

THE CONTOURS OF RACISM

We conceptualize racism as existing along a spectrum, with many different types and forms. Part of the confusion about racism—as the introductory vignette to this chapter illustrates—is that the term is used to describe many different phenomena and is laced with multiple meanings. There are different levels of racism, direct and indirect racism, intentional and unintentional racism, varying sites of racism, and a range of frequencies of racism. We describe these contours briefly before presenting the spectrum of racism.

Levels of Racism

Racism traditionally has been viewed as having at least three levels: (a) individual, (b) group, and (c) institutional. *Individual racism* refers to biases, prejudices, beliefs, or actions that participate in or collude with racism. An example of individual racism is demonstrated by a person who harbors stereotypes of inferiority or difference toward a person who is a member of a group that is different from their own, which leads to exclusionary behaviors or actions, or even telling racist jokes. It can also lead to law enforcement officers using lethal force more quickly when confronting young men of color.

Group racism alludes to actions on the part of one group—often referred to as a dominant, privileged, or agent group—that discriminates against, marginalizes, or in any way oppresses another group that is constructed as being racially different. An example is when White ethnic groups formally and informally control a residential area and will forcefully resist having an ethnic group of color integrate the neighborhood. Another example is the predominantly White composition of many police forces in communities with high numbers of people of color.

Institutional racism indicates systemic, societal, durable racism that is embedded in institutions, organizations, laws, customs, and social practices. Institutional racism forms a web that blocks opportunities for some while offering privilege to others. It leads to a cumulative effect in which groups that are racially targeted are excluded from living in certain neighborhoods and working in numerous jobs and professions, have less access to social assets such as quality schools, and incur greater health risks and other negative consequences and outcomes because of a variety of interacting legal, illegal, direct, and indirect practices. Institutional, group, and individual racism combine when men of color are stopped more frequently than White men by White police officers working in predominantly White police forces and who are more likely to use lethal force.

A final level of racism, *ideological racism*, is pervasive and interwoven into social discourses and narratives. Virulent ideological racism has been enacted throughout history and across the globe through hateful and degrading messages, such as about Muslims in Kosovo by Serbs, Tutsis in Rwanda by Hutus, and Jews in Nazi Germany, and is used to justify horrendous actions against a racial or ethnic group. A modern U.S. example is the vitriol expressed by former President Trump against Muslims and immigrants. By contrast, subtle ideological racism is so familiar that it often passes unnoticed, yet it sustains stereotypes or discriminatory practices. Former President Trump often engaged in this form of racism as well, such as his Tweets about how “no human being” would want to live in Baltimore, implying that those living in Baltimore are not fully human. Ideological racism can be used to reinforce or justify any of the levels of racism mentioned here.

Direct and Indirect Racism

Some racism is overt and direct. Examples of this were the Jim Crow laws and practices in the southeastern United States, which prohibited African Americans from riding in the front of buses, from voting, and even from using the same water fountains as White people. Direct, overt racism can occur at any level. An individual can actively and directly express racial bias or discrimination toward another person and cause bodily, emotional, or psychological harm to the target of racism.

Indirect, or covert, racism seems on the surface to be more passive, but in practice it serves to sustain and maintain racism. An example is seen in the attitudes and biases that inhibit homeowners in a predominantly White suburb from selling their homes to people of color. The cumulative effect can be a segregated neighborhood. Another example is the difference between sentences for possession of cocaine versus crack cocaine, which have no overt indication of racial bias, yet carry the consequence of African Americans being incarcerated disproportionately, more frequently, and for longer periods than their White counterparts.

Intentional and Unintentional Racism

Intentional and unintentional forms of racism are related to active and passive types of racism. The important variable here is motivation. The men who murdered James Byrd, Jr., in 1998, tying him to a vehicle and dragging him along the roads of Jasper, Texas, consciously tortured him because of his race. But many well-intentioned and well-meaning White people engage in racist behaviors of which they are unaware unless confronted. This often comes from unexamined stereotypes or attitudes and consequent microaggressions.

For instance, a White professor, when talking about poverty or single parenthood, may direct her gaze consistently to African American students in the class—a behavior of which she and many White students are unaware but is painfully evident to most African Americans in the class, as well as some White students.

Leong (2012) discusses the concept of racial capitalism; a practice that can include either intentional, unintentional, or both forms of racism. Long offers an examination of a practice where non-Whiteness is valued as a commodity within individual or institutional practices that seek to elevate their own value or value of their institution. Diversity itself has become a valued commodity and most often refers to having Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) individuals become participants in a predominantly White group or institution. As a result, many institutions intentionally look to hire or accept people of color (POC) in order to be attractive both to White individuals who wish to be in a diverse environment and to POC individuals who do not wish to be the only person of color in an institution. This valuing of non-White racial identity, solely because of the benefits it affords a predominately White institution is *racial capitalism*. That is not to say that diversity does not have its merits or that attempts to achieve it are inherently racist. What must be examined is the real objective of an individual or institution.

