4.4: Racism

Racism

The terms stereotype, prejudice, discrimination, and racism are often used interchangeably in everyday conversation. While prejudice is not necessarily specific to race, racism is a stronger type of prejudice used to justify the belief that one racial category is somehow superior or inferior to others; it is also a set of practices used by a racial majority to disadvantage a racial minority. The Ku Klux Klan is an example of a racist organization; its members' belief in white supremacy has encouraged over a century of hate crime and hate speech.

Institutional racism refers to the way in which racism is embedded in the fabric of society. For example, the disproportionate number of Black men arrested, charged, and convicted of crimes may reflect racial profiling, a form of institutional racism.

Sociologists, in general, recognize “race” as a social construct. This means that, although the concepts of race and racism are based on observable biological characteristics, any conclusions drawn about race on the basis of those observations are heavily influenced by cultural ideologies. Racism, as an ideology, exists in a society at both the individual and institutional level.

While much of the research and work on racism during the last half-century or so has concentrated on "white racism" in the Western world, historical accounts of race-based social practices can be found across the globe. Thus, racism can be broadly defined to encompass individual and group prejudices and acts of discrimination that result in material and cultural advantages conferred on a majority or a dominant social group. So-called "white racism" focuses on societies in which white populations are the majority or the dominant social group. In studies of these majority white societies, the aggregate of material and cultural advantages is usually termed "white privilege".
Video \(\PageIndex{1}\): "The Look: A Story About Bias in America." This video from Proctor & Gamble came from the same series as "The Talk" in Section 4.2.

(Close-captioning and other YouTube settings will appear once the video starts.) (CC BY-SA; P&G (Procter & Gamble) on Ads of Brands via YouTube)

Implicit Bias

Figure \(\PageIndex{2}\): Microaggressions. (Courtesy of Shutterstock.com)

- Implicit biases are attitudes or stereotypes that \textit{unconsciously} affect our actions, decisions, and understanding.
Implicit biases can be positive (a preference for something or someone) or negative (an aversion to or fear of something or someone).

Implicit biases are different from known biases that people may choose to conceal for social or political reasons. In fact, implicit biases often conflict with a person’s explicit and/or declared beliefs.

Implicit biases are formed over a lifetime as a result of exposure to direct and indirect messages. The media plays a large role in this formation process.

Implicit biases are pervasive: everyone has them.

Implicit biases are changeable, but research shows that this process takes time, intention, and training.

In this video, CNN journalist Van Jones gives a brief overview of implicit bias and references some of the ways it has manifested in recent events.

Video \( \PageIndex{3} \): Van’s research on the concept of Implicit Bias and the role it is playing in race relations today.

(Close-captioning and other YouTube settings will appear once the video starts.) (CC BY-SA; CNN on Rebuild the Dream via YouTube)

The Kirwan Institute is a leader in the field of implicit bias research. Watch their video, in which they explore some of the ways that individual impacts of implicit bias can compound to create large negative impacts for people of color.
WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?

Research into implicit bias has helped to uncover some of the ways that implicit bias impacts marginalized people and communities. The studies listed below are only a small sample of the large body of research in this field, and only include studies related to race. Other research has shown that implicit biases also function along other lines of marginalization such as gender and disability.

- Preschool teachers were shown a video of four children playing: one white female, one white male, one Black female, and one Black male. The 135 teachers were instructed to look for “challenging behavior” among the students, and their eye movements were tracked while they watched the video. Although there was no challenging behavior actually depicted in the video, the teachers spent the most time observing the Black male child, and when asked, identified him as the child who needed the most attention (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016).

- When provided with discipline scenarios that differed only in the students' name, teachers were more likely to escalate the response to a second infraction for students perceived to be Black than for students perceived to be white (Okunofua & Eberhart, 2015). In addition, teachers were more likely to view individual infractions as representing a larger pattern of misbehavior when the student was perceived to be Black (Smith, 2015).

- In an interview study involving 16,000 racially diverse U.S. teachers, respondents were asked to predict their 10th-graders' future educational attainment. When asked about any specific Black student, white teachers were about 30 percent less likely than Black teachers to predict he or she would someday earn a college degree. For white students, the teachers' expectations were about the same (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015).
Repeated studies have shown that people perceive young Black men as bigger (taller, heavier, more muscular) and more physically threatening (stronger, more capable of harm) than young white men of the same actual size. Participants in these studies were more likely to condone the hypothetical use of force against Black men compared to white men on the basis of this perceived threat (Wilson, Hugenberg, & Rule, 2017).

Given patients indicating identical pain levels, doctors and other medical staff are less likely to prescribe pain medication to Black patients than to white patients (Hoffman, Trawalter, Axt, & Oliver, 2016).

Repeated experiments have shown that Black and Latinx job applicants are significantly less likely to receive a callback than white applicants with identical resumes (e.g., Pager, Bonikowski, & Western, 2009).

