



## “Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Racism

### What is Racism? What Can We Do to Address it?

**Racism** is a combination of stereotypical thinking, negative and hateful emotions, and discriminatory acts targeting individuals or groups of individuals who are regarded as being inherently inferior, somewhat socially deviant, and deserving of inferior status in society. While all humans have the capacity to hold stereotypes and prejudices towards other groups, racism becomes a serious problem when one group or its individual members have the power to act on these views and evaluations of others.

- Racism is a complex of social categorization and a system of behaviours that are deeply rooted in histories of colonization and slavery. The construction of a racial hierarchy by colonial powers continues to create advantages for those with power in maintaining their social, economic, and political dominance.
- The groups which become the recipients of racism typically have distinct physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features, and body types. Historically, these groups in North America and other Western countries tend to be people who have darker skin tone, are a minority, and are socio-economically disadvantaged (e.g., Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) due to systemic racism. In this fact sheet we will focus on racism, but we recognize that racism exists in combination with sexism, homophobia and transphobia, classism, ableism, etc.

**Individual Racism** refers to internalized racism that resides within the person. Examples include anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, and anti-Asian sentiments, words, and actions. Believing that some groups are inherently inferior to others is an example of individual racism. People may endorse racism overtly or in more subtle ways, also known as microaggressions.

**Systemic Racism** refers to the unfair practices and unequal treatment of the affected groups either as a result of institutional legitimization or by way of general consensus and long-standing informal practices among the majority and privileged groups. Systemic racism in North America provides a foundation for White Supremacy that allows oppression and exploitation of racialized minorities. A few of the many historical examples of systemic racism in Canada include:

- 200 years of slavery from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries where Black and Indigenous peoples were the primary enslaved peoples.
- Indian Act in 1876 essentially made Indigenous Peoples wards of the state. In 1894-1996 Canadian policy required Indigenous children to be taken away from their families and placed in residential schools run by Christian priests and nuns. These children were forced to abandon their cultural practices including their language.





- 1885 Chinese Immigration Act required Chinese immigrants to pay a very high tax for coming to Canada while European immigrants were not required to pay this tax.

There is a tendency to frame racism as an issue of “good” people versus “bad” people, which often leads White people to seek to position themselves as “good” since they believe themselves to have good intentions, and therefore cannot be racist. This creates a pattern of avoiding being able to look at one’s own racist attitudes and behaviours. As such, BIPOC individuals can be met with an intensely defensive, and at times aggressive response, denying the racist behaviour. This dynamic serves to maintain White supremacy by silencing BIPOC individuals’ expressions of their experiences of racism.

## What is the Psychology of Racism?

Racism is comprised of i) Social stereotypes; generalized thoughts, ii) Prejudice; negative attitudes and negative emotions, and iii) Discrimination; unfair and unequal actions against individuals due to their group membership.

### Social Stereotypes and Biases in Judgements

- It is a fundamental property of the human mind to divide the social world into the categories of similar-to-me (In-group) and not-similar-to-me (outgroup). This perception of similarity and dissimilarity with others may be based on clearly noticeable criteria such as the skin colour, gender, age, language, or they may be based on criteria not so clearly visible such as one’s belief systems, religion, culture, or ethnicity.
- Due to familiarity and frequency of interactions with one’s ingroup members, one can identify and distinguish one’s ingroup members with relative ease. In contrast, the relative low familiarity with outgroup members is associated with the tendency to perceive and judge the outgroup as a whole. The result is **Social Stereotypes** or generalized thoughts about outgroups such as “*natives are alcoholics*” or “*blacks are criminals*”.
- The tendency to perceive an outgroup as a whole is associated with the “*They all look alike*” effect. This may partially explain why police officers may make errors in identifying individuals from their unfamiliar “outgroups”. When this judgement error occurs within the context of systemic racism, more severe negative consequences can result, such as the police officer not only apprehending the wrong individual but also quickly meting out brutality against this individual if they happen to be from a BIPOC group.
- **Implicit Bias** refers to having a stereotypical view of a category of people without having a conscious awareness of it. However, some circumstances can trigger them without the individual’s conscious awareness, which in turn may trigger a biased behavioural response. This may include an unintended racial slur or unintended unfair treatment of the individuals from the BIPOC groups.





