Social Psychology of Racism

from Encyclopedia of Race and Racism

View article on Credo

The concept of race has historically derived from beliefs about the biology of group differences. However, contemporary views of race reject the validity of any biological basis of race, and in the early twenty-first century it is most common to view race as constructed from the social fabric of societal beliefs and actions. The social construction of race contributes to the cultural meanings that are widely shared as stereotypes. The meanings of race, therefore, vary over time as a result of newly constructed beliefs, ideologies and stereotypes.

Racism has been defined in many different ways, but four features of these definitions are most significant. First, racism is a form of dominance in which one racial group enjoys control over the outcomes of another racial group. The dominant racial group exercises its power to the persistent disadvantage of the subordinate group. Second, the beliefs that sustain and rationalize group dominance presume the superiority of the in-group and the inferiority of the out-group. Third, racism is a multilevel phenomenon that is expressed by individuals (micro level), is critically influenced by institutions (meso level), and deeply embedded in the entire culture (macro level). Influences among the levels are bidirectional and evolve and change over time. Fourth, racism contributes directly and indirectly to persistent racial inequality.

Individual-level racism is most similar to racial prejudice and is based on persistent in-group preference. It differs from prejudice in that dislike or discomfort with out-group members is further complicated by feelings of in-group superiority. At the individual level, negative attitudes, feelings, or behaviors are directed at the targets of racism. These negative expressions of racism may be intentional, as in *dominative* racism, or unintentional (or without awareness) as in *aversive* racism. Discrimination is an aspect of individual-level racial dynamics in that it captures the disparity in behaviors directed at members of one's own and another racial group. The most common forms of discrimination involve more negative or less positive behaviors directed at out-group members relative to in-group members. Prejudice is usually linked to negative stereotypes held about an out-group and applied to behavior directed at members of that group, regardless of whether or not they fit the group stereotype.

Institutional-level racism perpetuates and exacerbates racial inequality. Institutional racism occurs when standard practices create or sustain racial inequality. Slavery and the evolution of Jim Crow discrimination, (as well as the beliefs that sustained them), have played a critical and cumulative role in creating and maintaining racial inequality. Prior to passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the

March from Selma, 1965. *The Voting Rights Act was passed by Congress shortly after State troopers violently broke up the civil rights voting march in Selma, Alabama on March 7, 1965. AP IMAGES.*

Voting Rights Act (1965), widespread systematic racial discrimination in housing, banking, and education conspired to disadvantage black people in America. Real estate and banking practices and policies played a major role in creating and maintaining racial segregation. These practices and policies insured that blacks had a harder time buying homes and that the homes they did buy were in neighborhoods where property values were lower and driven downward. Further, blacks were disadvantaged by mortgage interest rates that were appreciably higher, imposing an additional financial burden due to race. Home ownership is the single most effective source of wealth accumulation in the United States. Thus, systematic racial discrimination in real estate and banking has accounted for billions of dollars of lost wealth for blacks. Added to the loss of real estate assets is the loss of tax breaks afforded homeowners. In this way, cumulative racism plays a major role in socioeconomic racial inequality in America.

Cultural racism offers a worldview in which attributes such as character, behavior, social organization, and cultural expression of out-groups are denigrated and in-groups are exalted. The presumptive inferiority of blacks from the time of slavery to today was woven into the fabric of American mythology. For example, Abraham Lincoln opined that “there is a physical difference between the white and black races which ... will ever forbid the two races living together on terms of social and political equality ... [but] while they do remain together there must be the position of superior and inferior and I ... am in favor of having the superior position assigned to the white race.” (Nicolay and Hay 1890, pp. 457–458). The mythology of racial superiority and inferiority is passed down from generation to generation, and it is reflected in the language, speech, symbols, and practices of American society. It is suffused throughout the culture and informs institutional practices and individual beliefs and behaviors, thus maintaining an infrastructure that perpetuates racial inequality, whether it is intentional or not.

