

Key Definitions on Antiracism, Racism, and Whiteness

Antiracism names the conscious, intentional effort to eradicate racism in all its forms. Antiracism work is directed toward undoing systemic oppression and domination created to advantage whites over other ethnic/racial groups. This work, involving self-reflection and critical social analysis, takes the specific form of

- 1) identifying the ways a certain, dominant “racial frame” functions as a central organizing principle in our society both by structuring social arrangements, relationships, and institutional power and practices, and by shaping people’s worldview – their conscious and unconscious assumptions, expectations, beliefs, feelings, images, values and behaviors;
- 2) engaging critical studies of how best to counter racism and create ethical, democratic community, and
- 3) organizing people for collective action to create a just society.

Antiracism cannot be spoken of outside the context of recognizing and challenging racial oppression and domination and addressing the relational breach racism causes. The word antiracism exists in a universe of action. To say the word suggests a sense of taking action against racism—action against oppression and domination.

Biological Race: On the issue of race, the human genome project findings seem to be summarized as follows: Racial designations and ethnicity have no scientific basis. Genetics research has revealed that people classified in the same racial group often have more genetic variation between them than they do with members of other ethnic groups.

The position of racist genetic determinists is, thus, refuted by the human genome project. Skin color, hair texture or shape of facial features—none is significantly genetically determined. Genes for these characteristics are (1) not correlated with other genes, (2) let alone are they connected with observable characteristics based on an organism’s interaction with the environment (e.g., blackness of Australian aborigines and sub-Saharan Africans). The genome project bolsters the category of arguments against “genetic” racism, and therefore all biological based racism (R. L. Hotz from Chronicle, Muskegon, MI, May 7, 1995. Adapted.)

Racial system: A racial system is characterized by ascribed status, imperative identity, caste-life, fixed social location, imposed limitations on human action, feeling, vistas of thinking, and possibilities for self-actualization. A racial system also limits social mobility, institutional participation, social influence, and the range of people with whom one may communicate. The racial caste system imposes limited existential possibilities in the way of one’s being human, of conceiving self, of existing in the world, and of defining reality and meaning (Berger: 83-84).

Functioning of racism: Racism (as understood in anthropological literature) “works” by attributing meaning to certain phenotypical (physical features) and/or genetic characteristics of human beings in such a way as to create a system of categorization (This, despite the fact that there is no correlation. There is greater similarity *between* different racial groups than there is *within* any one racial group.), and by attributing additional (negatively evaluated) characteristics to the people sorted into those categories. This process of signification (meaning attribution) is therefore the basis for the creation of a hierarchy of groups, and for establishing criteria by which to include and exclude groups of people in the process of allocating resources and services (Robert Miles 1989: 3).

Systemic racism: Systemic racism refers to race-based system of hierarchical interaction, principally concerning the creation, development, and maintenance of privilege, economic wealth, and sociopolitical power in defense of the interests of the dominant racial group and its elites. In the United States, systemic racism includes a diverse assortment of racist practices; the unjustly gained economic and political power of whites (theft of land from American Indians and enslavement of

Africans); the continuing resource inequalities; and the racist ideologies, attitudes, and institutions created to preserve white advantages and power (Feagin 2000: 6). (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

Structural dynamics of racism: Four principles drive the overall dynamics of racism in the United States (Louise Derman-Sparks and Carol Brunson Phillips: 1997). (1) Racism operates both overtly and covertly. (2) Racism is based on a politically constructed concept of race. (3) The U.S. manifestation of racism is rooted in the developmental capitalism and colonialism that Europeans cultivated in the New World. (4) Racism interacts in complex ways with sexism and classism. (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

Individual responsibility for racism: All individuals who live in a racist system are enmeshed in its relationships; this means that all are responsible for its perpetuation or transformation. There are no bystanders and neutral observers: each person is either part of the problem or part of the solution. Nevertheless, the situation is complex because, while both dominant and dominated groups play roles in keeping racism alive, the responsibility is not equally shared (Sparks and Phillips 1997: 24).

Racism a white problem: Racism in the United States is a “white problem.” Whites established the system in the first place, control its resources and power, and also have the primary power to transform it. Moreover, simply by virtue of birth into the dominant racial group all whites inherit a multifaceted system that asserts that white is right and that provides benefits and privileges for them. In as much as all whites **benefit** from racism (to some degree) and all whites are **harmed** by it, all are, therefore, implicated in the evils of racism. However, this does not mean that all whites equally possess the power to create and implement racist practices, benefit equally from racism, have consciously chosen to participate, or even want to oppress people of color (based on Sparks and Phillips 1997: 24).

White racial frame: the overarching worldview encompassing important racial ideas and beliefs, terms, images, emotions, inclinations, and interpretations and determining a way of being, perspective on life, and language and explanations that help structure, normalize, and make sense out of society. White racial framing is as much, if not more, subconscious than conscious – thus a “hidden” barrier (Feagin 2013: 3, 9-14).