When they received e-mails from fictional prospective doctoral students seeking to schedule a meeting, white males were granted access to faculty members 26% more often than women and people of color (the study treated all women and all POC regardless of gender as a single category). White males also received more and faster responses (Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2012).

**Microaggressions**

- Implicit biases can impact our relationships and interactions with each other in many ways, some of which are described in the research findings listed above. One way that implicit biases can manifest is in the form of *microaggressions*: subtle verbal or nonverbal insults or denigrating messages communicated toward a marginalized person, often by someone who may be well-intentioned but unaware of the impact their words or actions have on the target. Examples of common microaggressions include statements like:
  - Where are you really from?
  - What are you?
  - You don’t act like a normal Black person.
  - You’re really pretty for a dark-skinned girl.
  - Microaggressions can be based on any aspect of a marginalized person’s identity (for example, sexuality, religion, or gender). Individual microaggressions may not be devastating to the person experiencing them; however, their cumulative effects over time can be large. The Tumblr blog Microaggressions, which aims to “mak[e] visible the ways in which social difference is produced and policed in everyday lives,” describes this as follows:

In his research, Dr. Derald Sue Wing found that BIPOC experience microaggressions every day – from the time they get up in the morning until they go to bed at night. In his workshops, Sue asks white people in the room this question: “Do you know what it’s like to be a black person in this society where you go into a subway and you sit down and people never sit next to you? Do you know what it’s like to pass a man or a woman, and they suddenly clutch their purses more tightly?” As he notes, many whites have never thought about how this feels because they don’t live this reality. It is invisible to them. By asking this question, Sue’s goal is to make the invisible visible, to get white people to “see” the microaggressions BIPOC experience on a daily basis, and to challenge them to understand how those microaggressions negatively impact the daily lived experiences of BIPOC.

To learn more about how young people experience microaggressions, watch this video, in which college students share their personal stories related to this issue.
WHAT’S THE IMPACT ON BIPOC?

Pervasive implicit bias and microaggressions do more than simply cause BIPOC to “feel bad.” Constant exposure to racism in both implicit and explicit forms can have cumulative and serious impacts on BIPOC. Researchers are only now beginning to identify and understand some of these impacts. For example, scientists have begun linking prolonged racism-related stress to racial health disparities such as differences in maternal mortality rates between Black and white women. Other racial health disparities, such as differing rates of asthma and diabetes across racial groups, may also be linked to the stress impact of racism. Stress hormones, while harmless in small doses, are toxic with prolonged exposure, and can cause permanent damage to the nervous, cardiovascular, immune, and endocrine systems.

In addition to health disparities, the so-called “racial achievement gap” in education has also been attributed at least in part to the presence of implicit bias, stereotypes, and microaggressions. In the 1990s, psychologists Claude Steele and Joshua Aronson provided empirical evidence for the impact of “stereotype threat” on academic performance. The idea behind stereotype threat is that awareness of negative stereotypes about one’s racial group raises stress and self-doubt among students, who then perform worse. Over two decades of data show that stereotype threat is common and consequential. For a summary of this phenomenon and related studies, read the American Psychological Association’s “Research in Action” page.
In her research, Dr. Patricia F. Katopol looks at the impact of stereotype threat on the use of library reference services by BIPOC, specifically African American college students at primarily white institutions. Katopol argues that stereotype threat may be an element of information anxiety – an element that leads many Black students to attempt to find all of the information they need on their own rather than having to interact with librarians who they perceive as judging them. To learn more about stereotype threat in library settings, read her article *Avoiding the Reference Desk: Stereotype Threat* in *Library Leadership & Management*, an open-source journal.

In each of these cases, current research is challenging our notions of cause and effect when it comes to implicit bias, stereotypes, racism, and life outcomes. Rather than attributing the causes of disparate life outcomes to inherent racial differences, this research asks us to consider racism itself as the cause. This is a perspective we will continue to explore later in this curriculum.

**TYING IT ALL TOGETHER**

Implicit biases, microaggressions, and stereotypes are interrelated concepts. Implicit biases are developed through exposure to stereotypes and other forms of misinformation over time. These implicit biases can then lead well-intentioned people to commit microaggressions against people of color, Native people, and others with marginalized identities.

**Glossary**

**Ageism:** A doctrine or ideology that one age group is superior, thus other age groups are deemed as inferior.

**Classism:** A doctrine or ideology that one social class is superior, thus other social classes are deemed inferior.

**Environmental racism:** Structurally analogous to environmental sexism, environmental racism involves a conceptual association between people of color and nature that marks their dual subordination. Environmental racism is seen in the deliberate targeting of communities of color for toxic waste disposal and the siting of polluting industries. It is racial discrimination in the official sanctioning of the life-threatening presence of poisons and pollutants in communities of color. And, it is racial discrimination in the history of excluding people of color from the mainstream environmental groups, decision-making boards, commissions, and regulatory bodies. (Bullard, 1984) Example: Government-allowed, lead-contaminated water in Flint, Michigan, disproportionately impacting African-American population.