## Prejudice and Feelings of Hate

- Negative stereotypes of a category of people are accompanied by negative attitudes and emotions such as anger, hate, irritability, and fear.
- Prejudice can also appear to be "positive," but these attitudes are paternalistic, condescending, and prescriptive; e.g., "You should be caring and kind. You are a Filipino", or "You should do well on math. You are Chinese".
- Prejudice can be reflected in the feeling of discomfort, irritability, anger, pity, and disgust towards members of racialized, ethnic and cultural minority groups and avoiding associating with them. Yet there may be a denial of conscious awareness of this emotionally negative attitude.
- When minority individuals do well and follow rules, they are viewed without prejudice. However, when minority individuals deviate from the norm, violate a law, perform below expectations or give a negative feedback or assessment, the reaction from the privileged group member can be swifter and harsher. For example, if a Black professor gives good grades and favourable comments to students, they are viewed on par with a colleague from a White-European majority. However, if both professors give low grades and negative feedback to students, the Black professor is likely to receive far more harsh evaluation from their students compared to their White-European colleague.
- Prejudice impacts the receiver negatively and may lead to reciprocal feelings and actions. That is, if one person dislikes or discriminates against another person, these attitudes and behaviours are returned. Those who express prejudice and engage in discriminatory practices cannot expect to be liked or accepted by those who are excluded. Hence, those individuals who are routinely excluded by systemic or individual prejudice are likely to react against those who are the sources of such prejudice.

## Discrimination: Unfair and Unequal Treatment

- **Discrimination** is the behaviour of treating individuals differently, and to their disadvantage, based on their group membership.
- Discriminatory acts can have serious impacts such as a physician who spends less time with a member of a racialized minority group or dismisses or misinterprets the seriousness of their symptoms and refuses due care. This act of discrimination may or may not be intentional, but the consequences can be serious.
- Discrimination may be subtle and often non-verbal. For example, a bank teller may greet their ingroup members with extra courtesy, an extra smile, and may offer extra help, but may remain very





formal and task-focused without offering any informal or personal courtesy to the member of the racialized minority group. Other examples include half-hearted or neglected greetings, showing signs of lack of interest while interacting, or not offering help when clearly needed, being quick in pointing out minor violation of some norms in a loud voice (e.g., *"Hey, you can't sit there. It is for seniors only"*).

- Discriminatory practices are commonly found in employment settings. It may start with the preference for selecting candidates from the privileged groups for jobs, so fewer members of racialized minorities are called in for interviews. During the interview, discrimination is evident in behaviours such as spending less time on the interview processes and showing signs of discomfort or a lack of interest. Also, the racialized minority candidate is likely to be offered a lower start-up salary, contributing to pay gap discrepancies which combines with accumulated wealth disparities to maintain White supremacy. Discrimination may continue in the form of biased performance evaluations and not offering promotion despite one's credentials. This highlights the importance of power differentials between groups. In other words, negative evaluations of others happen when one group is able to act on their negative stereotypes and prejudice towards another group.
- The result is a "vertical mosaic" whereby at the top jobs in most organizations, we see individuals from the privileged group, notably from White-European background. At the bottom of the employment hierarchy; the low paying manual labor jobs such as cleaning and dish washing, we see an overrepresentation of racialized minority groups. This leads to economic disparity. For example, in 2016, more Black Canadians were unemployed compared to Canadians who were not visible minorities (12.5% vs. 7.3%). Also, the average income of Black Canadians was significantly lower than average income of Canadians who were not visible minorities (\$35,310 vs. \$50,225).
- Discrimination is also reflected in the judicial and foster care systems. While Indigenous peoples make up only 3.8% of the total population, 23.2% of all people incarcerated in prison and 52% of children in care are Indigenous.
- Experience of discrimination negatively impacts one's physical and mental health. There is consistent and strong evidence that self-reported racism is associated with negative outcomes for physical health such as high blood pressure, heart disease, and obesity. It is also evident in increased mental illnesses such as depression, anxiety, distress, and substance abuse. The negative impact of racism on physical and mental health have been found amongst men and women of all ethnic groups including Blacks, Indigenous, Latinos, Asians, and Whites for all age groups (i.e., adolescents, university students, and adults).





