



# 7

## Racism and Neo-racisms

The word “racism” was not always in use along with beliefs in the existence of human races. During the age of racial essentialism and explicit white supremacy based on posits of racial hierarchy, what is called “racism” today was built into the idea of race. As ideas that human races were morally equal gained credibility, names came into use for those who retained inegalitarian beliefs and the practices associated with those beliefs. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the first recorded use of the word “racism” in English derives from Richard Henry Pratt’s (1840–1924) criticism of government policy that segregated Native Americans:

Segregating any class or race of people apart from the rest of the people kills the progress of the segregated people or makes their growth very slow. Association of races and classes is necessary to destroy racism and classism.

Pratt had been Second Lieutenant in charge of the Buffalo Soldiers, the sole African–American unit during the Civil War. He persuaded Congress to fund a boarding school for Native American children, the Carlisle Indian Industrial School at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, with a mission to extinguish their language and culture so that they could assimilate to white society (Demby 2013). The irony is that today, Pratt would be considered a cultural racist for his goal of eliminating Native American culture.

At first, the word “racism” came into broad intellectual use to describe Nazi propaganda against Jews in the 1930s (Fredrickson 2002, p. 5). According to the United Nations High Commission in 1969, racial discrimination is about ethnicity as well as race:

In this Convention, the term “racial discrimination” shall mean any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, colour, descent, or national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life. (United Nations, Part I, Article 1, 1, 1969)

The word “racism” was in ordinary usage by the 1970s and it played a prominent role in the new wave of progressive academic scholarship that began at the end of that decade. Anthony Appiah in 1990 distinguished between *racialists*, or those who believe there are races with essences, and two kinds of *racists*: *extrinsic racists* believe that racial essences determine morally relevant differences such as character traits; *intrinsic racists* believe that races are morally different, regardless of their essences (Appiah 1990, pp. 5–6).

In the early twenty-first century, when ordinary people in US society and those in the mass media talk about “race”—talk that many believe does not happen often enough—they are usually talking about racism. But the two are different, conceptually: “racism” refers to attitudes and actions toward people; “race” is about the taxonomy of human races. (Chapters 1–6 addressed race and this chapter is about racism.) Part of the widely recognized reluctance of people to talk about race in the early twenty-first century is related to agreement that racism is unjust and morally bad. **Racism**, as we will consider it in this chapter, consists of **prejudice** or negative beliefs about people because of their race, and **discrimination** or unfavorable treatment of people because of their race. Prejudice and discrimination are the two components of racism, but that in itself doesn’t tell us very much. To add content to these abstractions, we need to understand what specific kinds of speech and action in reality are racist. And we need to understand how they work, to what extent they are illegal, and who or what is to blame for them. It’s also important to understand whether racism can be changed and to consider how that could come about.

The late twentieth-century academic study of racism began with individuals and legal structures. It was assumed that racist actions and exclusions were carried out because individuals had certain beliefs, and that people of color experienced discrimination because the law did not explicitly prohibit it. After the civil rights movement, the number of people identifying as white supremacist or segregationist rapidly decreased, but the effects of racism continued. Scholars then realized that racism was still observable, but without known individual prejudice or intentional individual discrimination. That insight led to ideas of structural or institutional racism or racism without

individual intent. However, individuals still participate in those racist structures and institutions that harm nonwhites but not whites. Therefore, ideas of implicit racism arose, including *white privilege*, *micro-aggression* and *epistemic oppression*. The first part of this chapter is about racism as something done by individuals—hearts-and-minds racism and racist action. This will be followed by discussion of contemporary institutional or structural racism and the chapter will conclude with analyses of implicit racism.

## Racism by Individuals

Racism by individuals consists of unexpressed racist thoughts and feelings and explicit and deliberate racist speech and action. Racist action ranges over many forms of human behavior, including crime.

## Racist Thought and Speech

**Hearts-and-minds racism (HMR)** is racism in, of, or by individuals, consisting of the beliefs of individuals and their reactions, emotions, impressions, and dispositions to act in racist ways. Prejudice, as judgment made before experience, plays an important role in this kind of individual racism. The racist has a closed mind and cold heart regarding groups and their members who are the objects of her racism. Such racism is often based on limited personal experience and interaction with people of races different from one's own, or it is simply adopted from others, such as friends and family members, who are already racists. HMR may be limited to a person's private life or socially and politically expressed. Most HMR racists are intrinsic racists according to Appiah's definitions—just the race of a person who is member of a group they are racist against is enough to evoke their racism.