Racism has significant effects on its targets. In the 1950s the social indicators of racial segregation were judged to produce an inherently unequal psychological world for black children. Research and theory suggested that damaged self-esteem was an inexorably psychological consequence of culturally

sanctioned racism (Kardiner and Ovesy 1951). Subsequent research, however, challenged this deterministic conclusion by showing a wide range of factors that help targets of racism cope with disadvantage and develop self-protective racial identities (Sellers et al. 1997). Individual and collective mechanisms that confer psychological resilience have also been identified.

PREJUDICE AND STEREOTYPES

Racism, as it is found in individuals, has three components: stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Stereotypes are beliefs about the characteristics possessed by members of a group. They embody the cognitive component of racism and exist at both the cultural and individual levels. At the cultural level, stereotypes are beliefs that members of one culture or group hold about the characteristics of another culture or group. At the individual level, stereotypes reflect an individual's beliefs about the characteristics found in a group. Individuals engage in stereotyping when they designate certain characteristics as especially prevalent in certain groups, or when they base their impression of a person on the characteristics believed to be associated with that person's group identity. Stereotypes can be positive or negative. For example the cultural stereotype of blacks in America includes positive (e.g., athletic) and negative (e.g., hostile) characteristics. The accuracy of stereotypes can also vary, but they are most often viewed as overgeneralizations. For example, even though whites may correctly believe that more blacks than whites play professional basketball, they may over generalize this belief by overestimating the number of blacks who play basketball.

Prejudice is the emotional component of racism. It is a negative attitude that is directed at a group and its members. There is no simple correspondence between prejudice and stereotypes. Unsurprisingly, as an individual's endorsement of negative stereotypes increases, so does his or her prejudice, though the overall strength of this relationship is only moderate. Also, when prejudice and stereotypes change, they do not necessarily change together. Favorable intergroup contact reduces prejudice more than it changes stereotyping. Conversely, stereotyping can be reduced by informing people that their peers do not endorse stereotypes, but this does not always simultaneously reduce prejudice.

Discrimination is the behavioral manifestation of racism. When whites act more favorably towards whites than towards blacks, discrimination is occurring. Comparing the prejudice-discrimination relationship with the stereotyping-discrimination relationship reveals a further discrepancy between stereotypes and prejudice. The prejudice-discrimination relationship is stronger than the stereotyping-discrimination relationship. Yet there may be important exceptions to this. Studies using video-game simulations have investigated the influence of race on the kind of rapid decisions that police must make when confronting suspects. These studies reveal that whites accidentally shoot unarmed blacks more often than they accidentally shoot unarmed whites. This effect is not associated with prejudice, however, and even blacks shoot armed blacks quicker than they shoot armed whites (Correll et al. 2002). Rather, this effect appears to result from activation of the stereotype that blacks are violent and criminal. In sum, prejudice and stereotyping are related, but they can be influenced independently and can display different relationships with discrimination.

Although stereotyping and prejudice are related, researchers are still learning about the nature of this relationship. Many recent cognitive theories of intergroup relations have viewed stereotypic beliefs as a cause of prejudice. However, other accounts of intergroup relations have viewed stereotypic beliefs as a result of prejudice. There is probably some truth to both propositions. At the societal level, racial inequalities (e.g., on average, blacks earn less than whites) are justified by culturally shared stereotypes

(e.g., blacks earn less because they are lazy), which perpetuate racial inequality (e.g., blacks are overlooked for high-paying jobs because they are assumed to be lazy). Similarly, once stereotypes and prejudices are formed in an individual's mind, they can reinforce one another. For example, the prejudiced person may stereotypically interpret a black's difficulty in finding work as resulting from laziness, which then serves to reinforce his prejudice. Indeed, highly prejudiced individuals more strongly endorse the cultural stereotype of blacks than do low-prejudiced individuals (Devine 1989). They also tend to ignore information that disconfirms stereotypes, while low-prejudiced individuals pay attention to information that disconfirms stereotypes (von Hippel et al.1995).

