



Cultural Competence Concepts

Contemporary Racism

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Introduction

Contemporary racism refers to the subtle and sometimes implicit negative beliefs about others based solely on their race or ethnic background. Whereas “traditional” forms of racism tended to be visible through a person’s blatant discriminatory words, actions, and opposition to policies that may have brought about equality, contemporary racism is not as obvious and is often expressed in publicly acceptable ways. Because of its subtle forms, it is easy to think that racism no longer exists. Nonetheless, modern racism can have many serious repercussions and thus it is important to understand this concept and learn how to address it in our daily lives.

Over the last several decades, researchers have made distinctions in the various forms of contemporary racism such as symbolic, modern, and aversive racism. These different concepts are related and may overlap, but very slightly.

- **Aversive racism:** Holding negative bias against others based on racial/ethnic membership but also believing that one supports values of equality.¹ Many people with aversive racism either claim to be against or truly believe that they are against racism even though they have deeply held prejudices. Aversive racism is expressed in very subtle ways, such as feelings of unease in the presence of ethnic minorities, suspicion, and doubt; and behaviors such as avoidance. Because they believe that they stand for equality, people who hold

aversive racist attitudes tend to rationalize or explain away bigoted feelings, reactions, and behaviors that they may express. For instance, a person who feels uneasy sitting beside a person of color on a bus might feel guilty for having those feelings and explain to himself that it is not because the person is an ethnic minority but because that person was acting suspicious. An adult program leader might have negative biases towards a child who is of ethnic minority background but rationalize these feelings by pointing out that child’s behaviors—even if other children act in the same way.

- **Symbolic racism:** Having deeply held racial/ethnic bias that is expressed by opposing rules, laws, and values that may uplift minorities. Symbolic racism is similar to aversive racism but has the specific component of supporting things that oppress others. For example, a person might say that he is against the influx of migrants not because he is racist, but because he supports “traditional” ways of life. Another person might claim to support economically marginalized groups and yet oppose programs that would help their well-being.
- **Modern racism:** Modern racism is a type of symbolic racism with the additional belief that racism no longer exists. Modern racism can express itself by people claiming that they have absolutely no biases and in fact they are “colorblind” and/or that there is no racism

in today's society. Modern racism can also be seen in people's contentions that there are no more institutional inequities—even if data clearly shows gaps in wage earnings of Caucasians and people of color, clear discriminatory incidences, and other evidence to the contrary.

Examples of Contemporary Racism

Contemporary racism comes in many forms. It could be brief verbal or nonverbal slights directed to people belonging to another race. Contemporary racism is also difficult to detect because it is rooted in deeply held beliefs and attitudes and in fact even paired with beliefs about equal rights. For example, meeting a university student who has an ethnic minority background and asking which scholarship he received may imply a perception that ethnic minorities do not have the financial means to pay for college or do not qualify for student loans. The person might, in fact, argue that he assumed the student was smart, and worked hard because of all his challenges as an ethnic minority—explaining away his initial reaction.

Another example would be a sales clerk following a person of color closely as she looks around the store. The sales clerk might not act the same way with everyone but might reason that the woman was acting suspiciously. The sales clerk might argue that she is not being racist and that in fact she has many ethnic minority friends—again explaining away her reaction and attitude towards the customer. Clearly, these examples show an underlying mindset that certain people are better or worse than others just because of their race.

Contemporary racism can also be seen in institutional practices. For instance, the racial wage gap describes how even if educational background and employment history are taken into account, African Americans and other people of color are still paid less when compared with Caucasians. Discrimination is also still very evident in job recruitment. Previous research has shown that resumes with American sounding names (e.g., Emily and Greg) get more callbacks than applications with foreign sounding names (e.g., Lakisha and Jamal).² This trend has been found despite the fact that companies claim that they are an “Equal Opportunity Employer.” This suggests that racism, although in a less overt form, still exists in the labor market today.

The Problem with Contemporary Racism

Although contemporary racism is real, some people still deny its existence, mainly because of the following reasons:

The subtlety of contemporary racism

As evidenced by the previous examples, racism today can easily go unnoticed and its victims may have a hard time proving it. Racial attitudes continue to spread without people noticing them. The popular culture, which involves Hollywood entertainment and social media platforms, is permeated by racial beliefs and negative stereotypes. For instance, housekeeper roles are almost always portrayed by Latinas and many of the villain characters are of African American or Middle Eastern descent. These cases could easily pass off as entertaining, harmless, and even funny. But it is these subtle instances that help perpetuate racism and send messages of race superiority and inferiority.

A confined definition of racism

Some people think of racism as limited to engaging in racial slurs, slavery, or lynching. Because they do not engage in these practices, they regard themselves as “color blind,” or that they do not judge people based on race. Additionally, people tend to overlook their prejudiced behaviors when they have other behaviors that are unprejudiced. For example, one might say that he has a lot of African American friends or that he gets along well with his Asian co-workers, so that means he is not racist. These thoughts can make it harder for us to reflect on our own prejudice and subtle racist behaviors. Another problem with modern racism is that people could easily dismiss the issue as petty and irrelevant because they do not believe it compares to the harm and socioemotional damage caused by blatant racism in the past.

Biases are implicit

Implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that subconsciously affect our understanding and behaviors.³ Implicit bias is so pervasive in that even people who say they are not biased still have their own biases. It is easy to consider ourselves objective and overlook our own biases, especially because these biases may be a consequence of the way we were socialized. In addition, previous research has shown that people categorize individuals into groups almost automatically.⁴ Our natural tendency to categorize people prompts and exacerbates biases and racial stereotypes.

