

*Defining the Sociological and Psychological Terms of Systemic Racism, and  
Exploring the Neurobiological root of Racism*

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### **Introduction: Defining terms**

It is crucial to define the terms that pertain to systemic and institutionalized racism to clear any confusion in order to aptly move forward. Defining terms such as racist, antiracism, intersectionality, oppression, assimilation, segregationism, diversity etc., will aid in the coherency and consistency of these terms. Often times the terms listed are vaguely understood, leading to the development of disparities in society overtime and disadvantages to people of Color. Racist practices historically such as slavery, which is segregation of Blacks amongst the Whites, continues today in forms of segregation within the workforce, education, healthcare, and socioeconomic status that are deeply imbedded into what is termed systemic racism. Comprehending that societal racism is only the tip of the iceberg, leads way into understanding that racism is one of many factors that people of Color face, this is also known as intersectionality. Intersectionality means that racism is not the only disparity that causes the injustice in so many lives of Colored people, where a non-white and non-heterosexual female can also be subjected to homophobic oppression, while also being in a lower socioeconomic class, and having a disability (mental disabilities or physical disability).

It is important to become aware of unconscious racism, which is crucial in actively being antiracist. According to Kendi (2019), a racist is, “one who is supporting a racist policy through their actions or inaction or expressing a racist idea.” An antiracist is, “one who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea” (Kendi, 2019). It is important to differentiate and set clear definitions because, “...the key is defining our terms so that we could begin to describe the world and our place in it. Definitions anchor us in principles. This is not a light point: If we don’t do the basic work of defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent, we can’t work toward stable, consistent goal... most consequential steps towards being antiracist have been moments when I arrived at basic definitions” (Kendi, 2019). To be an antiracist is to clearly set definitions

for oneself and understand the difference between racism and antiracism in policies, ideas, thinking, and people. A racist person is someone who, "...constantly redefines in a way that exonerates one's changing policies, ideas, and personhood" (Kendi, 2019). Racist people and racist policies lead to constant and normalized racist inequities, which means that "...when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing. Here's an example of racial inequity: 71 percent of White families lived in owner-occupied homes in 2014, compared to 45 percent of Latinx families and 41 percent of Black families. Racial equity is when two or more racial groups are standing on a relatively equal footing. An example would be if there were relatively equitable percentages of all three racial groups living in owner-occupied homes in the forties, seventies, or, better, nineties" (Kendi, 2019).

Defining racist policies is also important because it sustains inequity between racial group, "An antiracist policy is any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups... and policy means written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people. There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity between racial group" (Kendi, 2019). Racism itself is institutional structural, and systemic. Discrimination, "is the sole cause of racial disparities in this country and in the world at large (Kendi, 2019)." President Lyndon B. Johnson said in 1965, "You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of race and then say, 'You are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair." (Kendi, 2019). The idea that anyone can be free is false, because the rich will continue to be affluent from the working-class people, and the people who are in the low socioeconomic class will continue to work and climb the latter of social mobility. Until the rich share their wealth, and everyone stands in solidarity rather than continuing the pattern of the oppressor

oppressing the oppressed, every person will be liberated, but not so much because the government is still in charge; this of course is a very socialist and borderline communist practice.

The fundamental point of approaching racism, and the activism behind being an antiracist is to liberate Black people and people of Color. There is no ‘saving’ the system, but a person can aid the system by understanding to liberate the oppressed group, where oppression is the belief that some people are less valuable than others, and we harm others to meet our needs (Kendi, 2019). Everyone has the power to discriminate, “... when someone discriminates against a person in a racial group, they are carrying out a policy or taking advantage of the lack of a protective policy... Only an exclusive few have the power to make policy” (Kendi, 2019). This further supports the inequality among leadership roles, due to race. To be an antiracist is to be conscious and to make radical choices every day, “We have all been programmed to respond to the human differences between us with fear and loathing and to hand that difference in one of three ways: ignore it, and if that is not possible, copy it if we think it is dominant, or destroy it if we think it is subordinate. But we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals” (Kendi, 2019). This leads way into understanding that racism is taught, rather than being innate. Exploring the sociology and psychology of racism will support the argument that due to the plasticity of the brain, racism is formed through nurturing rather than being innate.

