

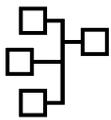
RACIAL & HEALTH EQUITY: Make It Your Business

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Learn: What Are the Root Causes of American Racism?

According to a recent article, *The Psychology of American Racism*, by Steven Roberts and Michael Rizzo of Stanford University, there are seven major contributing factors known to motivate racism as it plays out in American culture: 1) Categories, 2) Factions, 3) Segregation, 4) Hierarchy, 5) Power, 6) Media and 7) Passivism.



Categories

Grouping people into racial categories is not something we inherently do from birth. We are taught to do this. We categorize people in several ways for instance by how they look, if they're majority or minority, or even labeled (e.g., Asian, Black, Latinx, White) by an authority (e.g., by the U.S. Census Bureau). These labels are particularly important because they were created by our federal government and passed down to its citizens.

There is an important link between categorizing people and understanding stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination. If we believe that categories are naturally occurring, then we can attribute a trait of one person to an entire group. If we attribute a negative trait to an entire racial category, we might be motivated to avoid contact or share resources with that category or support policies that form boundaries between categories.



Factions

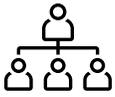
Once we find ourselves grouped into categories, we can extend our own positive perceptions of ourselves to the rest of the group we're in. This, for example, can apply to the racial categories we are in or the company we work for or the gender we identify as. Once we've extended this positive perception to our entire group, we start preferring the group we're in over others. This leads to trusting our group more than others, or competing with other groups.



Segregation

Segregation is when racial categories are kept apart. It happens broadly across the country as a result of racist policy. Redlining, for example, systematically denied communities of color access to real estate and set the precedent for a range of policies that continue to harm communities of color today.

Another form of segregation is based off of preference. When parents raise their children without interracial contact, children can develop a familiarity with certain racial groups, which may contribute to social preferences later in life. Since white Americans are the majority in the U.S., most Americans have more frequent contact with white people than with people of color, which can result in negative feelings toward people of color.



Hierarchy

All societies are hierarchically ordered, and the U.S. is no exception. The U.S. has an explicit hierarchy based on race. Though the country is roughly 77% white, the highest positions of status are held by white Americans at a vastly disproportionate rate. In 2018, 97% of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies were white. This hierarchy in corporate America, which is rooted in American history and perpetuated by racist ideologies, practices and policies, reinforces the concept that white Americans are superior to others.



Power

White Americans represent the majority in the United States. They have occupied most positions of power, which has enabled them to establish societal norms, achieve goals, give orders, control resources, and dominate and exploit others. This power is so deeply interwoven into the fabric of U.S. society that nearly every facet of life is marked by the stain of white supremacy. It is so deeply engrained that white people often don't notice it, and worse, remain silent when made aware of it.

Power is hard to relinquish, and by remaining silent on issues involving white supremacy white Americans maintain their power. This perpetuates the system of white supremacy and continues the cycle of the disproportionate allotment of power in our society.



Media

The portrayal of racial categories, factions, segregation, hierarchy and power in the media all reinforce American racism at a massive scale. Underrepresentation of Indigenous peoples contributes to the crisis of invisibility that Indigenous people have faced for centuries. Between 2003 and 2009, the proportion of high-status Black characters in entertainment media declined while the proportion of low-status Black characters tripled. This representation of Black people results in viewers being more likely to perceive Black people as criminals.

The media is a powerful, collective voice that shapes American culture. More diverse voices are needed to change the narrative from one dominated by white supremacy to one of equity and inclusion.



Passivism

Passivism is probably the most prevalent component of American racism. Passivism is apathy toward systems of racial advantage or denial that those systems even exist. There are a number of paths to passive racism, but the following three are common.

One of the most common pathways to passive racism is ignorance. If an adult is ignorant about historical American racism, they are more likely to deny the existence of racism today.

A second pathway to passive racism is through denial. Related to ignorance, if a person won't accept that racism is a major problem facing society, then they're less likely to support anti-racist policy and advocacy and could even promote the belief that racial inequality is justified by differences in effort.