Research has also shown that implicit beliefs do not necessarily align with our declared beliefs or what we would like to think we believe in (e.g., a person who publicly endorses racial equality may still hold prejudice against other races).⁵ What people learn about race and the experiences they associate with racial

issues contribute to their biases. Although these associations can change, biases have the potential to be so deeply ingrained in people's lives that they sometimes manifest in words and actions involuntarily or without intentional control. It is because of this unawareness that people continue to engage in racism. The more we keep the idea that we do **not** have these biases, the less likely we are to address them and to understand the negative consequences of modern racism.⁶

Negative Effects of Contemporary Racism

Although very subtle, contemporary racism can have serious consequences. Research has consistently shown that being a victim of contemporary racism is associated with depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, and an overall negative view of the world.^{7 8 9} In addition, racism has also been found to negatively affect the physical and mental health not only of the victim, but also of the one who holds racist attitudes and biases.

In experimental research, subtle forms of racism have been found to affect hiring and evaluative decisions. As mentioned earlier, people with more ethnic sounding names on a resume are generally evaluated less favorably than those with more majority culture sounding names even if the resumes are identical. Consider the consequences of this finding in real-life settings of employment, school, and others.

Suggestions for Action

In many ways, bias and prejudice are difficult to avoid. Our brains are wired to think in efficient ways, which includes the use of categories and classes. Often, these categorizations come with stereotypes and beliefs that are difficult to change. In fact, research shows that contemporary racist attitudes start to emerge very early in our childhood. That said, what can we do to avoid falling into the trap of racism?

First, it is important that we acknowledge that contemporary racism and inequality continue to exist. By acknowledging the problem, we can strive to be more culturally sensitive and aware of our actions and words. The more we try to assert that we are bias-free, the more likely we are to overlook our blind spots and take their negative consequences for granted.¹⁰ By being aware of our biases, we can better check ourselves when we experience racist attitudes and feelings and then consciously work within ourselves to eliminate those prejudices.

We can try to be conscious about our actions and

reactions to others. If we are having a negative response to another person, we should think about why this is so. Is it because of something that person has said or done? Or are we having a reaction because of that person's membership in a racial, ethnic, or religious group? Additionally, we should be willing to have discussions with others who are different from ourselves to learn about their experiences and viewpoints. If we do not understand another person's viewpoint, it is important that we are open and ask questions.

It is also important for adults to intentionally teach children to be culturally sensitive. Research has shown that children as young as age 3 who are exposed to racial discrimination tend to accept and learn racism in only a matter of days.¹¹ Many people think that the topic of race is sensitive, and adults may be tempted to avoid discussing issues around race with children. However, even without prodding, children can develop their own thoughts and beliefs about race, and these may not always be correct. If adults do not engage them in conversation, these biased beliefs will persist and even escalate.¹²

To help children develop positive ideas about racial diversity, parents and teachers can start in their own home and classroom by exposing children to different cultures (e.g., language, food, toys) that they can learn to appreciate. Additionally, adults, on a daily basis, can teach children by modelling positive attitudes and behaviors toward race. If children see that there are adult role models who make efforts to end racism, they will learn that racism is not inevitable and that they can do something about it as well.¹³

Overall, we must be persistent in our efforts to eliminate racism. We must be conscious of our own thoughts, but also be willing to educate others. Encouraging the viewpoint amongst others that all cultures, races, languages, and religions are valuable sends the message that prejudice is not tolerated. Additionally, when prejudice and racism do occur, explain to others why this is negative, not only to the recipients of the behaviors, but to themselves.

Additional Resources

Below are additional resources that provide information on modern racism and how to promote racial equality:

"ABC - What Would You Do? - Racism in America," YouTube video, 6:34, posted by "pleaslucian," June 20, 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ti5ZFmgIzV4>.

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Durden, T. R., Escalante, E., & Blitch, K. (2014). *Culture Matters—Strategies to Support Young Children's Social and Cultural Devel-*

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“I Am NOT Black, You are NOT White.” YouTube video, 4:35, posted by “Prince Ea,” November 2, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q0qD2K2RWkc>.

John Black, “The new threat: ‘Racism without racists,’” *CNN*, November 27, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/11/26/us/ferguson-racism-or-racial-bias/>.

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Perry, Richard J. (2007). *“Race” and racism: The development of modern racism in America*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan).

“Racism Is Real • BRAVE NEW FILMS,” YouTube video, 3:04, posted by “Brave New Films,” April 29, 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fTcSVQJ2h8g>.

Notes

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7. Cassidy, C., O’Connor, R. C., Howe, C., & Warden, D. (2004). Perceived discrimination and psychological distress: The role of personal and ethnic self-esteem. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 51(3), 329–339.
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10. Ross, H. (2014). *Everyday bias: Identifying and navigating unconscious judgments in our daily lives*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
11. Otten, M., & Banaji, M. R. (2012). Social categories shape the neural representation of emotion: Evidence from a visual face adaptation task. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience*, 6, 9.
12. Olson, K. (2013). Are kids racist? (Not) talking about race with your children. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/developing-minds/201304/are-kids-racist>.
13. Derman-Sparks, L., Tanaka Higa, C., & Sparks, B. (n.d.). Children, Race and Racism: How Race Awareness Develops. Retrieved from https://www.teachingforchange.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/ec_childrenracism_english.pdf.

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