### **Neurobiology of Race**

In order to understand how racism has wired the brain through teachings, and social learning, the bases of neuroscience and research must be explored first. The increase in the interactions of intergroups directly correlates to the increase of racial composition and the diversifying populations, which is a crucial part in understanding how people perceive and categorize race. There are studies and research done to understand the neurobiology of racism

using brain imaging techniques, "...to examine how social categories of race and finding, focusing on black and white race categories. A network of interacting brain regions in important in the unintentional, implicit expression of racial attitudes and its control" (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). Research shows that there are correlations between race, emotions and the decision making of persons that was influenced by race (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). Intergroup interactions are common and found everywhere in everyday life, which leads way in the interest of scientist to study what drives the attitudes, beliefs, and cognition among the intergroups (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013).

The interest in mental representation of race and ethnicity have led to the exploration and use in electrophysiological imaging such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to study how an individual processes different races and the behaviors of a person towards different races (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). American participants with brain lesions were studied, where researchers specifically examined the blood oxygenation level signals (BOLD) throughout the participants brain, as well as looking at the (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013), "...amygdala, anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), dorsolateral prefrontal cortex (DLPFC) and fusiform face area (FFA)" (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). The amygdala is the region of the brain that is responsible for emotional processes, and is located in the temporal lobe, anterior to the hippocampus (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). The amygdala has been reported to have the highest frequency, "...in studies of Black-White race attitudes, beliefs and social decision-making. The amygdala comprises a small group of nuclei that are critical for the acquisition, storage and expression of classical fear conditioning. In humans, the role of the amygdala in emotional learning is extended to include social means of fear learning, such as verbal instruction and observation" (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). In broader terms the amygdala is important to emotionally detect

stimulus from the environment, which include positive stimulus, and plays an important role in attention and memory (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013).

The role of the amygdala has a crucial role in race processing because, “The history of race relations in the US, especially Black-White relations, is fraught with complex emotions, including fear, hostility and lack of trust. Consistent with the emotional salience of race in American culture and increasingly, elsewhere, a number of studies have found greater amygdala in the BOLD activity to outgroup race faces than ingroup faces” (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). The result of the increase in BOLD activity validates the study that race has a major role on neurobiological functions of the brain (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013). Due to the different attitude towards race in different racial groups, there is inconsistency across the studies which is partially due to stereotypes and cultural and social learning (Kubota, Banaji, and Phelps 2013); this validates that racism is taught through culture and stereotypes rather than being innate.

In one study neuroimaging was used to study race-related prejudice, in correlation to the active response of the amygdala. Prejudice is defined as a preconceived judgement or opinion that is formed before sufficient knowledge that leads to irrational attitude of hostility directed against a race. Prejudice, “...is an enduring and pervasive aspect of human cognition. An emergent trend in modern psychology has focused on understanding how cognition is linked to neural function, leading researchers to investigate the neural correlates of prejudice” (Chekroud et al., 2014). There are critical reviews of social neuroscientific studies of the amygdala in race-related prejudice that will be further explored in order to understand the effects of racism in the plasticity of the brain (Chekroud et al., 2014). Observations were made to study the “pattern of sensitivity in terms of potential threat... More specifically, we argue that negative culturally learned associations between black males and potential threat better explain the observed pattern of amygdala activity. Finally, we

consider future directions for the field and offer specific experiments and predications to directly address unanswered question” (Chekroud et al., 2014). The neural activity of human brains is able to be studied non-invasively because of modern psychology, where the understanding of racism is linked with, “...how cognition is linked to neural function. As an enduring and pervasive aspect of human cognition, researchers have recently investigated the neural correlates of prejudice...the largest number of studies exist for race-related prejudice. It is, indeed, substantially more difficult to directly address other group memberships not outwardly expressed, such as religion or sexuality, in the same manner. Research into race-related prejudice quickly highlighted the amygdala as the brain region of interest” (Chekroud et al., 2014). Neural activity was observed; however, research showed that there were larger behavioral impacts on the brain where the experiment resulted in “...differential brain activity for black and white faces predicts damage awards in hypothetical employment discrimination cases. In combining the social psychological backdrop to prejudice with neuroimaging and interference studies of the amygdala, differential amygdala activity may best be considered in terms of threat, arising through culturally learned associations between black males and potential treat” (Chekroud et al., 2014). An important function of the amygdala is the comprehension that the amygdala is involved in, “avoidance conditioning, learned (conditioned) fear, memory for faces, and both positive and negative affect... the structure known as the amygdala in fact encompasses several groups of nuclei with distinct structural and functional characteristic... there a more indirect measure of bias, such as subliminal priming, lexical decision tasks, and implicit association measures, but also more physiologically focused” (Chekroud et al., 2014). Techniques were used such as, “fMRI and ERPs (event-related potentials), allow investigation of the engagement of different brain regions during interesting behavioral phenomena, offering more sensitive measures of cognitive evaluation than would be available in response time data. Others assess