Philosophers have addressed HMR with ethical analyses pertaining to moral responsibility in terms of individual virtue/vice and praise/blame. To be responsible for racism, it must be true that an individual could have not become a racist. J.L.A. Garcia has put forth a *volitional* or willed account of racism, as a vice in the heart of a racist that affects or infects her actions. Garcia claims that beliefs are secondary to racism, because racism is primarily motivated by emotions and attitudes and need not logically follow from beliefs (Garcia 1996). Tommy Shelby has responded to Garcia by insisting that the racist must have some beliefs associated with her racism and suggesting that racism more closely resembles an ideology or false view of the world, than either emotions or isolated beliefs (Shelby 2002).

Public racist speech was linked to politics after the 2016 US presidential election. Richard B. Spencer addressed the National Policy Institute, self-described as “an independent organization dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of people of European descent in the United States, and around the world.” Spencer proclaimed, “America was until this past generation a white country designed for ourselves and our posterity. It is our creation, it is our inheritance, and it belongs to us.” Spencer’s white audience cheered, applauded, and raised Nazi salutes in homage to President-Elect Donald Trump (Lombroso and Appelbaum 2016). They were expressing a political ideology of HMR as Shelby suggests, but also expressing individual emotions and attitudes as intrinsic racists.

The question naturally arises of whether some people of color are HMR racists. Insofar as people of color may react in racist ways against whites who have directed racist discourse and action against them, they are not intrinsic racists. That they are reacting to the racism of others suggests that they would not be racist against whites if whites had not been racist against them. When people of color engage in antiwhite racist discourse in the absence of immediate white racist discourse or action, they are often referring to past white racist action, such as slavery and lynching under Jim Crow, not so much in prejudice as postjudice. **Postjudice** is an attitude of judging people based on their race, because members of that same race perpetrated racist harms in the past. It goes beyond claiming that those past actions have ongoing effects in the present, because it holds contemporary people responsible for what ancestors of the racial group they belong to, did in the past.

Insofar as HMR by white people expresses white superiority, contempt for nonwhites, and an attitude by those of higher status based on race, it draws on ideas of racial hierarchy that value whites over all other racial groups. There is no such historical or contemporary background of higher status for people of color, especially African Americans. Those who may be intrinsic racists against whites do not have the same ability to express superiority, contempt, or any attitude from higher status. In an immediate context, people of color may at times be properly charged with antiwhite HMR, but when broader societal status contexts are considered, the charge is difficult to back up.

There are milder versions of non-racist defenses among people of color that may look like racism to a casual observer. Within racially integrated schools and colleges, students of color tend to segregate. Part of that self-segregation is a reaction to the aversion and avoidance of interactions with students of color, by white students; another part is a desire of students of color to associate with one another. In a 2007 qualitative study of nine high-achieving black students in a predominantly white high school,

Dorinda Carter concluded that meeting and talking within their racial and achievement group supported their academic success and gave these students opportunities to affirm their own racial identities, as well as cope with non-supportive aspects of their environment (Carter 2007). Research on first-generation college student success suggests that students of color (many of whom are the first in their families to attend college) benefit from structured Living-Learning programs for both academic and social resources (Inkelas et al. 2007; University of Oregon 2017).

As private or public discourse, HMR is still speech and not yet action. In the United States, such discourse is constitutionally protected as a First Amendment right to free speech. Other countries are not as permissive about racist speech. After World War II, in reaction to the Holocaust, there was legislation throughout Europe against anti-Semitic discourse, as a means to prevent recurrence of genocide. This legal policy expanded through the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). In Article 10, the ECHR imposes restrictions on freedom of expression, to protect “the reputation and rights of others.” The CERD in Article 4(a) requires signatory nations to enact punishment for “all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred.” In Article 20, the ICCPR requires signatory nations to have laws against “any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence” (The Middle East Forum 2017).