If the rationale for diversity is only valued to the extent to which it benefits White people, it is commodifying non-Whiteness and has no intention of including POC in the institution's power structure. In this example, the perception is that by merely having POC present, they are, in fact, included. However, the reality is, POC can be present without being included. A desire for diversity that emerges from a belief that remediation is necessary to right the

wrongs of past racial discrimination certainly brings with it an intent toward racial justice. Yet, either way, it is the predominantly White institution that possesses the power to place value on non-White identities. What this reveals is that progress for POC in these instances only occurs when it benefits Whites. In order to avoid participating in racial capitalism, when an individual or institution has racial diversity as a goal, they must simultaneously create a plan for how POC individuals will be included in the power structure and supported by the institution.

Sites of Racism

Racism occurs in many different places—on highways when dark-skinned people are stopped “randomly” by the police while light-skinned people drive by; in classrooms, courtrooms, neighborhoods, and streets where White people are more predominant or in positions of power; in television shows and the nightly news, where White people dominate as producers and presenters; in mental health agencies where White people are often in positions of authority and power, even in agencies predominantly serving people of color; in conversations between White people where racial stereotypes and norms or White privilege and supremacy are reinforced backstage; in segregated or racially homogenous neighborhoods; in the privacy of people’s homes. Racism operates in all units of society, public and private, institutionally and individually.

Frequency and Magnitude of Racism

Frequency and magnitude refer to the incidence and scale of racism. Is it an everyday occurrence, a legacy that has persisted for decades, or an isolated incident? Does a television show consistently portray Asian Americans in a stereotypical fashion, or did a typecast emerge in a single episode? Is the racist narrative conveyed in a news discussion a part of the network’s pervasive culture or a reflection of an individual editor and presenter? When analyzing racism and how to respond to it, an analysis of the frequency and magnitude of racism is useful, and using CRT to identify the hidden patterns and drivers is essential.

THE SPECTRUM OF RACISM

Racism does not fit into neat, exclusive categories. Individual and institutional racism coexist side by side and are interactive; they potentiate one another. The racist attitudes of individuals become reified in institutions, and racist institutions normalize prejudice and oppression, shaping the way in which individuals view the world. Societally, racism is a fluctuating, shifting process, with many examples of societies that have been at the extreme end of the spectrum of oppression during certain eras but not during others. However, when racism and White supremacy are part of a society’s history, they will usually re-emerge even if they had seemed to wane. Exercise 2.3 can help with the application of concepts related to the spectrum.

The United States has experienced all of the types of racism described by the spectrum. The spectrum of racism has a core set of practices and a range of levels, as shown in Figure 2.2. The bottom line indicates the level of racism, ranging from the intrapsychic/intrapersonal, to the interpersonal, through the institutional, to the societal/nation state.

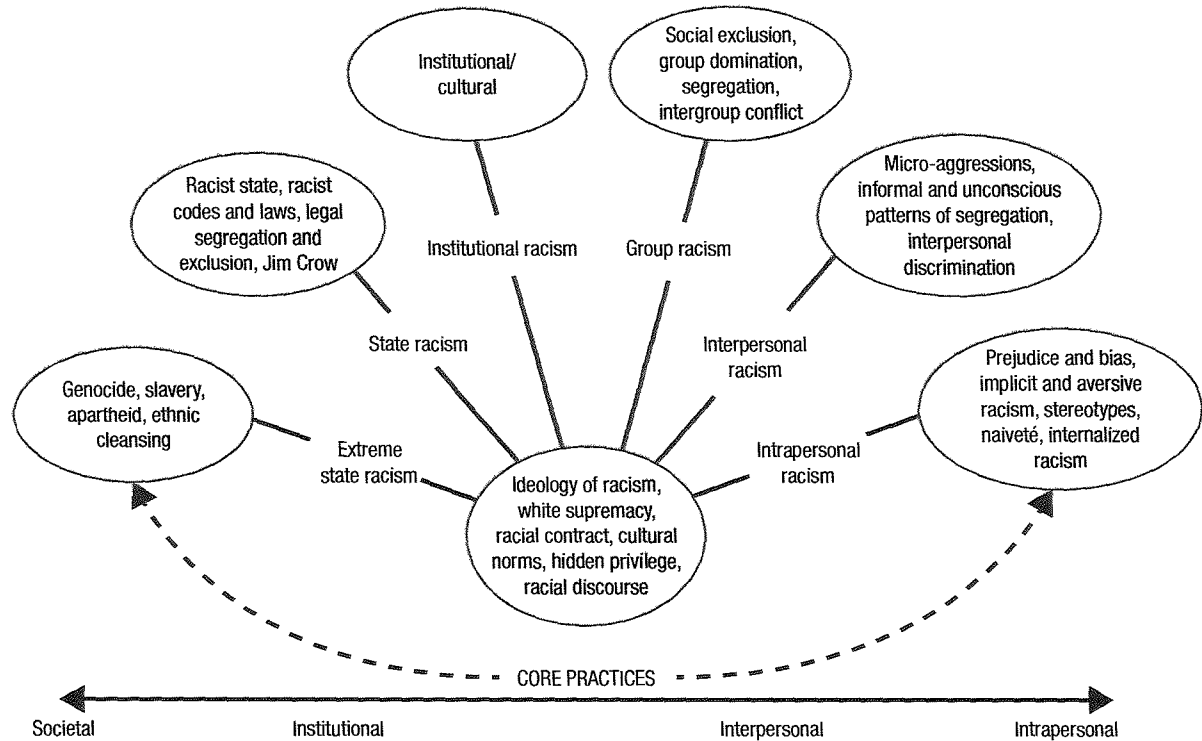


FIGURE 2.2 The spectrum of racism.

