

KEY DISTINCTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING RACE, RACIALIZATION, & RACISM

INTENTIONAL RACISM: This is intentional, usually overt, prejudice and bigotry exhibited by people who are racist and proud of it. Some white Americans are still intentionally racist, and it is vital to address this reality. The bigger challenge is that many white people think this is the sole definition of racism. They don't consider themselves personally racist (color blindness is often the value they strive for), and they thus check out of the conversation because they think other people are the problem, not them. Perhaps they might recognize themselves in some other important dynamics described below:

IMPLICIT RACIAL BIAS: Many of us, despite a conscious desire *not* to be prejudiced, are still conditioned to hold residual unconscious biases and stereotypes. This bias can show up in multiple spheres, via snap judgements by doctors, teachers, retail employees, police ... sometimes with deadly results. *Project Implicit* runs an online test (at implicit.harvard.edu), in which 75% of whites exhibit an implicit pro-white/anti-black bias, and even black participants evenly split between pro-white and pro-black bias. The latter is an example of "internalized oppression," where people of color have internalized negative attitudes towards themselves and their group. It is hard to completely get rid of unconscious or implicit bias, but one can catch oneself and interrupt it, or devise institutional protocols to guard against it.

MICROAGGRESSIONS: Columbia professor Derald Wing Sue popularized the use of this term to refer to "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color," or that serve to "invalidate" (e.g. not sitting next to a person of color in a classroom, on public transportation, etc.). Since microaggressions are often unintentional, this is an area (like other concepts listed here) in which it is helpful to distinguish between intent and impact, and to honor both truths. Many people of color speak about how exhausting it is to deal with these frequent "small" moments that add up, and that can take much energy to deal with on a daily basis.

INSTITUTIONAL AND STRUCTURAL RACISM: Institutional racism refers to the ways in which organizations collectively disadvantage people of color through policies and practices. These institutional practices may result from individual prejudice or bias; more often, they seem to be color-blind but are not race-neutral in their impact. Structural racism is a broader term, encompassing institutional practices as well as the historical and cultural context, and racial stereotypes and beliefs, which maintain racial advantages and disadvantages in our society. The result of institutional and structural racism is racial inequality in educational attainment, health and healthcare, employment, wealth, rates of incarceration, housing, and other life outcomes.

WHITE PRIVILEGE: Given the history of racism in this country, and its stubborn staying power, white Americans receive unearned privilege (on top of whatever they may have earned). White people do not have to worry about being followed in stores, racially profiled by law enforcement, or subjected to low expectations in schools. Nor do white people suffer from institutional racism; on the contrary, they often benefit from, for example, the use of social networks for institutional access, which perpetuates privilege for groups that have traditionally had that access. Many of these privileges are about the absence of disadvantage; for this and other reasons, privilege is frequently invisible to the privileged. It is important to note that there are real differences among white Americans, based on education and socioeconomic status, so that they enjoy privilege to different degrees.

HISTORICAL MYTHS: Many of us are conditioned to believe misleading and inaccurate historical narratives about different groups. These can perpetuate blindness about how white privilege and structural racism operate. For example: the dominant narrative suggests any Americans can succeed by “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.” But achievement of the American dream has depended on the “head start” given to white families during centuries of discrimination. In the 20th century, large-scale government aid in areas like homeownership, college education, and support for entrepreneurship served as a kind of “white affirmative action” and “hand-out” for European-Americans, letting them enter the middle class in large numbers—while people of color were denied that access. Since historical narratives are central to family, community, and group identities, it can be challenging to reconsider these myths. Learning accurate, balanced history is key.

RACIALIZED EMOTIONS: Many of us bring strong emotions to conversations and situations that are about race, racism, and particularly slavery. European-Americans, African-Americans, and other people of color may carry any number of emotions: fear, distrust, guilt, shame, resentment, anger, defensiveness, anxiety/nervousness, numbness/overload, despair, grief, exhaustion, etc. Terms such as “white fragility” (Robin DiAngelo) and “racial anxiety” (which can be felt in different ways by people in all groups) are increasingly being used to refer to some of these emotions. Emotions are physiological experiences and can often trigger the fight, flight, or freeze response, which shuts down thinking in the prefrontal cortex. Often an emotion expressed by a member of one group can trigger an opposing emotion in a member of another group, causing us to go around in vicious cycles (such as people of color’s exasperation and white defensiveness). We may also unconsciously project emotions onto others (e.g., assuming a black person is angry, or a white person is fragile). It is key to develop wisdom and emotional intelligence about how best to relate to one’s own, or another person’s, emotions.

In conclusion, it is hard to have conversations about race, and to address white privilege, structural racism, and racial inequities in an effective and collaborative manner, without dealing with unconscious bias, microaggressions, historical myths, and racialized emotions.

This document was created by Katrina Browne and James DeWolf Perry of Ebb Pod Productions/Traces of the Trade (www.tracesofthetrade.org) and the Tracing Center on Histories and Legacies of Slavery (www.tracingcenter.org). It draws on key definitions common in the field of antiracism, adding a focus on emotions and historical myths which we believe are under-discussed in race work, despite being omnipresent barriers to advancing equity. You may reproduce this document, with credit included.