

The Psychology of American Racism: Summary

Why does racism persist, even when so many are fighting to eliminate it? We often speak of institutionalized racism, i.e., the ways in which school systems, financial institutions, governments, and employers treat whites and people of color differently. In order to end racism, we need to understand those organizational and institutional barriers, and to change them.

To bring about change, we need to understand not just the institutions, but the people who live and work in them. Why do they carry on inherited patterns of discrimination, and perhaps even introduce new ones? To understand this, it is helpful to understand the psychology of racism.

Steven O. Roberts and Michel T. Rizzo wrote an excellent overview of decades of research in psychology and related disciplines about factors that contribute to racism. They focus on seven factors, described below. The complete article can be found here: Roberts, S. O., & Rizzo, M. T. (2020). The psychology of American racism. *American Psychologist*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1037/amp0000642>

Factors contributing to American racism:

1. Categories

Human beings put things into categories as part of the way we understand the world. We distinguish animals from plants, dogs from cats, beagles from boxers. Some categories are more important than others. Humans are not born knowing about racial categories, but children learn which categories the people around them think are important. The labels and characteristics children hear attached to different racial groups are connected to racial stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination.

2. Factions

Human beings are social by nature, and they also create ingroups and outgroups. People have more positive views of members of their ingroup, and are more likely to be cooperative, trusting, and supportive of members of their ingroup than their outgroup. Because racial categories are so salient in American society, people are likely to see others who are the same race as part of their ingroup – and behave in cooperative, trusting, and supportive ways towards them. Conversely, they may be less cooperative, trusting, and supportive to people they view as outside their group.

3. Segregation

Residential segregation by race is common in the United States. Urban, suburban, and rural communities tend to have different racial compositions, as do different regions of the country. In part, this segregation results from a history of redlining and harmful government policies. One result of this segregation can be limited contact between members of different racial groups. The lack of contact means that people do not have the direct interaction that can counteract negative stereotypes about their outgroup.

4. Hierarchy

Like most societies, the U.S. is hierarchical: some people and groups (e.g., whites) have more power than others. People often attribute the high status that an individual has to hard work or intelligence, and tend to ignore the biases in social structures that make it easier for some people to get to the top. As a result, people think that those who are at the top are better than others, whether they got there by hard work, or by the advantages that come with race and class. And, at least according to one study, once people get to the top, they are less willing to rectify injustices or to see the perspectives of the societally defined low-status individuals.

5. Power

White Americans hold disproportionately more leadership positions in the U.S., in government, business, and other organizations. This gives them the ability to establish norms, provide direction, and control resources. For example, in recent years, some white American political leaders have normalized racist comments, making such comments seem more acceptable than they had previously been.

6. Media

The media is a major factor in influencing attitudes towards race. In general, the media over-represents whites and under-represents people of color in its entertainment programming. The percentage of Native Americans as regular TV characters is especially low. Gaps can be found in news programming as well. For example, one study found that compared to actual Department of Justice records, local television news programs tended to overrepresent lawbreakers as Black. Biasing information such as this has the potential to impact people's attitudes towards criminal justice issues, such as supporting harsher penalties for Blacks convicted of the same crimes as whites.

7. Passivism

Many Americans are apathetic about systemic racism. In some cases, they have never learned about the full extent of the historical oppression of people of color. In other cases, they have learned about it, but deny its importance or its continuing impact. People may also take social cues from others: if they don't see anyone else taking action to combat racism, they think they don't need to do anything themselves. Both whites and people of color can experience this sense of passivism. However, this passivism benefits whites because it allows racism to continue, unchallenged.

Roberts and Rizzo have summarized an extensive body of research on the psychology of American racism. They also identify a need to research a psychology of anti-racism, that is, how to actively challenge racism and work to prevent its occurrence. Their full article includes much more information and examples and can be found [here](#).