How Does Racism Work?

We at ARTI have often said that racism is learned and therefore can be un-learned. Continue with us on this journey as over the next three months as we explore how racism works, and explore strategies on how we can organize to undo it.

For many people, "racism" is a problem limited to individuals, and involves personal prejudice against people of color. The remedy on offer is education, such as diversity training or cultural competency training.

But racism is much more than an individual's shortcomings. It is a complex system deliberately designed to privilege light-skinned, "white" Euro-Americans through a hierarchy of human worth based on skin color.

Deeply-rooted in our nation's history, racism is embedded in law and maintained by violence. It remains powerful and pervasive because it has come to seem normal, especially to white Americans who benefit, often unconsciously, in ways large and small.

To author Isabel Wilkerson, American anti-Black racism amounts to a caste system like that maintained in India in the wake of the British occupation; or the anti-Jewish Holocaust in Nazi Germany.

She writes in *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (Random House, 2020), "caste is the granting or withholding of respect, status, honor, attention, privileges, resources, benefit of the doubt, and human kindness to someone on the basis of their perceived rank or standing in the hierarchy."

In other words, America's racialized caste system withholds from people of color the social and material attributes that signify their lives matter.

Between now and March we will examine more closely how this works.

This month, we give a brief overview of three of the four main types of racism:

- Structural or "Systemic" Racism
- Institutional Racism and
- Interpersonal Racism

In the January and February ARTI Hub posts we will delve into the fourth type of racism, which is internal and therefore often unconscious, unexamined and unaddressed:

- Internalized Racial Oppression, and
- Internalized Racial Superiority

We wrap this series up in March as we take all that we have learned and apply the information toward strategies for undoing racism.

Systemic Racism

Systemic racism is deeply embedded within all institutions whether they be governing entities, private corporations or entities within the community-serving sector such as banking, healthcare, criminal justice, education, and the list goes on.

This embedding can be subtle and not very obvious or blatant. The G.I. Bill, enacted post-World War II, presents a clear example of the latter: Approximately 125,000 Black servicemen fought in World War II; however, lenders refused to extend the benefits under the GI Bill to Black servicemen.

Under the benefits afforded by the GI Bill, white servicemen were able to purchase homes building equity, creating generational wealth and creating a racial wealth gap where today the average white family has approximately 10 times the net worth of a Black family.

Centuries of systemic racism codified in policy marginalizing or oppressing persons because of their race, has perpetuated and grown the racial wealth gap. Furthermore, systemic racism results in political disenfranchisement, mass incarceration of persons of color, and disparities in health, education, employment and housing.

Institutional Racism

While systemic racism is the embedding into an organization of policies based in prejudice and privilege, "institutional racism" is the manifestation of white superiority into "programs" of discrimination and oppression of persons of color. Institutional racism in the United States goes back to colonial times with the institution of slavery being one of the earliest examples. The institution of slavery embraced the Slave Codes, rules based on the premise that enslaved persons were property, not persons. Inherent in the institution of slavery were social controls which enslavers codified in law.

When the social controls of slavery were removed by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Thirteenth Amendment, the Black Codes, which had their roots in the Slave Codes, were enacted in the states of the former Confederacy following the Civil War. The Black Codes were set in place to continue the construct of white supremacy.

The Black Codes were done away with during Reconstruction; however many of their provisions made a reappearance in the Jim Crow laws of the late 19th and early 20th century. "Jim Crow"

remained intact until the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Since then, the nation's [War on Drugs](#) launched an era of indiscriminate detention and mass incarceration of Americans of color, accompanied by new laws restricting voting rights and defunding the social safety net that provided a path to the middle class. These measures disproportionately targeted people of color, but also swept up millions of poor white Americans in the effort to maintain institutional racism.

Interpersonal Racism

When people think of racism, it is generally the "Interpersonal" brand of racism that comes to mind. Interpersonal racism occurs between individuals.

As humans we all harbor conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices that shape our perceptions of other people. From the time we are born, we are surrounded by racialized messaging. We incorporate into our biases and prejudices the messaging that comes from our family members, all of the institutional systems we interact with, (i.e. health care systems, school and work) and from the media we consume, just to name a few. We also incorporate misinformation and stereotypes which further shape our perceptions of others.

Personal beliefs, attitudes toward other races, conscious and unconscious biases and prejudices influence our interactions with others and affect the way we treat people of color. At the behavioral level, toxic interactions can range from microaggressions to physical violence.

Examples of physical violence abound, most notably the 1955 abduction, torture and lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till, and the public murder of George Floyd in 2020 by a (now former) Minneapolis police officer.

Microaggressions can be both verbal and nonverbal and include acts of harassment, exclusion and slights, insults, the telling of racist jokes, indignities, marginalization, discrimination, racial profiling, suspicion, avoidance such as crossing the street so as not to pass a Black man, lack of respect and dehumanization.

In an article titled ["Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life,"](#) psychologist Dr. Derald Wing Sue reported on his research that suggests microaggressions fall into three categories:

- Microassaults: Conscious and intentional discriminatory actions: using racial epithets, displaying white supremacist symbols—swastikas, or preventing one's son or daughter from dating outside of their race.

- Microinsults: Verbal, nonverbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a co-worker of color how he/she got his/her job, implying he/she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system.

- Microinvalidations: Communications that subtly exclude negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, white people often ask Latinos where they were born, conveying the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land; or comment on how "articulate" a Black speaker is, suggesting that a well-spoken Black person is unusual.

Interpersonal racism can occur at both an unconscious and conscious level. When we are aware of and feed the mental constructs shaping our personal beliefs about others of different races, interpersonal racism operates at the conscious level. When we are complacent in beliefs, attitudes and actions that contribute to the maintenance of racism, interpersonal racism takes place at the unconscious level.

# # #