Between US Free Speech permissiveness and European restrictions, Canada restricts racial and ethnically discriminatory free speech. Canadian law also covers electronic communication. Section 13 of the Canadian Human Rights Act warns that it is a “discriminatory practice” to send hate messages via telecommunications equipment, including the internet (CBC News, Canada 2011). But there are strict standards for prohibition and punishment, as well as loopholes. Prohibited speech must be severe, targeted, public, and deliberate. Religious interpretation and rhetoric such as irony are permissible (Butt 2015).

## Racist Action and Hate Crimes

Racist action is anything harmful done to, with, or about members of a racial group, from racist motives. Not all such actions are crimes. In US law, only individual racist action that is categorized as a hate crime is punishable.

The requirements for action to count as hate crime are detailed and stringent. Here is how the FBI, relying on definitions provided by Congress, defines hate crimes:

A hate crime is a traditional offense like murder, arson, or vandalism with an added element of bias. For the purposes of collecting statistics, Congress has defined a hate crime as a “criminal offense against a person or property motivated in whole or in part by an offender’s bias against a race, religion, disability, ethnic origin or sexual orientation.” Hate itself is not a crime—and the FBI is mindful of protecting freedom of speech and other civil liberties. (FBI 2017)

The FBI has also made a public commitment to investigating and prosecuting hate crimes, “as the highest priority of its Civil Rights Program,” based on racist history that is recounted on its website:

The FBI investigated what are now called hate crimes as far back as World War I. Our role increased following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Before then, the federal government took the position that protection of civil rights was a local function, not a federal one. However, the murders of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney, near Philadelphia, Mississippi, in June 1964 provided the impetus for a visible and sustained federal effort to protect and foster civil rights for African Americans. MIBURN, as the case was called (it stood for Mississippi Burning), became the largest federal investigation ever conducted in Mississippi. On October 20, 1967, seven men were convicted of conspiring to violate the constitutional rights of the slain civil rights workers. All seven were sentenced to prison terms ranging from three to ten years. (FBI 2017)

Hate is not a crime in the United States and hating a racial group is not a crime. In the FBI definition of hate crimes and the description of the historical background to its commitment against them, the victims as well as the perpetrators of hate crimes are perceived by the FBI to be individuals and not racial groups. This legal focus on individuals, which is in accord with the 1960s civil rights and immigration legislation wording, makes it difficult to secure legal remedies for racist actions that go beyond harm to individuals and affect many more members of a larger racial group. The FBI does have a category of “crimes against society” but these are “so-called” victimless crimes such as prostitution and drug use (FBI: NIBRS 2015).

There are other gaps in the FBI’s definition of hate crimes. If an individual is racist toward a racial group and its members and commits a crime against one of its members for an immediate motive different from his or her racism, that crime would not qualify as a hate crime. For example,

imagine a situation of road rage caused by a minor accident between a black motorist and a racist white motorist. The white motorist pulls out a gun and kills the black motorist because he is enraged by the damage to his bumper. That would not qualify as a hate crime, even if the white motorist would not have killed another white motorist in the same situation, although it would be racist action. To qualify as a hate crime, racist action has to be mainly or solely motivated by the race of the victim.

Hate crimes meeting the FBI criteria and recorded as such are relatively rare in the United States. For 2015, the FBI reported for “Victims of Hate Crime Incidents,” that there were 5818 single-bias incidents involving 7121 victims; 59.2% of victims (about 4200) were targeted because of the offenders’ race/ethnicity/ancestry bias (FBI 2016, 2017). By comparison, in 2015, there were an estimated 1,197,704 violent crimes in the United States and an estimated 7,993,631 property crimes (FBI: UCR 2017). Thus, out of about 1.2 million crimes against individuals, about 7000 or 7% were reported as hate crimes associated with race/ethnicity/ancestry/bias (which include intimidation). Either hate crimes are underreported or the requirements for what constitute hate crimes exclude racist crimes that in common sense would be considered hate crimes—or both. In a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, it was estimated that between 2003 and 2011, over 250,000 hate crimes occurred each year (Sandholtz et al. 2003). That would average out to about 35 times the FBI hate crimes reported for 2015.

