantage individuals based on their race. However, what elevates prejudice and discrimination to racism is the systemic backing of power. This power can be socio-economic, political, institutional, or cultural, allowing the dominant racial group to enforce its prejudices and create barriers for others, thereby maintaining its privileged position within the social structure.

Distinguishing between individual racism and systemic racism is crucial for a comprehensive understanding. Individual racism manifests through explicit acts of bias, such as derogatory comments, hate speech, or physical violence targeting individuals based on their race, as well as through implicit biases that unconsciously affect perceptions and interactions. Systemic or institutional racism, on the other hand, operates through established policies, practices, and norms embedded within societal institutions--like education, housing, employment, and the justice system--that disadvantage specific racial groups, regardless of individual intent. These structural biases often lead to disparities in opportunities and outcomes, even without overt acts of personal animosity.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "racism" itself emerged in the early 20th century, notably gaining prominence in the 1930s as a descriptor for the ideology underpinning Nazi Germany's persecution of Jews and other groups. However, the phenomenon it describes has much deeper historical roots. While ethnocentric biases and conflicts between distinct groups have existed throughout human history,

the modern concept of race and, subsequently, racism, largely developed concurrently with European colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade from the 16th century onwards. The need to justify the enslavement and exploitation of non-European peoples led to the invention and propagation of racial hierarchies, positing Europeans as superior and Africans, Indigenous Americans, and others as inherently inferior.

This period saw the rise of so-called "scientific racism," an erroneous attempt to use scientific methodologies to prove the existence of distinct human races and their inherent differences in intelligence, morality, and capabilities. Figures like Carl Linnaeus and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, despite their significant contributions to other fields, inadvertently contributed to racial classifications that were later weaponized to justify discrimination. These classifications, often based on superficial physical traits, were used to create a rigid social order, entrenching notions of White supremacy and legitimizing oppressive systems like slavery in the Americas and colonial rule across the globe.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, racism continued to evolve and manifest in various forms. In the United States, after the abolition of slavery, Jim Crow laws institutionalized racial segregation and discrimination, denying African Americans basic civil rights and economic opportunities. Similarly, in South Africa, Apartheid established a brutal system of racial segregation and white minority rule. The mid-20th century also witnessed the horrors of the Holocaust, a genocidal campaign driven by a radical racist ideology. The latter half of the 20th century, fueled by civil rights movements globally, challenged many explicit forms of racism, leading to legal reforms, yet the deeper systemic and structural aspects of racism persist and continue to be subjects of intense societal debate and struggle.

3. Key Characteristics

Racism manifests through a spectrum of behaviors and structures, ranging from the overtly hostile to the subtly ingrained. At one end is **explicit racism**, which includes readily observable acts such as written, verbal, and graphic disparagement, including racial slurs, hate speech, and the propagation of racist propaganda. This form of racism is often conscious and intentional, aimed at demeaning or intimidating individuals or groups based on their race. It can also escalate to physical violence, intimidation, and hate crimes, which directly threaten the safety and well-being of targeted communities, creating environments of fear and insecurity.

Conversely, **implicit racism** operates through less overt, often unconscious biases that shape behaviors and decisions. This includes subtle inequities embedded within societal structures, such as disparities in education funding, housing opportunities, access to healthcare, and employment prospects. These implicit biases can lead to systemic disadvantages for racial minorities, even in the absence of explicit discriminatory intent. For instance, unconscious biases in hiring practices

can lead to fewer opportunities for individuals from certain racial backgrounds, or implicit associations can influence how police officers perceive and interact with different racial groups, contributing to racial profiling.

Beyond individual and explicit/implicit dimensions, racism can be further characterized by its institutional and structural forms. **Institutional racism** refers to the ways in which institutions (e.g., government, corporations, universities) through their policies, practices, and procedures, create and maintain racial inequality. This might involve zoning laws that perpetuate residential segregation, standardized tests that are culturally biased, or healthcare systems that provide unequal treatment based on race. **Structural racism** represents the cumulative effect of these institutional policies, historical practices, and cultural norms that reinforce and perpetuate racial hierarchies across various interconnected systems, creating a pervasive and entrenched landscape of racial disadvantage that is larger than any single institution or individual.

4. Psychological and Sociological Dimensions

The psychological underpinnings of racism involve complex cognitive and emotional processes. Stereotypes, which are oversimplified and often negative generalizations about groups of people, form a cognitive basis for prejudice. These stereotypes can be absorbed through social learning and cultural narratives, shaping individuals' perceptions even without direct experience. Cognitive biases, such as the confirmation bias (tendency to seek out information that confirms existing beliefs) and the out-group homogeneity effect (tendency to see out-group members as more similar to each other than they actually are), contribute to the rigid maintenance of racist attitudes. Furthermore, psychological phenomena like social identity theory highlight how individuals derive self-esteem from their group membership, leading to in-group favoritism and out-group derogation, which can fuel racial animosity.

Sociological perspectives emphasize the role of social structures, power dynamics, and historical context in shaping racism. From a sociological standpoint, racism is not merely a collection of individual prejudices but a system of oppression that is deeply embedded in the fabric of society. Theories such as conflict theory explain how dominant groups use racism as a tool to maintain power and privilege, often by creating divisions among subordinate groups or by exploiting racialized labor. Social learning theory suggests that racist attitudes and behaviors are acquired through observation and imitation within social environments, reinforced by cultural norms, media representations, and institutional practices.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a particularly influential sociological framework, asserting that racism is not an aberration but a normal and pervasive aspect of American society, deeply embedded in legal systems, policies, and institutions. CRT posits that race is a social construct used to maintain the interests of the dominant group, particularly white elites, and that racism often

serves pragmatic and material purposes for those who benefit from it. It also emphasizes the importance of storytelling and the lived experiences of racial minorities, challenging dominant narratives that may obscure or deny the realities of racial discrimination. This framework highlights how racism adapts and evolves, often becoming less overt but remaining potent through structural and systemic mechanisms.

