

# Defining Racism

## Race

Race refers to socially constructed categories and hierarchies that are mostly based on bodily features. Race has no scientific or biological basis, but it does create significant cultural meanings and social realities. Race splits people into groups having to do with historical patterns of oppression and rationalization of that oppression. Due to the historical and current significance of these racial realities, racial categories cannot be easily dismissed, discounted or simply wished away (as theories of “melting pots” and “color blindness” try to do).

## People of Color

The term people of color (POC), like race, is not based in any biological or scientific fact. Rather, people of color is used in the U.S. to describe people who share the common experience of being targeted and oppressed by white supremacy.

## Racism

Racism is defined as a set of societal, cultural and institutional beliefs and practices (regardless of intention) that oppress one race for the benefit of another. Key indicators of racism are inequities in power and opportunities, unfair treatment and the disparate impacts of policies and decisions. Racism condemns millions to

poverty, inadequate health care, substandard jobs, violence and other conditions of oppression. In short, racism is a system that routinely advantages white people while disadvantaging people of color. Where there are racial inequities, there is racism.

## TYPES OF RACISM

Part of what makes racism so powerful in the U.S. is the many modes in which it operates. Many dominant discussions of racism begin and end with personal racism—individual, person-to-person acts of racism. But, as we’ll see through the following definitions, racism is much more complex than that, and often much more difficult to identify.

### Personal Racism

Personal racism is the way in which we perpetuate racism on an individual basis. Personal racism encompasses acts (like using racist slurs), characterizations (like sexualizing people of color) and assumptions (like the idea that masculine of center people of color are “scarier” or “less trustworthy” than white masculine people). While personal racism is real and destructive, it is not the end of the discussion on racism.

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## Cultural Racism

Cultural racism includes the norms, values and standards assumed by the dominant culture which perpetuate racism. Some examples of cultural racism include:

- Defining white skin tones as “nude” or “flesh colored.”
- Identifying only white people as great writers, composers or historical leaders and only acknowledging people of color as side notes, if at all.
- “Melting pot” theories, which require people of color to assimilate into dominant white culture and accept it as the norm.
- Anti-ness.

Those aspects of society that overtly and covertly attribute value and normality to white people and whiteness ultimately devalue, stereotype and label people of color as “other,” different, less-than or render them invisible. Our society suppresses the cultures of people of color by concentrating cultural resources in the hands of white-controlled institutions, by subjecting cultural production and distribution to a market logic, and then by using this relative cultural monopoly to spread myths about their races, their abilities, and their roles, which provide the basis for racist belief and action in the other social institutions.

## White Privilege

White privilege refers to the rights, advantages and immunities enjoyed by white people in a culture that values whiteness as the norm. In her influential essay, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh defined white

privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets which I [as a white person] can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”

## Internalized Dominance

From birth, those of us with privileged identities are socialized to internalize dominance. We come to believe that our privilege, or even superiority, is natural and that all opportunities are granted based on individual merit. *“I never had a hard time finding a job. Pull yourself up by your bootstraps!”* Internalized dominance is the fuel for oppression. For example, if men don’t acknowledge that they benefit from sexism, gender inequality remains the status quo. And if white people don’t acknowledge that they benefit from racism, they are cosigning onto white supremacy. (For more on this term, check out: <http://everydayfeminism.com/2015/01/your-internalized-dominance-is-showing/>).

## Institutional Racism

Institutional racism encompasses discriminatory treatment, unfair policies and inequitable opportunities and impacts that are based on race and that are produced and perpetuated by institutions. Institutional racism occurs within and between institutions, distributing resources in such a way that reinforces advantages for white people. Institutional racism is not based on intent, but is still has a severe impact.

Institutional racism is one of the forms of racism that is largely overshadowed

by discussions of personal racism. When we focus on individual acts as the be-all and end-all of racism in the U.S., we lose sight of the institutional structures that perpetuate racism in some of the most insidious ways.

Racist institutions perpetuate the myth that racism is no longer relevant, which undermines our ability to dismantle it. In order to address racism in a meaningful way, we must rename and reframe our reality. We won't end racism by tricking racist institutions. An institution can never be meaningfully and fully restructured to address racial inequities if the discussion is not framed around racism.

### **Structural Racism**

Structural racism is defined by Race Forward, formerly the Applied Research Center as “the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics [...] that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color.”

The intersection of structural racism, institutional violence and historic deprivation creates a society in which racism and economic disparity are often intertwined. Structural racism:

- Operates through every institution (including non-profits).
- Operates upon generation after generation of communities of color (as opposed to homophobia and transphobia, which, while they do have severe impacts, do not operate reliably and cyclically on generation after generation of a family or a community).
- Is at work in all parts of U.S. society, including its history, culture, politics and its very social fabric.

This analysis of structural racism informs a way to talk about racism that is unique from the way we talk about homophobia and transphobia.