The contemporary *White racial frame* not only encompasses cognitive stereotypes and articulated values (the important conceptions of what is desirable or undesirable on racial matters), but also important nonlinguistic elements such as racialized emotions, images, and even smells. Altogether, these various elements of a racial frame act as an “organizing principle;” that is, the ideas, images, feelings, dispositions, assumptions, perspectives, and worldview *about race* are used to interpret social reality (used to make sense of relational roles and responsibilities, to understand who is owed deference, who is deserving, who ought to control or lead, and so forth) (Feagin: 2013)

Fostered constantly by white elites through the institutions of cultural transmission –academia and faith communities, political discourse and media – and reinforced by a majority of white parents and peers, the contemporary white racial frame is deep and pervasive, having numerous sub-frames. “The white racial frame is so institutionalized that all major media outlets [including MPR] operate out of some version of it” (Feagin 2013).

This dominant frame shapes our thinking and action in everyday life situations. [This is so for all of us who live by the norms and values of US society – whites as well as people of color. We absorb perspectives, assumptions, dispositions, and values of the white racial frame in ways outside of our awareness; even while impacted by it, some of us are aware of its insidious, pervasive action and resist it with *counter framing*.] Where and when whites find it appropriate,

they consciously or unconsciously use this frame in accenting the privileges and virtues of whiteness and in evaluating and relating to Americans of color.

Social construction of *whiteness*: In the United States, distinct European identities are submerged and largely erased under a social-political, racial identity. Euro-Americans are not born “white”. They need to learn the “white” identity. White unity and identification is learned in a context of cross-class, cross-gender world of racial privilege and power in which whites participate (consciously or not). A common white racial identity has generally determined the social world and loyalties and the life-world of whites—whether as citizens of the colonizing mother country, settlers, non-slaves, or as beneficiaries of the “color bar” and the “color line” (Feagin 2000: 31. Adapted.). (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

White agency: ...Because *whiteness* is a social construction, a range of possibilities opens up for white agency. Although durable, racial-group identity is also fluid and flexible. It fractures into different racial projects, some of which do not merely reproduce and reiterate oppressive white power (white domination). ...*Whiteness* as a social construction can be invented, lived, analyzed, modified, and discarded. (Leonardo 2009: 96) Deep level changes in *whiteness* at the individual level (worldview, emotions, assumptions, interpretations, values), as lived out day-to-day, are hard won and under challenge, and are limited, unless society-wide shifts in consciousness occur. (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

White bodies, white people, white culture: There is a difference between white bodies and white people. One can argue that white bodies (termed “whites” here for convenience) only become white persons when they become *articulated* as such by the ideology of *whiteness*. Certainly white bodies existed prior to the creation of an ideology of “race” roughly five centuries ago. In the context of European colonization across the globe, white bodies were interpellated into White People, i.e., white bodies came to mean “white people” through racist ideology. This on-going “interpellation” (bringing into being) is accomplished through (1) language practices and (2) particular interpretations of social relations. Both of these two discursive practices make it *appear* that white bodies have always been conceived as White People. (Leonardo 2009: 102) (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

Whiteness should not be confused with white ethnic cultures, most forms of which may be benign or even critical of *whiteness*. *Whiteness* is not the problem if whiteness is understood as white culture or European-American ethnicity. The expression of white ethnicity (white culture) needs to be distinguished from “white racial culture.” The problem is that certain interpretations of what it *means* to be *white* lead to forms of domination. As a collective **racial** social construction, *whiteness* is associated with colonization, takeover, and denial (refusal to acknowledge and address racial realities). (Leonardo 2009: 118). White **racial** culture is guided by white racial knowledge – knowledge involving tactics and strategies, rituals, social arrangements, practices, and ways of thinking and interpreting that are deployed in the interest of advancing and preserving white domination. It is white **racial** knowledge that typically is termed *whiteness*. (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)

White privilege: White privilege refers to the concrete benefits of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society that whites receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color in a racist society. Examples include the ability to be unaware of race, the ability to live and work among people of the same racial group as their own, the security of not being pulled over by the police for being a suspicious person, the expectation that they speak for themselves and not for their entire race, the ability to have a job hire or promotion attributed to their skill and background and not affirmative action (McIntosh 1992).

White privilege: Also see, Gregory Jay, “Who Invented White People?” page 102 of original pagination: Securing a bank loan, receiving service in store, hailing a cab, seeking a job—in all such contexts,

whiteness plays a role in the outcome, whether or not the white person is a “liberal” or “anti-racist.” See also the research on “racial disparities” across all social sectors, including health care, education, graduate rates, access to quality of education, wealth/employment, housing, arrest and incarceration.

White supremacy: White supremacy refers to institutionalized beliefs and practices that support and affirm the use of power to control, dominate, and subjugate people in the interest of maintaining a racial and cultural hierarchy that privileges whites or those nonwhites who are advantaged by colluding in the system. Support of white supremacy can exist in the absence of prejudicial (racist) feelings or beliefs. White supremacy refers to the use of power and the instruments of power to construct a social world that serves the interests of whites, first and foremost. The logic of white supremacy is to bring people under control by advancing beliefs, values, and norms of behavior that legitimate and normalize “whiteness” as the standard for human-beingness. It confers benefits on those nonwhites who conform to the norm of white preeminence and dominance (bell hooks 1995: 185-187. Harvey, et al. 2004: 22-23). (ASDIC/Okogyeamon)