unintentional biases, of which people are largely unaware” (Chekroud et al., 2014). When white participants were exposed to unfamiliar Black and White faces, “...results showed a significant correlation between differences in amygdala activation and scores on the IAT test (implicit association test), such that the white participants with the most negative implicit attitudes toward black exhibited the greatest difference amygdala activity between responses to black and white faces...” (Chekroud et al., 2014). The researchers of this study made interpretation of the results, “... findings as evidence that the amygdala and behavioral responses of white participants to Black vs. Whites faces reflect cultural group-level evaluations modified by individual experience” (Chekroud et al., 2014). This research provided great validation that racism is in fact formed culturally and is generationally learned. The study shows that the amygdala is part of the brain that is important in emotions and decision making, and that it is rarely innate where emotions such as prejudice would innately be present (Chekroud et al., 2014). These actions of racism and prejudice are formed through culture and personal experience (Chekroud et al., 2014). Elicited emotions of fear and irrational based decision making, found that most of the time these fight-or-flight emotions were due to personal experiences that increase the likelihood to evoke a fear-based emotion, which was observed in the brain images (Chekroud et al., 2014).

Although research has found that racism is taught rather than being innate in the human brain, it can also be argued that racism is innate. In a study done by Rana Hogarth (2019), found that when racial disparities were studied among the racial groups (Blacks and Whites), there was an innate difference in Black people’s bodies, “... that make them different from White people’s bodies. This approach encourages scrutiny of Black people’s bodies, their habits and customs, etc., and arises from an assumption that Black people are indeed different in comparison with other races” (Hogarth, 2019). The disparities among the different racial groups were studied to understand the inequities in genealogy and disparities

as function of Black people's bodies (Hogarth, 2019). There is more research that needs to be done in understanding the neurobiology of the formation of innate racism in the brain; however, there is support that there is an innate difference in Black people's bodies compared to White people's bodies (Hogarth, 2019). There were more research and studies done to understand how racism was taught throughout generations, with the help modern psychology and the use of neuro imaging to observe the amygdala reactions. The use of modern psychology was useful in understanding the neuroscience behind racism due to elicited emotions of fear, hate, anger of the amygdala from different racial groups.

### **Psychology of Racism**

The exploration of cognitive, developmental, and social topics in psychology is important to explore in order to understand the motives of racism and how it is psychologically wired in humans. Racism is a system of advantages, "...based on race that is created and maintained by an interplay between psychological factors (i.e., biased thoughts, feelings, and actions) and sociopolitical factors (i.e., biased laws, policies, and institutions...) ... racism is not inborn; American become more or less inclined toward racism—or antiracism via a culmination of factors that are deeply woven into the fabric of U.S. society" (Roberts and Rizzo, 2020). White Americans are those with the highest social and economic power, who ultimately have the power to create, regulate, and define policies in institutions that advocates for racial inequality (Roberts and Rizzo, 2020). Albert Bandura and his colleagues (1963) studied the cognition of children that witnessed aggression on television, which caused them to act in a similar aggressive way (Roberts and Rizzo, 2020). This idea and research led to understanding the attributions that this had on American racism, "How the media portrays racial groups thus plays a pivotal role in reinforcing American racism" (Roberts and Rizzo, 2020). There is a difference in the way American media portray Native and Black Americans, which attributes to segregation among the race. Often times black

people were, "...depicted as criminals and victims on TV to actual crime reports and found that black American overrepresented as criminals and underrepresented as victims. Viewers exposed to such portrayals are more likely to perceive Black people as criminal, report anti-Black attitudes, and support harsher criminal sentencing against black people. How American media portrays interracial interactions can further foster racism" (Roberts and Rizzo, 2020). The foundational understanding of racial hierarchy in media and how it cognitively distorts the representation of Black people, creates a greater division among racial groups. Every Black person carries a history of slavery and alongside the continual misrepresentation of themselves. It is extremely invalidating to people of color, specifically Black people, to be misrepresented in media, and for non-blacks to blindly define their role in society through false media portrayal.

### **Conclusion**

In order to be an active antiracist, understanding and defining terms and the kind of people we want to become to be is important. The language we use must be consistent and stable, so that antiracist policies, ideas, thinking and people are clearly understood. Often times, terms such as oppression, racism, segregationism etc., are vaguely understood, which leads to the racism and further discrimination among the racial groups. Racism has been neurobiologically programmed in the human brain to respond with fear, and the psychological the constant misrepresentation of colored people (Black people) throughout history (systemic racism). It is important to define and understand the neuroscience, sociology, and psychology to use as a backbone moving, in order to properly advocate and liberate Black people or any person who suffers from racism.

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