In the center of the spectrum is the core, consisting of a racial contract, an ideology of racism, cultural norms, and the oftentimes hidden, invisible privileges of those who benefit from the advantages of the racial contract. The core of racism is part of any facet of the spectrum. The heart of racism is what powers any type or form of racism. Like a human heart, it pumps blood to the various regions of racism, and from them the blood returns.

Intrapersonal

At the intrapersonal end of the spectrum are prejudice and bias, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, ideas, and cognitions. These ideas and responses are what we think of when we see a news story about an armed robbery or what we feel when we pass someone on the street. They are at the core of our internal process and form a reservoir for the stream of messages that we have received from birth, from parents, books, teachers, songs, films, and pictures—messages as ubiquitous as the air we breathe. Our absorption of these messages leads to internalized stereotypes, some of which we are aware but many others of which are unconscious. These stereotypes, in turn, can be a repository of internalized superiority or inferiority—what sometimes is referred to as “internalized racism.”

Interpersonal

At this point along the spectrum, we see racism expressed in interactions between people. Racial “microaggressions” occur, unintentional acts of racism often unrecognized by the perpetrator but agonizing and hurtful to the target of the interaction. Or intentional hostile acts take place, resulting in many potential levels of injury. The challenges of having respectful and meaningful interracial conversations and dialogues lead to poor and missed communications. Interpersonal levels of racism create tensions in the workplace and social isolation and even violence in the community.

Intergroup

Intergroup racism refers to the place on the spectrum where people identify with groups defined by socially constructed racial categories. The act of identification shapes the formation of racial identity, and the collective interactions of group members result in domination, exclusion, discrimination, and other forms of group-based oppression.

This level of racism can be manifested in voting patterns and support for voter suppression laws that disproportionately impact members of another racial group, competition for jobs and neighborhoods, and marriage and friendship patterns. This is not a playing field of equals; one group (Whites) has more power, resources, and privilege and exercises this advantage at many levels of interaction and patterns of behavior that appear to be racially neutral and “the way things are.”

Institutional

Institutional racism is well documented and is discussed at length in Chapter 5. Institutional racism leads to exclusion from neighborhoods, jobs, schools, politics, healthcare, and mental healthcare; greater exposure to environmental hazards; higher risk of arrest, incarceration, and lethal force; and lower life expectancies. We also include dominant cultural patterns of

prejudice and oppression as a form of institutional racism. Institutional racism can occur in any form of society, including democracies.

Official and State

Official and state racism describes situations in which the state is overtly racist. Examples of this, unfortunately, abound. This level of racism includes state-sponsored racism at any level of government. Legal segregation, racist codes and laws, and Jim Crow are all forms of state-sponsored racism that are part of U.S. history. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed the rights of states to racially gerrymander political districts and impose voting restrictions that disproportionately affect voters of color. As long as the policy or law has the veneer of being race neutral, it has been ruled acceptable by the current Supreme Court, despite having documented racialized consequences. Not only has the court allowed practices that disenfranchise people of color from the right to vote, but also those that result in them disproportionately and disastrously being the victims of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010).

Extreme, State Sanctioned

The gloomiest, most appalling end of the spectrum of racism is at the state-sanctioned extreme. Examples include genocide, ethnic cleansing, slavery, and racial apartheid. All of these are part of U.S. history and, sadly, these forms of racism persist in the world to this day. The profound cruelty and terrorism of slavery and the attempts to exterminate indigenous people cannot be glossed over or seen merely as past practices; their legacy persists to this day and is the foundation for the “causal” level of enduring manifestations of White supremacy.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have traced the historical underpinnings of the notion of race and explored the many meanings and interpretations of racism. Various theories of race and racism have evolved, and this chapter highlights several. We have offered a “spectrum of racism” to incorporate the many forms and levels of racism in the United States.

Our understanding of racism, both complex and comprehensive, should not leave us feeling hopeless or overwhelmed. Racism, in its most virulent manifestations, such as during the period of U.S. history when slavery was legal, has been undermined, dismantled, and delegitimized. But racism and White supremacy are always lurking in the shadows, functioning as hidden drivers, and can re-assert themselves in a full-blown way at any moment. The work ahead is hard and challenging, progress is often painfully slow, and we must often take the long view, but the stakes are high and the risks to us all by remaining bystanders and not taking action are even higher.

EXERCISE 2.1 Conceptual Frameworks and You

Consider the different theoretical frameworks presented in this chapter. Which ones best help you to understand the nature of racism? What questions do they raise for you that are