

Definitions

We have created this list of definitions as a way to be transparent about the language that we are using in this module. People frequently have different understandings of key terms when we discuss racism and white privilege.

Racism – “Racism, both personal and institutional, involves prejudice and the power to enforce it (Allies for Change, 2009)”. It is revealed in attitudes, behavior and systems in which white people maintain supremacy over people of color. Human beings create and maintain the systems, which in turn, reinforce racism. “Personal/individual racism is a result of the beliefs, attitudes, and actions of people that support or perpetuate racism. It happens at both an unconscious and conscious level, and can be both passive and active. Examples include telling a racist joke, using a racial epithet, or believing in the inherent superiority of white people (Adams, Bell and Griffin, 1997, p 89).”

White supremacy/institutional racism – White supremacy is the institutionally enforced system of racism. It is historically based on: 1) the theft & military conquest of native lands of North America; and 2) the economic exploitation of North American land through slavery (Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, 2000). Institutional racism/white supremacy is the network of institutional structures, policies, and practices that create advantages and benefits for whites, and discrimination, oppression and disadvantage for people of color. Institutional racism or white supremacy is built in to many institutions in the U.S (Martinez, 1995). The advantages created for whites are often invisible to them, or are considered “rights” available to everyone as opposed to “privileges” awarded to only some individuals and groups (Wijeyesinghe, 1997).

An example of institutional racism is the crack versus powder cocaine laws. While it is well documented that there is no difference in the effect between crack and cocaine, federal sentencing guidelines result in a 100:1 disparity between the sentences for crack and for powder cocaine (crack users are more likely to both be prosecuted, convicted, and receive a harsher sentence). Crack is much more commonly used among blacks, whereas cocaine is primarily used among whites. According to Nolan, “The government has chosen to penalize the use of one form of a drug, favored by blacks, 100 times more harshly than another form of that same drug favored by whites (Nolan, 1997, p. 416).”

White privilege – “White privilege is a historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of: 1) preferential prejudice for and treatment of white people based solely on their skin color and/or ancestral origin from Europe; and 2) exemption from racial oppression (Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, 2000).”

Peggy McIntosh, in *White Privilege, Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, offers many clear examples of identifying white privilege. For example: “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented, “ or “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection,” or “I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.”

Discrimination - “Discrimination is the differential allocation of goods, resources, and services, and the limitation of access to full participation in society based on individual membership in a particular social group (Racial Equity Tools, n.d.).”

Oppression – “Oppression is the illegitimate institutionalized power that is built and perpetuated throughout the course of history. This power allows certain 'groups' to confer illegitimate dominance over other 'groups', and this dominance is maintained and perpetuated at an institutional level (Colours of Resistance, n.d.).”

Race - Race is a concept invented by people to use characteristics such as skin tone, ancestral heritage, and ethnic classification to artificially divide people (Wijeyesinghe, 1997). Research has shown us that there is more difference within racial groups than across racial groups (O’Neil, 2009). Racial categories have changed over time. Just look at the U.S. Census which is administered at ten year intervals--throughout the decades, race categories change dramatically (Staples, 2007).

White – The term white was created by colonial rulers (e.g. Virginia slave holders) in the 1600s. The purpose was to differentiate European plantation owners from African slaves, indigenous peoples and poor white people. After Bacon’s Rebellion of 1674, ‘white’ was used to separate the servant class on the basis of skin color and continent of origin. The creation of ‘white’ meant giving privileges to some, while denying them to others with the justification of biological and social inferiority (Adair and Powell, 1988).

People of color – “People of color is a term used to refer to nonwhite people, used instead of the term "minority," which implies inferiority and disenfranchisement. The term emphasizes common experiences of racial discrimination or racism” The term ‘minority’ is inaccurate, since people of color are the majority of the world’s population, as well as the majority in many communities in the United States (Colours of Resistance, 2008).

Prejudice – “Prejudice is a set of negative personal beliefs about a social group that leads individuals to pre-judge people from that group or the group in general regardless of individual differences among members of that group (Goodman and Shapiro, 1997 p 118).” We can all be prejudiced, regardless of our power status. For example, “all blondes are dumb,” is a common prejudice often reinforced in Hollywood films. Another common prejudice on college campuses suggests that “all athletes are dumb.” This becomes a racial prejudice when the majority of athletes on campus are students of color. Can black people be prejudiced against Latino/as? Yes; they can make incorrect assumptions about their citizenship or their language use. We do not believe that African Americans can be racist toward Latinos because racism involves prejudice plus the power to enforce that prejudice.

Ethnicity - Ethnicity is a social construct which divides people into social groups based on characteristics such as a shared sense of group membership, values, behavioral patterns, language, religion, political and economic interests, history and ancestral origin. Ethnicity shapes a group's culture. For example, the food, language, music, and customs

often identify an ethnic group. Everyone has an ethnicity, though many white people today do not identify themselves ethnically. Whether we come from a German background, an Irish background, or a combination of many backgrounds, these ancestral ethnic identities have most likely played a very important role in shaping how we view, interpret, and interact with the world. African American ethnicity is based on the African tribal identity of the person, though most African American people do not know their ancestral roots. Latino/as often identify ethnically based on their country of origin, e.g. Puerto Rican, Colombian, Mexican, etc. This is similar for Asian Americans, e.g. Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Hmong (Navigating a Diverse World, n.d.). For American Indians, ethnicity is tribal identity, e.g. Dakota. For Euro-Americans, ethnicity is connected to place(s) of ancestry, e.g. Russian or Scottish.

Culture - Culture is passed on from generation to generation through institutions, groups, interpersonal, and individual behavior. Culture provides the glue which gives institutions their legitimacy. For individuals, culture provides a sense of identity, belonging, purpose, and worldview. In the U.S., our dominant “white” culture provides the basic values and worldview, assumptions, ways of thinking, styles of learning, and ways of relating to each other (Challenging White Supremacy Workshop, 2000).

Affirmative action – Affirmative action refers to policies that attempt to redress the cumulative harm of hundreds of years of oppression and policies that subjugated people of color, women, and low income whites (King, 2004).

According to this definition, affirmative action does not mean quotas, rather it impacts decisions when all other characteristics are equal. For example, what happens when a white man and an African American woman apply for the same social work position? Both have excellent resumes, M.S.W. degrees, five years of experience and great recommendations. In this case, *with all things equal*, the African American woman would get the job. We believe this is not the perfect remedy for historical injustices. Interestingly, the group that has most benefited from affirmative action is white women (African American Policy Forum, n.d.).

Ally – An ally is someone who supports a group other than his/her own. Allies stand in solidarity with a group by acknowledging the group’s historical and/or current marginalization and commit themselves to reducing their own collusion in the oppression of that group (Albrecht and Brewer, 1988). For example, a white woman could challenge a promotion that another white person gets in her organization if a person of color was passed over with equal qualifications. She would be acting as an ally in this situation.