

Definition of systemic racism in sociology

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As viewed through a fish-eye lens, Zamir Almazbek, a student at the School of Arts, puts the finishing touches on a chalk message referring to the words of Eric Garner, who died in July 2014 after a New York City police officer placed the man in a choke hold while trying to make an arrest. More than 150 young people took part in the march on December 12, 2014, which the organizers said was staged to protest systemic racism and police brutality across the United States. Photo by: David Zalubows for AP.

Systemic racism is both a theoretical concept and a reality. As a theory, it is based on the research-supported claim that the United States was founded as a racist society and that racism is part of all of its social institutions. Rooted in a racist foundation, systemic racism today is the result of racist institutions, laws, ideas and behaviors. These give an unjust amount of resources, rights and power to white people while denying them to people of color (POC).

Definition Of Systemic Racism

Developed by many social scientists, including sociologist Joe Feagin, systemic racism is a popular way of explaining the significance of race and racism both historically and in today's world. Feagin describes the concept and the realities of systemic racism in his book "Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations." In this book, Feagin uses historical evidence and demographic statistics to argue that the United States was founded as a racist nation, ever since the Constitution classified black people as the property of whites. Feagin illustrates how the legal recognition of black slavery became a cornerstone of a racist social system. Within this system, resources and rights were and are given to white people and unjustly denied to POC.

In the introduction to his book, Feagin writes that racism is "systemic" because it is reflected in "each major part of U.S. society — the economy, politics, education, religion, the family." Systemic racism includes "the complex array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites ... and the white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain ... white privilege and power."

Feagin uses historical data to illustrate that systemic racism is primarily composed of seven major elements.

Impoverishment Of People Of Color And Enrichment Of White People

One of the core aspects of systemic racism, Feagin argues, is that white people are unfairly rich, which is why people of color are unfairly poor. In the U.S. this is the result of black slavery, which created unjust wealth for white people and their businesses. The historical exploitation of POC created a social system that had racist economic inequality built into its foundation. Systemic racism continued through practices such as "redlining," which made it harder for POC to get loans to buy homes that would allow their family wealth to grow. Banks once drew red lines on maps to mark off neighborhoods where they wouldn't lend money to. The banks thought the people in those neighborhoods couldn't pay back the loans.

Vested Group Interests Among White People

Within a racist society, white people enjoy many privileges denied to POC. Among these is the way that group interests among whites allow white people to benefit from a white racial identity without even identifying it as such. This is seen in support among white people for political candidates who are white, and for laws that benefit white people.

For example, many white people have historically opposed some programs that would increase diversity within education and jobs, such as affirmative action. They have also opposed ethnic studies courses that better represent the history and reality of the U.S. White people have suggested that programs like these are "hostile" or examples of "reverse racism." In fact, the way white people wield political power to protect their interests, without ever claiming to do so, maintains a racist society.

Alienating Racist Relations Between White People And POC

In the U.S., white people hold most positions of power. A look at the membership of Congress, the leadership of colleges and universities and the top management of corporations makes this clear. The racist views and assumptions that course through U.S. society shape the way those in power interact with POC. This leads to a serious and well-documented problem of discrimination in all areas of life, and the frequent dehumanization and mistreatment of POC, including hate crimes.

The Costs And Burdens Of Racism Are Borne By POC

In his book, Feagin points out that the costs and burdens of racism are disproportionately borne by people of color. Having to bear these unjust costs and burdens is a core aspect of systemic racism. For POC, the result is shorter life spans, limited income and wealth potential and less access to educational resources. Along with these come the psychological and emotional tolls of living with less, and being seen as "less than."

The Racial Power Of White Elites

While all white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism, it is important to recognize the powerful role played by white elites. Often unconsciously, white elites work to perpetuate racism through politics, law, education and the media.

It is important that the public hold white elites accountable for combating racism and promoting equality. It is equally important that those who hold positions of power within society reflect the racial diversity of the U.S.

The Power Of Racist Ideas, Assumptions And Worldviews

Racist ideology — the collection of ideas, assumptions and beliefs — is a key aspect of systemic racism. It often asserts that whites are superior to people of color for biological or cultural reasons. This is expressed through stereotypes, prejudices and popular myths and beliefs.

Ideology informs our relationships with others, so it follows that racist ideology promotes racism throughout all aspects of society. This happens regardless of whether a person acting in racist ways is aware of doing so.

Resistance To Racism

Finally, Feagin recognizes that resistance to racism is also an important feature of systemic racism. Racism has never been passively accepted by those who suffer it, and so it is always accompanied by acts of resistance. These take the form of protests, political campaigns, legal battles and other actions. The white backlash that typically follows resistance, like countering "Black Lives Matter" with "All Lives Matter," does the work of maintaining a racist system.

Systemic Racism Is All Around Us And Within Us

Feagin's theory, and all of the research he and other social scientists have conducted over 100 years, illustrates that racism is built into the foundation of U.S. society. Over time it has come to affect all aspects of it. Racism is present in our laws, politics, economy and social institutions, affecting how we think and act, whether consciously or subconsciously. It's all around us and inside of us, and for this reason, resistance to racism must also be everywhere if we are to fight it.