**External colonialism:** Worldwide imperialism by certain capitalist nations, including the U.S. and European nations (i.e. Great Britain, France, Germany, etc.); control of economic and political systems by an outside country.

**Heterosexism:** A doctrine or ideology that heterosexuality is superior to all sexual behaviors.

**Ideological racism:** An ideology that considers a groups’ unchangeable physical characteristics to be linked in a direct, causal way to psychological or intellectual characteristics and that, on this basis, distinguished between superior and inferior groups. (Feagin & Feagin: Race & Ethnic Relations) Example: The justification of slavery as “saving” Africans from their homeland’s “disturbed culture;” Manifest Destiny that purported Euro-Americans God-given rights to the lands in the eastern United States at the expense of Native Americans who symbolized as “savages;” Trump’s statements on the campaign trail linking Mexicans to rapists and criminals.
Ideology: (1) A system of beliefs or concepts about human life or culture; (2) body of ideas & beliefs used as the basis for social or political action; (3) presentation of the interests of one particular group or individual those of the whole society.

Institutional racism: 1. Patterns, procedures, practices and policies that operate within social institutions so as to consistently penalize, disadvantage, and exploit individuals who are members of non-white groups. (Better: Institutional Racism) 2. Normal operations of society which systematically deny opportunity to people of color; “business as usual.” (Carmichael & Hamilton: Black Power) Example: The lack of portrayal of Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, Pacific Islanders and Native Americans in mainstream film, television and magazines; the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of professors or teachers whose students are predominantly students of color. Intra-group racism: Racist attitudes and behaviors against people of your “same racial group.” Example: A light-skinned person of color who evaluates a dark-skinned person of color as inferior; a wealthy person of any particular "race" who speaks pejoratively of less financially wealthy individuals in his or her "race."Inter-group racism: POVERTY + SUSPICION = TENSION; Poverty is having significantly low income; suspicion of groups who have a different culture or customs from your group; tension derives through this lack of understanding (ignorance) of the similarities that these groups experience. (Laslett) Example: Article # 60 by Laslett (Inter-Racial Violence): explains why poor Latinos, Asians, Caucasians, and African American gangs are fighting each other instead of fighting the system that really perpetuates not only inequalities but the conflicts between these "have-not" groups.

Internal colonialism: Control and exploitation of non-European groups in the colonized country passes from whites in the home country to white immigrant groups within the newly independent country.

Internalized racism: Members of the target group are emotionally, physically, and spiritually battered to the point that they begin to actually believe that their oppression is deserved, is their lot in life, is natural and right, and that it doesn’t even exist. (Yamato: Something About the Subject Makes It Hard to Name). Example: A person of color who hates his or her skin color and wishes to marry out so his or her children will be of lighter complexion; the root of the alcohol problem in indigenous communities can be traced to the effects of colonization, internalizing the colonizer’s message (i.e. Indians are not humane but rather savage).

Modern racism: White beliefs that serious anti-Black (or anti-Mexican, anti-Arab, anti-Asian, etc.) discrimination does not exist today and that African Americans are making illegitimate demands for social changes. (Sears & McConahay in Feagin & Feagin: Race & Ethnic Relations). Example: The Caucasian male (David) in the film, COLOR OF FEAR, who was sure he was not racist at all and sure that racism is a thing of the past and only a figment in the imagination of the minds of African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, etc.; color blindness.

Neocolonialism: When previous European colonies which have received independence from colonial powers but continue to have their economics and politics directed by the capitalists and corporations of the former (or new) colonial powers.

Oppression: An unjust or cruel use of authority or power.

Prejudice: An opinion or feeling formed without knowledge, thought, or reason.Discrimination: Behavior that excludes members of a group from rights, opportunities or privileges.

Power: The ability to realize one’s will, even against the resistance of others; The ability to get others to do something
Racism: A doctrine that one race is superior, thus other races are deemed as inferior.

Sexism: A doctrine or ideology that one sex is superior, thus another sex is deemed as inferior.

Stereotype: A standardized mental picture that represents an oversimplified opinion, attitude, or judgment of an entire group.

Structural racism: A shorthand term for the many systemic factors that work to produce and maintain racial inequities in America today. These are aspects of our history and culture that allow the privileges associated with "whiteness" and the disadvantages associated with "color" to remain deeply embedded within the political economy. Public policies, institutional practices and cultural representations contribute to structural racism by reproducing outcomes that are racially inequitable. (The Aspen Institute) Example: The racial-ethnic imbalance evidenced in the composition of the Supreme Court justices, elected members of Congress, and Presidential Cabinets, including the Office of President – none of which reflect the racial-ethnic demographics of the country. This imbalance impacts political, educational, and economic policies, laws, and court cases impacting the entire nation. Subtle, covert racism: Hidden, camouflaged, pernicious racism. Example: The English language’s meaning of words such as black, minority, savage. All words used in the United States English lexicon and all found in the Webster’s Dictionary, yet all contain derogatory meanings.

Contributions and Attributions

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Works Cited