## How Do We Learn to Live Together Without Racism?

The approach to changing individual and systemic racism must be both at the individual level, and at the government, legal, and policy level.

- Racism, if not checked has the potential to escalate. Genocides for example, do not occur overnight. Hence it is important to confront racism at its slightest and subtlest expression, in person or in social media. Signs and symbols of racially motivated oppression and harassments on smaller scales such as pranks, vandalism, racial slurs, and racial jokes must be confronted and addressed right away. Individuals, for example, may confront their friends and relatives, and respond to negative social media posts by them.
- The burden of bringing awareness and preventing hateful acts of prejudice and discrimination should not be solely on the-shoulders of the racialized minority groups. Rather, majority members who have inherited, and therefore benefit from the systems of racial power have the responsibility to repair harm and establish justice. They must step forward to becoming true partners in making change. This will also establish the basis for trust between majority and minority groups, which will nurture racialized minority groups' willingness to work with majority partners. It is crucial for both majority and minority groups to work together to bring about social transformation.
- The psychological principle that *familiarity and similarity lead to liking* may be implemented by creating opportunities for people to increase interactions with the dissimilar "others". This would allow them to find core similarities to enhance a sense of overall familiarity while understanding cultural differences. Education strategies including lesson plans for young children may include a focus on exploring similarities and understanding and appreciating differences among children.
- Community activities and events must be inclusive of ALL cultural groups at all levels (organization, representation, participation). They must include majority and privileged community members alongside racial minority groups. Community programs should target fostering meaningful interactions and cooperation between privileged majority groups and racialized minority groups to reach a common goal.
- Contact between individuals of different backgrounds has been shown to improve mutual acceptance. However, such contact is likely to be more effective when contact is voluntary; is among individuals of roughly equal status; and when it is supported by promoting inclusion and limiting discrimination. These conditions need to be put in place by enacting public policies and programs.
- All social institutions (government, healthcare, education, family, etc.) need to recognize and actively commit to dismantling racist policies and behaviours in combination with repairing past discrimination. Measures and actions need to be put into place which favour equity, diversity and





inclusiveness. This is achieved through several processes: (1) continuous education, training, and discussion; (2) holding ourselves accountable to prevent racism from being committed, as well as addressing racism when it is committed; and (3) organizing our institutions in a way that inherently favours diversity and social justice.

- We must support policies and programs that promote the acceptance of people for who they are, and what matters most to them such as their cultural heritage, and religion.
- Holding ourselves accountable for the ways that society has been structured to advantage White people, and for the racist actions at both individual and institutional levels, will enable social change towards living together without racism.

## Where do I go for more information?

**You can consult with a registered psychologist** who is trained in anti-racism and cultural diversity to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Individuals impacted by racism may benefit from working with a psychologist who identifies as Black, Indigenous or as a Person of Colour. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, please visit: <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations>.

*This fact sheet has been prepared for the Canadian Psychological Association by Gira Bhatt (Kwantlen Polytechnic University), Saba Safdar (University of Guelph), John Berry (Queen's University), Maya Yampolsky (Université Laval), and Randal Tonks (Camosun College).*

*Date:* August 10, 202

*Updated:* October 12, 2020

Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

Canadian Psychological Association  
141 Laurier Avenue West, Suite 702  
Ottawa, Ontario K1P 5J3  
Tel: 613-237-2144  
Toll free (in Canada): 1-888-472-0657