A third pathway to passive racism is through watching the inaction of others. If others in your circle, family, workplace or place of worship do nothing about racism then you may believe that there isn't a problem in the first place. And so, you follow your group into passivity. For white Americans, this has no consequence other than that it continues to further their advantage. When doing nothing results in advantage, people will choose inaction over effort every time.

Reflect: How is Your Workplace Influenced by Racist Structures?



How many positions of power in your company are held by white people?

Does your business take an active, anti-racist position or passive position on racism?

How many trainings on racial equity does your company require for all employees annually?

Considering how you answered the three previous questions, how is your business planning to advocate for racial justice in your community?

Change: Steps Toward Progress



Moving from Passivism to Action

One of the most prevalent components of American racism is passivism. An apathy toward and a denial of systems of racial advantage. There are many ways passive racism can show up, but consider the following three exercises to move your business away from passivism and toward action.



Education

One of the most common pathways to passive racism is ignorance. Fortunately, the workplace is a great environment to provide educational opportunities for adults. Corporate teams and small businesses can learn about historical and contemporary racism in many ways. Here are a few strategies for you to consider:

- Start a monthly book club or film club.
- Provide company time for employees to attend conferences on racism and equity.
- Hire a consultant to lead a team through a day-long workshop or overnight retreat.
- Require regular online trainings for all employees.
- Promote volunteer opportunities that serve minority populations.

The key to education is fostering an environment that values ongoing growth, and discourages the “checkbox” mindset that releases individuals and business from accountability.

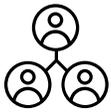


Acceptance

Related to ignorance, denial can be a common barrier to education efforts. Leadership is needed at the highest level of the organization to dispel disbelief and denial around racism. Below are a few strategies to consider that will position your organization, and your employees, on a path toward active education and acceptance.

- Declare broadly that the organization will not tolerate any form of racism both internally and externally with clients.
- Condemn acts of racism and violence immediately when they occur locally or nationally, and offer support to employees who may be experiencing difficulty processing news.

- Embed anti-racist language through visible corporate policy, hiring practices and client communications.
- Recognize significant cultural holidays and events, and develop an inclusive environment.



Leadership

If you want the individuals in your organization to move from passivism to action, the leaders of the organization need to be the example. Observing inaction is one of the most common forms of passivism. If the people in a group do not care about racism enough to take action, it either must not be real or important enough to prioritize. This can cause a cycle of inaction that perpetuates denial and ignorance. Below are a few strategies to consider that will break the cycle of observing inaction.

- Boards, owners and executives should participate in trainings as a group or with their employees.
- Leadership should encourage their teams and direct reports to pursue education that advances their cultural comprehension.
- Leaders should understand their own biases through reflection, education and evaluations like the Intercultural Development Inventory.

Learn More



- “How To Be An Antiracist,” by Ibram X. Kendi, <https://www.ibramxkendi.com/how-to-be-an-antiracist>
- “Beverly Daniel-Tatum on passive racism vs active racism,” Hive Learning, <https://www.hivelearning.com/site/1-beverly-daniel-tatum-on-passive-racism-vs-active-racism/>
- “Changing the Narrative: How News Media Covers Race in America,” Aspen Institute, <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/videos/changing-the-narrative-how-news-media-covers-race-in-america/>
- “How to build an actively anti-racist company,” Quartz at Work, <https://qz.com/work/1864529/how-to-build-an-actively-anti-racist-workplace/>
- “Companies are speaking out against racism, but here’s what it really looks like to lead an anti-racist organization” by Jennifer Lu, CNBC, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/15/what-it-means-to-be-an-anti-racist-company.html>

Sources:

Roberts, S., & Rizzo, M. (2020, June 1). “The Psychology of American Racism.” <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/w2h73>

“Stanford psychologist identifies seven factors that contribute to American racism” by Sandra Feder, <https://news.stanford.edu/2020/06/09/seven-factors-contributing-american-racism/>



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