5. Significance and Impact

The significance of racism lies in its profound and devastating impact on individuals, communities, and global societies. Historically, racism has been a primary driver of numerous unfortunate events, ranging from pervasive social inequality to the brutal institution of slavery, widespread racial warfare, and horrific acts of genocide. The transatlantic slave trade, fueled by racialized justifications, forcibly removed millions of Africans from their homes, subjecting them to unimaginable suffering and laying the foundation for enduring racial disparities across continents. Colonialism, similarly underpinned by racist ideologies, led to the exploitation and subjugation of vast populations and the destruction of indigenous cultures worldwide, leaving legacies of underdevelopment and conflict.

On an individual level, the impact of racism is deeply traumatic. Victims often experience psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, due to constant exposure to discrimination, microaggressions, and the threat of violence. Racism limits opportunities, creating barriers to education, employment, and upward mobility, thereby perpetuating cycles of poverty and disadvantage within racialized communities. The stress associated with navigating a racist society can also have significant physiological consequences, contributing to health disparities and reduced life expectancy among racial minorities, a phenomenon increasingly recognized within public health discourse.

Societally, racism erodes social cohesion, breeds division, and fosters distrust between groups. It underpins vast economic disparities, where racialized groups consistently face wealth gaps, lower wages, and unequal access to capital. Politically, racism can manifest as voter suppression, unequal representation, and the marginalization of minority voices, undermining democratic principles. In international relations, legacies of racism continue to influence global power dynamics, perpetuating inequalities between nations and fueling conflicts. Addressing racism is therefore not merely a matter of social justice but a fundamental prerequisite for building equitable, stable, and prosperous societies both locally and globally.

6. Contemporary Manifestations and Anti-Racism Efforts

In contemporary society, while overt forms of racism may be less socially acceptable in many contexts, racism has adapted, often manifesting in more subtle yet equally damaging ways.

Microaggressions - subtle, often unintentional, expressions of racism that convey hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to people of color - are a pervasive daily experience for racial minorities, cumulatively contributing to psychological stress and feelings of otherness. Racial profiling in law enforcement, disparities in criminal sentencing, and unequal access to justice continue to highlight systemic biases within legal systems. Furthermore, the digital age has given rise to new forms of racism, including online hate speech, cyberbullying, and the algorithmic biases embedded in artificial intelligence that can perpetuate existing racial inequalities.

In response to the enduring challenge of racism, a wide array of anti-racism efforts and movements have emerged globally. These efforts encompass various strategies, including legislative reforms aimed at prohibiting discrimination and promoting equal opportunity, such as civil rights acts and affirmative action policies. Educational initiatives play a crucial role, seeking to raise awareness about the history and impact of racism, promote cultural competency, and challenge implicit biases through training and curriculum development. Activism, grassroots organizing, and social movements, exemplified by movements like Black Lives Matter, continue to advocate for systemic change, demand accountability, and empower marginalized communities to fight for their rights and recognition.

However, addressing racism remains a complex and ongoing struggle. Challenges include overcoming entrenched systemic inertia, confronting implicit biases that are often unconscious, and navigating debates about the most effective strategies for achieving racial equity. The concept of intersectionality has become particularly vital in anti-racism discourse, recognizing that individuals can experience multiple, overlapping forms of discrimination based on their race, gender, class, sexual orientation, and other identities. This perspective highlights the need for inclusive anti-racism strategies that acknowledge the unique experiences of diverse groups and address the interconnected nature of various systems of oppression, pushing for a more holistic approach to social justice.

7. Debates and Criticisms

The concept of racism itself is a subject of ongoing academic and public debate, particularly regarding its definition and application. One significant area of contention revolves around the idea of "reverse racism." Critics of this term argue that racism fundamentally requires not just prejudice or discrimination but also systemic power to enforce and perpetuate that discrimination. Therefore, while individuals from dominant racial groups can experience prejudice or discrimination, they generally do not face systemic oppression or disadvantage based on their race within societies structured by historical and ongoing racial hierarchies. This debate underscores the importance of distinguishing between individual acts of bias and a systemic framework of power and oppression.

Another critical debate centers on the role of intent versus impact in defining racist acts or policies. Some argue that an act can only be considered racist if there is conscious intent to discriminate or harm based on race. However, a broader understanding, particularly prevalent in anti-racism scholarship, emphasizes that the impact of policies or actions on racial minorities is paramount, regardless of the perpetrator's intent. Policies that appear race-neutral on the surface can still produce racially disparate outcomes due to existing systemic inequalities, leading to what is termed "racism without racists." This perspective highlights that simply removing overt expressions of racism does not dismantle the deeper, often unintended, structural mechanisms that perpetuate racial inequality.

Furthermore, discussions around "colorblindness" represent a significant point of contention. While some advocate for colorblindness as an ideal where race is ignored to promote equality, critics argue that this approach often serves to deny or obscure the ongoing realities of racial inequality and discrimination. By pretending not to "see" race, proponents of colorblindness may inadvertently dismiss the unique experiences, challenges, and cultural contributions of racial minorities, and fail to acknowledge the historical and systemic factors that continue to shape racial disparities. Instead, many scholars and activists argue for a "race-conscious" approach that actively recognizes and addresses racial differences and inequalities to achieve genuine equity and justice.

Further Reading

[Racism - Wikipedia](#)

[Racism - Britannica](#)

[Racism - American Psychological Association](#)

[Universal Declaration of Human Rights - United Nations](#)