Although relatively rare as reported, racial and ethnic hate crimes receive intense media coverage and alarm many members of the group to which targeted victims belong. As related by Human Rights Watch, University of California researchers reported that hate crimes against Muslims increased 44% in 2016, going from 180 incidents in 2015 to (an estimated) 260 in 2016 (Pitter 2017). There were also reports of increased hate crimes against Muslims after the 2016 elections. Thus, *Slate* staff reported in June 2017:

Since the election of President Donald Trump, news outlets and social media accounts have swelled with reports of swastikas at schools, racist taunts, and other hate-fueled attacks and acts of intimidation. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which has aggregated media reports and gathered submissions from its website, catalogued 1064 such incidents, 13 of which were later debunked as false reports, in the first month after Trump won the presidency. (Twenty-six of those incidents were perpetrated against Trump supporters.) (*Slate Staff* 2017)

Overall, the United States does not have a legal apparatus to punish or deter hate speech against nonwhites or crimes that may arise from hearts-and-minds racism. Institutions such as universities may have their own

internal policies to curb such expression and action by individuals, and the general impression is that they are more stringent than outside government entities. However, in Spring 2017, five progressive African–American tenured professors, who exercised their free speech rights to criticize violence by whites or refer to black self-defense, were aggressively attacked in conservative media, which led to death threats and disruption of their lives. The professors received either lukewarm support from their administrations or disciplinary action (Creeley 2017). This suggests that First Amendment rights are not fully protected against those who use them abusively against other individuals who are using them and that they have become a weapon against academic freedom.

## Institutional Racism

**Institutional racism** or **structural racism** is a form of discrimination that affects large numbers of nonwhites. It is racist, because the effects of the discrimination on nonwhites by or within public and private institutional procedures and social practices, amounts to treatment worse or more unjust than how whites are treated. There may be no intentional bias by individuals who carry out institutional racism. The instruments of institutional racism need not mention race explicitly in order to have unequal racial effects. Institutional racism does not require an HMR component.

## The US Criminal Justice System

From arrest to imprisonment, to life after release from prison, the US criminal justice system functions as a form of institutional racism against African Americans, Hispanic/Latinos, and other nonwhites. Disproportionate numbers of nonwhites are incarcerated. A paraphrase of Peter Wagner and Bernadette Rabuy's report on US mass incarceration in 2016, on behalf of The Prison Policy Initiative, provides a general picture: Over 2.3 million people are incarcerated in 1719 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 901 juvenile correctional facilities, 3163 local jails, and 76 Indian Country jails. Others are held in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, and prisons in US territories.

On a yearly basis, 641,000 people are released from prison, but 11 million people are jailed. Nonviolent drug offenses involve 20% of those arrested, with most of those arrests occurring at the federal level.

(African Americans represent 12.5% of illicit drug users, but they constitute 29% of those arrested for drug offenses and 33% of those incarcerated in state facilities for drug offenses (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) 2017.) Almost all convictions are the result of *plea bargains* when defendants, including those who are innocent, plead guilty for a lesser offense in order to avoid the uncertainty of a trial. Federal prisons hold 16,000 people for criminal convictions of violating federal immigration laws and 41,000 are civilly detained by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). All together, 840,000 people are on parole (conditional release) and 3.7 million are on probation (as an alternative sentence) (Wagner and Rabuy 2017).

Wagner and Rabuy also note that at 13% of the whole population, African Americans are 40% of the prison population; at 64%, whites are 39% of the prison population, and at 14%, Hispanics are 19% of the prison population (Wagner and Rabuy 2017). There are other figures related to these disparities according to the NAACP's. "Criminal Justice Factsheet:" From 1980 to 2015, the US prison population grew from half a million to over 2.2 million. One in 37 adult Americans or 2.7% are under correctional supervision. African American adults are incarcerated five times the rate of whites; African American children are 32% of children arrested, 42% of children detained, and 32% of arrested children who are sent to criminal court (NAACP 2017).

Although the United States contains 5% of the global population, it makes up 21% of the global incarcerated population. If African Americans and Hispanics were arrested at the same rate as whites, the prison population would be reduced by 40% (NAACP 2017). If that were to happen, the United States would make up about 12% of the world's prison population compared to being 5% of its total population. The use of prison itself to discipline or oppress nonwhites might be based on a more general social and political commitment to control minority populations. There is also a partly private prison industry that provides jobs for contractors and staff, as well as profits for corporations. One cause of so many nonwhites in prison may be that they are already a vulnerable part of the population, economically and socially.