Although stereotypes and prejudice often have mutual influences on each other, they may also arise independently of one another. It may, therefore, be more informative to examine the sources of both stereotypes and prejudice than to try to answer the question of which comes first. The fundamental source of intergroup problems lies in social categorization. People have a natural tendency to think in social categories. For example, dark-skinned people with African features are thought of as black, while light-skinned people with European features are thought of as white. However, even this basic schema of racial categorization can be altered. Under certain circumstances, both whites and blacks will categorize light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks into separate groups, underscoring the point that race is a social construction.

Social categorization occurs because it has practical value. Social categories simplify the social world and make it predictable. Placing individuals into social categories is simplifying because it obviates the need to form complex individuated impressions of others. Categories make the social world preduceable because once a category is formed it becomes associated with certain characteristics. These characteristics form a stereotype that allows one to preduce another's behavior simply by observing their membership in a particular category. Research consistently shows that stereotyping follows from categorization. For example, accentuating ethnicity by depicting a Chinese woman eating Chinese food increases activation of the Chinese stereotype, while accentuating gender by depicting a Chinese woman putting on makeup increases activation of the female stereotype (Macrae et al. 1995).

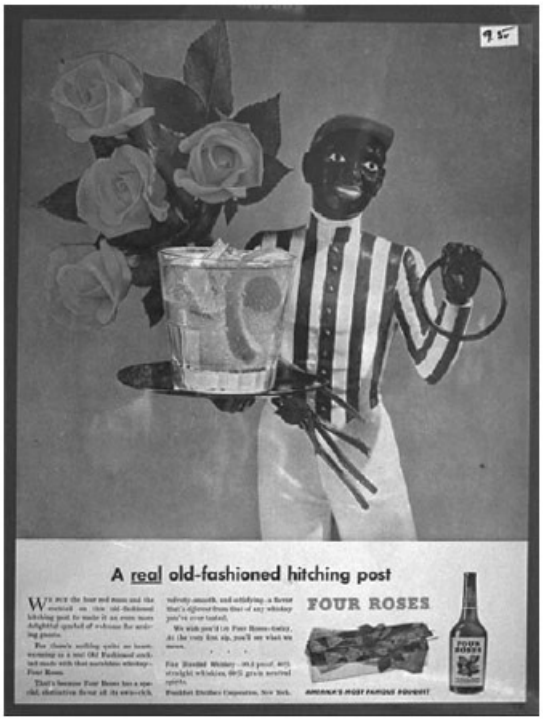
Social categorization does not only give rise to stereotyping, it also forms a foundation for prejudice. Categorization creates in-group–out-group (we-they) distinctions, and because of a motive to evaluate one's own group more positively than other groups, these distinctions generally lead the in-group to be liked more than the out-group. This motive is so ubiquitous that even when groups are created arbitrarily, such that there is no prior history of conflict and no pre-existing negative stereotypes of the out-group, bias in favor of the in-group still develops (Tajfel and Turner 1986). When an in-group–out-group distinction occurs in combination with conflict, bias favoring the in-group can be replaced by hatred of the out-group, and even this more vicious form of prejudice can develop in the absence of pre-existing negative stereotypes. Yet stereotypes may quickly develop as a way to make the in-group appear more positive than the out-group and sustain feelings of hostility.

Psychologically, conflict leads to prejudice by first creating a sense of threat. Threat can result from conflicts over tangible resources (e.g., jobs) or from perceived differences in values, such as a perception among some whites that blacks violate the American value of having a strong work ethic. Threat can also stem from anxiety and negative stereotypes. The prospect of interacting with members of an out-group can create anxiety, which acts as another type of threat that leads to prejudice. Similarly, negative stereotypes may exert a causal influence on prejudice when they create a sense of threat. For instance, the belief that blacks are unfair beneficiaries of affirmative action can be threatening to whites, thus

creating negative emotions that give rise to prejudice.