The US prison system is to an extent self-perpetuating regarding minorities. The processing of people of color into prison, the effects of their incarceration on family members, and the nature of their lives after release, are integral parts of the prison system. Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow* describes the increase in the US prison population, together with the War on Drugs begun during the Reagan administration, as a conservative reaction

to the success of the civil rights movement. Felons face permanent obstacles to employment and lose the right to vote, after their release. While relatives are incarcerated, family members are not only separated from fathers, sons, and husbands, but often forced to go onto various government aid programs and/or suffer extreme poverty, which predisposes the next generation to poverty and prison (Alexander 2011). Moreover, there is reason to believe, as we will discuss in Chapter 9, that racial profiling is part of the wide net that disproportionately charges people of color with crimes that put them in prison—and part of the justification for racial profiling is the high rates of minority imprisonment (Zack 2015, pp. 54–6). There is also long-standing evidence that prosecutors and juries may be racially biased (Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) 2017). The result of all this is that preexisting racism and preexisting punitive tendencies in US culture, the poverty of prison families, and high rates of minority incarceration, all work together to perpetuate high rates of minority incarceration.

## Public K-12 Education

In their introduction to *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Education*, Abigail Thernstrom and Stephan Thernstrom write:

Today at age 17 the typical black or Hispanic student is scoring less well on the nation's most reliable tests than at least 80 percent of his or her white classmates. In five of the seven subjects tested by the National Assessment of Education Project (NAEP), a majority of black students perform in the lowest category—Below Basic. The result: By twelfth grade black students are typically four years behind white or Asian students, while Hispanics are doing only a tad better than black students. These students are finishing high school with a junior high education. (Thernstrom and Thernstrom 2003, p. 2)

Success in the US public school system is officially based on merit. But merit at any given age depends on resources available for the child to develop and those resources include funds available to public schools and intangible resources such as support for student motivation to achieve. In Chapter 6, we mentioned the correlation between residential property values and resources for public schools. Affluent neighborhoods that have disproportionately lower numbers of minority residents generally have better schools. Racial differences in home ownership and mortgage debt are also well-known. After the Great Recession of 2007–2008, US homeowners

lost 7 trillion in equity (home value minus mortgage debt). Black-white gaps increased and Latino-white gaps were the greatest, because blacks and Hispanic/Latinos tend to own property in poorer neighborhoods that are not as resilient in economic downturns (Faber and Ellen 2016). Although home values went down in those neighborhoods, erosion of local tax revenue for K-12 education was offset by higher tax rates. States typically provide 45% of school funding, the federal government provides 46% and the rest is provided by local taxes. However, cuts in state spending affected gaps in school funding that were already underway, with significant effects on most of the 52 million K-12 students in 50 states and 14,000 school districts (Leachman et al. 2016).

Not only do poor nonwhite children have less available educational resources when they attend school, but their residential backgrounds result in deficits in cognitive skills when they begin school (Lee and Burkam 2002). There is a high likelihood that poor neighborhoods, poor preparation for school, and poor schools form intergenerational life cycles for poor people of color. Among African American children in grades 7–12, 35% have been suspended or expelled, compared to 20% of Hispanics and 15% of whites (NAACP 2017).

African Americans are less upwardly mobile economically than whites; upward economic mobility rates are highest for white men, followed in order by white women, black men, and black women. However, both black and white children with higher academic test scores in primary and middle school are more likely to experience substantial upward socioeconomic mobility than those with lower scores (Mazumder 2008). Those results suggest what anecdotal information confirms—success in school is a path to success in life, and there is a race gap in both forms of success.

Why do disproportionate numbers of minority children not succeed in school? Poor performance in poor schools together with nonwhite racial identities may affect student attitudes in self-confirming ways. *Oppositional Culture Theory*, as developed by John Ogbu, holds that minority children resist school because it represents white culture, which they oppose based on their life experience. His theory has been popularized as resistance to “acting white,” but he emphasizes the experience that supports minority student attitudes. Although “success in school may be a path to success in life,” minorities have few role models who have succeeded in life based on their educational achievements (Ogbu 2008). Ogbu’s theory has been controversial. Garvey Lundy, for example, claims that black students do not resist school as part of resisting white behavior, but rather resist white behavior in favor of their own cultural agency (Lundy 2003).