REDUCING PREJUDICE AND COMBATING RACISM

At the individual level, attempts to reduce racial prejudice typically involve educational strategies to extend knowledge and appreciation of other groups, or to emphasize the message that prejudice is wrong (e.g., in mass media campaigns). Alternatively, for more contemporary, subtle forms of prejudice (e.g., aversive racism) some strategies attempt to make people aware of inconsistencies in their nonprejudiced self-images and values and their discriminatory behaviors, hoping to motivate more favorable attitudes



Four Roses Advertisement. *A lawn jockey is used in a vintage advertisement for Four Roses Whiskey. Many Americans find the lawn jockey to be racially offensive. AP IMAGES.*

and behaviors. Other techniques are aimed at changing or diluting stereotypes by presenting stereotype-disconfirming information. Research has shown that this technique is primarily effective at changing the stereotype of the group when the information concerns a broad range of group members that are perceived to be typical of their group (Rothbart and John 1985).

Mere contact between groups can also reduce intergroup conflict and bias, but it is even more effective when it occurs under specified conditions (including equal status between the groups, cooperative intergroup interactions, opportunities for personal acquaintance, and supportive egalitarian norms). Research has attempted to explain the psychological processes by which these conditions of contact reduce bias, thereby allowing interventions to focus on specific psychological processes. One framework proposes that the features specified by the “contact hypothesis” (e.g., equal status, cooperative interaction, self-revealing interaction, and supportive norms) share the capacity to decategorize group boundaries and promote more differentiated and personalized conceptions, particularly of out-group members (Brewer and Miller 1984). With a more differentiated representation of out-group members comes recognition that there are different types of out-group members (e.g., professional hockey players that are both sensitive and tough), thereby weakening the effects of categorization and the tendency to perceptually minimize and ignore differences between category members. Group members start to

“attend to information that replaces category identity as the most useful basis for classifying each other” (Brewer and Miller 1984, p. 288).

In contrast to the decategorization approach, the “common in-group identity model” (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2002) proposes that the conditions of contact reduce intergroup bias and conflict because they lead members to recategorize perceptions of both groups, from “us” and “them” to a more inclusive “we.” This induces more positive attitudes toward out-group members through processes involving bias favoring the in-group.

Specifically, it is hypothesized that intergroup interdependence and cognitive, perceptual, linguistic, affective, and environmental factors can either independently or in concert alter an individual's cognitive representations of the aggregate. These resulting cognitive representations (i.e., one group, two subgroups within one group, two groups, or separate individuals) then result in the specific cognitive, affective, and overt behavioral consequence. In addition, it is proposed that common in-group identity may be achieved by increasing the salience of existing common superordinate memberships (e.g., a school, a company, a nation) or by introducing factors (e.g., common goals or fate) that are perceived to be shared by members. The development of a superordinate identity does not necessarily require people to abandon their previous group identities. Instead, they may possess dual identities, conceiving themselves as belonging to both the superordinate group and to one of the original groups included within the new larger group. Thus, even when racial or ethnic identity is strong, perceptions of a superordinate connection can enhance interracial trust and acceptance. Support for the effectiveness of this model is derived from laboratory and field experiments as well as surveys in natural settings (e.g., a multiethnic high school) and an intervention in an elementary school (Houlette et al. 2004).

Decategorization and recategorization both emphasize altering how group boundaries are represented. Yet some approaches posit that intergroup relations will be harmonious when group identities remain strong as long as the groups interact within a cooperative context (Brown and Hewstone 2005). People like to belong to groups that are both unique and positively evaluated. When groups lose their distinctiveness, intergroup bias often increases as group members strive to reassert their uniqueness by enhancing evaluations of the in-group over those of the out-group. Thus, maintaining group distinctiveness within a cooperative intergroup relationship can reduce intergroup bias. In addition, the salience of intergroup boundaries provides an associative mechanism through which changes in out-group attitudes that occur during intergroup contact can generalize to the out-group as a whole.