A racial gap in school performance and motivation for academic achievement is evident. Conservatives have raised questions about race-based differences in intelligence and individual responsibility. There has consistently been a 15 point difference in IQ scores between whites and blacks. However, Richard E. Nesbitt writing in the *New York Times* points out several problems with the assumptions of *hereditarians* (those who believe IQ is inherited):

The hereditarians begin with the assertion that 60 percent to 80 percent of variation in I.Q. is genetically determined. However, most estimates of heritability have been based almost exclusively on studies of middle-class groups. For the poor, a group that includes a substantial proportion of minorities, heritability of I.Q. is very low, in the range of 10 percent to 20 percent, according to recent research by Eric Turkheimer at the University of Virginia. This means that for the poor, improvements in environment have great potential to bring about increases in I.Q. (Nesbitt 2007)

Other researchers have criticized the validity of IQ tests, on the grounds that a white middle-class cultural context is assumed for correct answers to some questions. In 1984 the US Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit upheld a lower court ruling that IQ tests used to place black students in California school classes for the “educable mentally retarded” were culturally biased (Foster 1984).

The critic of the claim that the race gap in education is an instance of institutional racism might insist that individual children or their parents are responsible for success in school. So how is the racial gap in education an instance of institutional racism? Part of the answer has already been provided in discussion of less resources for predominantly nonwhite schools in poor neighborhoods. There is a smaller racial gap in educational achievement in middle-class racially integrated schools. Researchers report that school integration improves the academic performance of all students and that supports the environmentalists on the subject of racial differences in IQ. The Century Foundation posted in 2016:

Integrated schools help to reduce racial achievement gaps. In fact, the racial achievement gap in K–12 education closed more rapidly during the peak years of school desegregation in the 1970s and 1980s than it has overall in the decades that followed—when many desegregation policies were dismantled. More recently, black and Latino students had smaller achievement gaps with white students on the 2007 and 2009 NAEP when they were less likely to be stuck in high-poverty school environments. The gap in SAT scores between black

and white students continues to be larger in segregated districts, and one study showed that change from complete segregation to complete integration in a district could reduce as much as one quarter of the current SAT score disparity. (The Century Foundation 2016)

Other researchers confirm that poor students who attend better funded schools have higher rates of high school graduation and better income and less poverty as adults (Kirabo et al. 2015; Baker 2012).

Public education is itself a primary institution in US society. The combination of poor schools and social racism is beyond the ability of individual children to change. The racial gap in education has been accepted as normal. Academic success is important for all children to advance socioeconomically, especially those who are poor. Therefore, present racial disparities in the US educational system are an important instance of institutional racism.

## Implicit Racism

Implicit racism is neither overtly negative discourse about people based on their race, nor harmful action, nor wide-scale social structures that obviously and statistically have unjust consequences for nonwhites. Rather, implicit racism occurs one-on-one or with small groups as its audience, and from the standpoint of implicit racists, it is often not easily recognized as racist. But, like institutional racism, implicit racism is racist because of its harmful effects on people of color. Not all people of color may identify the same incidents as implicitly racist, but respect for those who describe their experience of it entails that implicit racism is not “just subjective” and that it should not be dismissed. The concept of implicit racism has many instances in societies with systems of race where there is also both hearts-and-minds and institutional racism and we will consider micro-aggression, white privilege, and epistemic oppression.

## Micro-aggression

A **micro-aggression** is something a person says, does, or causes to happen that members of racial or ethnic minority groups experience as indirect or covert prejudice or discrimination. Micro-aggression is socially acceptable and may not be noticed by people who are not its targets and it may even be unintentional or accidental. Micro-aggressions tend to project stereotypes

onto people of color, doubt their specific racial identities if they do not conform to stereotypes, or belittle them as human beings because of their race or ethnicity. They are often present in casual banter (Nigatu 2013). But their effects may be quite insulting and alienating in making people of color feel as though they do not belong in certain contexts, are not really members of groups to which they belong, or are socially, professionally, or academically, unacceptable (Runyowa 2015). Researchers believe that the effects of micro-aggression are cumulative and in a process called *weathering*, can lead to problems in both physical and mental health (Ho 2015, p. 221).

Some writers have claimed that white teachers may be implicitly racist toward students of color, even though most white teachers are now committed to racial egalitarianism. Writing for the magazine *Everyday Feminism*, Jamie Utt suggests ten ways in which white teachers might be implicitly racist—and how they can be corrected: (1) Basing achievement expectations on students' race or ethnicity—avoid cultural bias in assessing student capability; (2) Insisting they are “color blind”—become culturally responsive; (3) Using racially coded language, such as “ghetto” or “tiger mom” and talking about students' poverty and harrowing experiences to get attention—develop solidarity with students' families and communities; (4) Mispronouncing student names—apologize and get their names right; (5) Practicing disciplinary procedures with greater impact on students of color—organize with other teachers and the community; (6) Valuing whiteness—diversify curriculum, pay attention to students of color in the classroom; (7) Tokenizing aspects of students' cultures, as in dress, music, or speech, in order to connect with them—listen to what students want to learn; (8) Appropriating students' cultures to connect with them—understand your own ethnic culture and create classroom space for authentic cultural expression; (9) Devaluing contributions of non-teachers—listen to parents, staff, and community members and invite them into the classroom; and (10) Not advocating for teachers and employees of color—organize for more diverse hiring practices (Utt 2015).

The teacher behavior described by Utt is an important form of micro-aggression, because teachers are respected and respectable representations of authority, to whom people entrust the development of children's minds. The teachers' harmful behavior and more casual instances of micro-aggression share a superficial approach to other human beings that does not take their humanity and dignity seriously. All of Utt's correctives call for deeper and more serious approaches to racial difference.

## White Privilege

Not everyone in a system of race is in a position to commit micro-aggression and to do so with impunity. Whites can not only commit micro-aggressions with the authority of their status in a background system of racial hierarchy, but it is difficult for people of color to effectively accuse them of it and other whites are often indifferent. The idea of a privilege refers to something desirable, such as an extra perk or reward, which is not officially a right, but an expected benefit from something else. Thus, **white privilege** refers to many benefits of being white in a hierarchical system of race. In 1989, Peggy McIntosh brought the term “white privilege” into broad popular and academic use by referring to the contents of an invisible knapsack or backpack. After realizing that she benefitted from a large unseen/invisible system of race, McIntosh wrote:

I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.

McIntosh describes 50 privileges of being white, in this sense of whites simply taking their status for granted (See Table 7.1).

Some of McIntosh’s backpack contents are social amenities, while others, such as “25. If a traffic cop pulls me over... I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race,” refer to safety and security, which are rights, rather than privileges.

African American cultural critics, from James Baldwin (1924–2987) to contemporary journalist Ta-Nehisi Paul Coates (1975–) have discussed the advantages of whites in the United States, as intergenerational wealth and power accumulated at the expense of African Americans, who have been neither recognized nor compensated for their work and cultural contributions (Baldwin 1963; Coates 2015). Baldwin, in “My Dungeon Shook - Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of Emancipation” the first essay in his *The Fire Next Time*, and throughout his 1965 Cambridge University debate with conservative writer William Buckley, insists that

**Table 7.1** Peggy McIntosh's Invisible Backpack (Source From McIntosh, Peggy, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack," 1989. <http://www.deanza.edu/faculty/lewijulie/White%20Privilege%20Unpacking%20the%20Invisible%20Knapsack.pdf> (This excerpted list is from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School))

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color
18. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group

(continued)

Table 7.1 (continued)

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22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior, without being seen as a cultural outsider
24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge," I will be facing a person of my race
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race
26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race
27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have
31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race
36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones
37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally
38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do
39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen
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(continued)

**Table 7.1 (continued)**

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41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me
  42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race
  43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem
  44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race
  45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race
  46. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin
  47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us
  48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household
  49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership
  50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional, and social
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the American racial system has benefitted whites at the cost of treating non-whites unjustly (Baldwin and Buckley 1965). Coates, in *Between the World and Me* that is written as a letter to his 15-year-old son, makes a similar argument and also takes up Du Bois's idea of the difference between how whites view blacks and how blacks know themselves. Coates, like Baldwin, shares a bleak perspective of the physical dangers posed by racism against African Americans. The conditions described by Baldwin and Coates are hardly a lack of privileges, but are instead point to more serious violations and denials of rights—to be discussed in Chapter 9.