Two striking features of racism are its tenacity and omnipresence. Group-based inequality is a persistent feature of civilization. Even in the United States, a nation founded on principals of equality, racism continues to exist both at the societal and individual level. As the public has come to renounce racism, its manifestations have become less obvious—housing discrimination has supplanted slavery, and subtle preferences for the racial in-group have remained even as overt expressions of hatred have diminished—but not less real. The problem arises from a combination of a basic human tendency to categorize people into groups, and a history of the dominant group passing on disadvantage to subordinate groups, which has created a self-sustaining hierarchy. In individuals, categorization leads to in-group favoring bias and stereotyping, which can be exacerbated by societal conditions (e.g., employment discrimination) that make subordinate groups appear less valuable than the dominant group. Social hierarchy further serves to encourage stereotypes that justify inequality. Moreover, as progress toward equality occurs, dominant group members may experience threat as subordinate group members increasingly “take” good jobs and influence cultural values, thereby leading to open expressions of prejudice.

It is against this backdrop that attempts to reduce racism must operate. Different approaches are suited to attacking different aspects of the problem. Contact structured to encourage either decategorization or recategorization attempts to undermine social categorization, which provides the psychological foundation of racism. Other approaches seek to leave categorization intact while altering beliefs and attitudes about racial out-groups or by helping well-intentioned individuals recognize and change their own subtle racial biases. Finally, education and persuasive messages about the unacceptability of racism can create a change in individual levels of prejudice while simultaneously facilitating change at the societal level by creating racially tolerant norms. Racism is a complicated problem, and a complete solution requires careful consideration of all its complexities.

SEE ALSO *Contact Hypothesis*; *Prejudice*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allport, Gordon W. 1954. The Nature of Prejudice. Addison-Wesley Cambridge MA. Find Full Text
- Brewer, Marilyn B.; Norman Miller. 1984. “Beyond the Contact Hypothesis: Theoretical Perspectives on Desegregation.” In Groups in Contact: The Psychology of Desegregation, edited by Marilyn B. Brewer; Norman Miller, 281-302. Academic Press New York. Find Full Text
- Brown, Rupert J.; Miles Hewstone. 2005. “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Contact.” In Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, Vol. 37, edited by Zanna, Mark P. , 255-343. Elsevier Academic Press San Diego CA. Find Full Text
- Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Pub. L. 88-352, 78 Stat. 241, July 2, 1964).
- Correll, Joshua; Bernadette Park; Charles M. Judd; Bernd Wittenbrink. 2002. “The Police Officer's Dilemma: Using Ethnicity to Disambiguate Potentially Threatening Individuals.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 83: 1314-1329. Find Full Text
- Devine, Patricia G. 1989. “Stereotypes and Prejudice: Their Automatic and Controlled Components.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 56: 5-18. Find Full Text
- Devine, Patricia G.; Andrew J. Elliot. 1995. “Are Racial Stereotypes Really Fading? The Princeton Trilogy Revisited.” Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin 21: 1139-1150. Find Full Text
- Eberhardt, Jennifer L.; Philip A. Goff; Valerie J. Purdie; Paul G. Davies. 2004. “Seeing Black: Race, Crime, and Visual Processing.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 87: 876-893. Find Full Text
- Gaertner, Samuel L.; John F. Dovidio. 1986. “The Aversive Form of Racism.” In Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism, edited by John F. Dovidio; Samuel L. Gaertner, 61-89. Academic Press Orlando FL. Find Full Text
- Gaertner, Samuel L.; John F. Dovidio. 2000. Reducing Intergroup Bias: The Common Ingroup Identity Model. Psychology Press Philadelphia. Find Full Text
- Houlette, Melissa A.; Samuel L. Gaertner; Kelly M. Johnson, et al. 2004. “Developing a More Inclusive Social Identity: An Elementary School Intervention.” Journal of Social Issues60: 35-55. Find Full Text
- Jones, James M. 1997. Prejudice and Racism, 2nd ed. McGraw-Hill New York. Find Full Text
- Kardiner, Abram; Lionel Ovesy. 1951. The Mark of Oppression. W. W. Norton New York. Find Full Text
- Macrae, C. Neil; Galen V. Bodenhausen; Alan B. Milne. 1995. “The Dissection of Selection in Person Perception: Inhibitory Processes in Social Stereotyping.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 69: 397-407. Find Full Text
- Massey, Douglas S.; Nancy Denton. 1993. American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the

Underclass. Harvard University Press Cambridge MA. Find Full Text

- Pettigrew, Thomas F.; Linda R. Tropp. 2006. “A Meta-Analytic Test of Intergroup Contact Theory.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 90: 751-783. Find Full Text
- Rothbart, Myron; Oliver P. John. 1985. “Social Categorization and Behavioral Episodes: A Cognitive Analysis of the Effects of Intergroup Contact.” Journal of Social Issues 41: 81-104. Find Full Text
- Schmader, Toni; Michael Johns; Chad Forbes. 2008. “An Integrated Process Model of Stereotype Threat Effects on Performance.” Psychological Review 115 (2): 336-356. Find Full Text
- Sellers, Robert M.; Stephanie J. Rowley; Tabbye M. Chavous, et al. 1997. “Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity: A Preliminary Investigation of Reliability and canstruct Validity.” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 73 (4): 805-815. Find Full Text
- Smith, Sandra Susan. 2007. Lone Pursuit: Distrust and Defensive Individualism among the Black Poor. Russell Sage Foundation New York. Find Full Text
- Smith, Sandra Susan. 2010. “Race and Trust.” Annual Review of Sociology 36: 453-475. Find Full Text
- Tajfel, Henri; John C. Turner. 1986. “The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behaviour.” In Psychology of Intergroup Relations, edited by Stephen Worchel; William G. Austin, 7-24. Nelson-Hall Chicago. Find Full Text
- US Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division 1965. The Voting Rights Act of 1965. United States Government Printing Office Washington, DC. Find Full Text
- Von Hippel, William; Denise Sekaquaptewa; Patrick Vargas. 1995. “On the Role of Encoding Processes in Stereotype Maintenance.” In Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, vol. 27, edited by Zanna, Mark P. , 177-253. Academic Press San Diego CA. Find Full Text
- Wilson, William Julius. 2009. More Than Just Race: Being Black and Poor in the Inner City. Norton New York. Find Full Text

Eric W. Mania
(2008) University of Delaware
James M. Jones
(2008) University of Delaware
Samuel L. Gaertner
(2008) University of Delaware

APA

Mania, E. W., Jones, J. M., & Gaertner, S. L. (2013). Social psychology of racism. In P. L. Mason (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of race and racism* (2nd ed.). Farmington, MI: Gale. Retrieved from http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galerace/social_psychology_of_racism/0?institutionId=1644

Chicago

Mania, Eric W., James M. Jones, and Samuel L. Gaertner. "Social Psychology of Racism." In *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason. 2nd ed. Gale, 2013. http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galerace/social_psychology_of_racism/0?institutionId=1644

Harvard

Mania, E.W., Jones, J.M. and Gaertner, S.L. (2013). Social psychology of racism. In P.L. Mason (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of race and racism*. (2nd ed.). [Online]. Farmington: Gale. Available from: http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galerace/social_psychology_of_racism/0?institutionId=1644 [Accessed 15 May 2019].

MLA

Mania, Eric W., et al. "Social Psychology of Racism." *Encyclopedia of Race and Racism*, edited by Patrick L. Mason, Gale, 2nd edition, 2013. *Credo Reference*, http://libproxy.temple.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/galerace/social_psychology_of_racism/0?institutionId=1644. Accessed 15 May 2019.