## Epistemic Oppression

The adjective “epistemic” means “pertaining to knowledge and its violation. Kristie Dotson defines **epistemic oppression** as exclusion from knowledge production that prevents some knowers from participating in knowledge communities. Not only are those excluded harmed, but epistemic oppression results in deficiencies of knowledge itself. Dotson posits three forms of epistemic oppression: (1) Testimonial injustice occurs when the testimony of some is not accepted as credible, due to prejudice; it can be remedied by adjusting the criteria for assessing credibility; (2) Hermeneutical injustice arises when members of some cultures are unable to contribute to collective knowledge without a change in the conceptual schemes involved, so that their experience can be described. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's work, Dotson refers to an inability of victims to describe sexual harassment in the workplace, before the concept of inappropriate and nonconsensual sexual behavior toward women in the workplace was understood and accepted (Fricker 2007); and (3) Contributory injustice occurs when there is willed ignorance of contributions that could be made by those who are excluded (Dotson 2012). Alison Bailey has suggested that “affective, aesthetic, or mystical resources” should be added to Dotson's idea of contributory injustice, which is primarily cognitive (Bailey 2014).

Epistemic oppression has an additional characteristic of seeming normal and benign to authorities within knowledge communities. Some white teachers, administrators, and college professors may not only be unaware that certain exclusions are unjust, but they may also be unaware that they are excluding knowers and their contributions from cultures different from their own. Dotson writes that such ignorance “follows from one's social position and/or epistemic location, which works to institute epistemic differences, while obscuring those same differences” (Dotson 2011, p. 248).

This raises a question of whether people can be held responsible for not knowing what they ought to know. It could be argued that those in positions of authority and power in educational institutions are obligated to represent a full human constituency, across all identities. In terms of epistemic justice, they are thereby obligated to have open minds and broad conceptual schemes.

The position of **colorblindness** with regard to race, in a society where some continue to suffer from racism, is an example of epistemic ignorance. When people say they are colorblind, the rationale may be that ignoring race is the best way to solve existing problems and injustice concerning race. However, it is implicitly racist for a white person to hold that position, because, as noted at the beginning of this chapter, ignoring what most people mean by “race” means ignoring racism. The white person proclaiming a colorblind position also has the privilege of not being a victim of what she is ignoring (Fryberg 2010).

## Conclusion

The word “racism” was coined long after races were posited and what we now consider racism was practiced. There is racism in discourse and in action. Hearts-and-minds racism pertains to individuals. Racist action is more widespread than hate crimes, which requires intent in specific instances. Institutional racism, which affect millions of people in a society with a system of race does not require the element of individual intent. Nevertheless, its victims, such as poor nonwhite school children and minorities incarcerated for minor crimes or crimes they did not commit, may be harmed as much or more than if there were racist intentions to harm them. Implicit racism is behavior with racist effects but without awareness that it is racist. All three forms of racism contribute to the ways that a system of race functions in the early twenty-first century. We will see in Chapter 8 how these different forms of racism and positive ideas, constructions, and practices play out in different segments of contemporary American society.

## Glossary

**colorblindness**—perspective that a person is unaware of racial differences effects of on minorities.

**discrimination**—harmful action against others based on their race.

**hearts-and-minds racism (HMR)**—racism of individuals.

**micro-aggression**—speech or behavior experienced by members of racial or ethnic minority groups as indirect or covert prejudice or discrimination.

**postjudice**—an attitude of judging people based on their race, because members of that same race perpetrated racist harms in the past.

**prejudice**—negative beliefs about others based on their race.

**racism**—prejudice and discrimination practiced by individuals or embedded in institutional practices.

**white privilege**—benefits to whites of living in a society with a history and present practice of racism against nonwhites.

## Discussion Questions

1. What are the advantages to free speech when racist hate speech is permitted? What are some arguments against it?
2. Can people who belong to groups that have experienced racism themselves be racist? Explain what is meant by “racism” if they can or cannot be racists.
3. How is postjudice different from prejudice?
4. Does the prosecution of hate crimes in the United States accomplish the deterrence of racism? Why or why not?
5. How is the US prison system a system of institutional racism?
6. What are some claims or arguments that the US K-12 educational system is, or is not, a system of institutional racism? What is your assessment?
7. Give some examples of micro-aggression from your own experience.
8. Does the idea of white privilege trivialize the violation of rights of nonwhites?
9. Is epistemic injustice real injustice in your view?
10. Compare the wrongs of individual racism with institutional racism, in general or theoretical terms.

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