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Racism Institutional and Structural

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Abstract:

Institutional and structural racism are sociological explanations for racism as more than individual prejudice, and as a deep seated and on-going force in contemporary societies that produce racially structured patterns of inequality that recur in spite of equality before the law and anti-discrimination policies. Such patterns can be seen across many aspects of society, such as employment, housing and law enforcement. Institutional/structural racism is also evident in ideologies at national and global levels through 'colour blind' perspectives as well as Eurocentrism. In theory and in practice they are best thought of working through an interacting and intersecting combination of individual/group, cultural and structural processes and forces.

Keywords: race, Race and Ethnicity, racism

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Main text

Institutional and structural racism are interlinked and essentially sociological ways of explaining racism as more than, and different from, individual prejudice or group antagonism towards others. They are used to account for how racially structured societies and racial inequalities persist in spite of anti-discrimination policies and rhetoric, as well as in situations of formal legal and political equality, and where explicitly racist ideologies and attitudes have largely been marginalised. In these contexts the terms are usually employed in a critical sense to draw attention to racism as a deep-seated, on-going structural and ideological force in societies that treat racism as a historical issue or just an aberration. Nonetheless, in the social sciences and in public and media debates institutional racism is often criticised as a confusing idea because it is thought to rely on dichotomising individual/institutional and witting/unwitting forms of racism.

Institutional racism refers to bureaucratic processes that have the unintended effect of creating and sustaining racial inequality in society. Structural racism overlaps with this but

can be seen as making a wider claim about racism as foundational to Western and global power. Patterns of social and economic racial inequality at national and transnational levels are the evidence of such racism, which is rooted in white/European racial privilege and framing, as well as Eurocentric and colonial ideologies and their legacies and import in the present day.

Unlike situations of formal and legal discrimination such as apartheid in South Africa or 'Jim Crow' segregation in the USA, institutional and structural racism shed light on racism that occurs in liberal democracies committed to formal equality, and in organisations with diversity and anti-discrimination policies. Despite these, a range of often implicit and unquestioned practices both produce and sustain racially skewed outcomes that continue to produce patterns of racial disadvantage.

Carmichael and Hamilton introduced institutional racism in their book *Black Power* (1967). They used it to stress the difference between individual, or subjective, racism and institutional racism. For these authors, institutional racism is non-explicit, underhand, and unidentifiable as the actions of specific individuals. It is a 'naturalized' form of racism in that it follows unquestioned assumptions, immanent in society as a whole, such as a belief that there are innate physical and mental differences and capacities between groups distinguished by race. As unthinking and usually unstated assumptions it underpins practices that produce racial inequalities, but through unquestioned bureaucratic procedures and social attitudes rather than as direct intent. Such procedures and assumptions inform group as well as organisational/institutional actions and become part of the normal operating practices of societies, making racism pervasive and systemic. Carmichael and Hamilton treated individual and institutional racism as analogous to the distinction between overt and covert racism. While individual racism is overt and can be seen and heard, institutional racism is a subtler, covert process that could not be reduced to the acts of individuals. Even if white people individually decry racism, white people as a whole collectively benefit from the racial order, as all people of colour are routinely at the bottom of the ladder for resources and rewards. Thus, *Black Power* explicitly critiqued the white establishment in the US, and it called for radical or militant black political activity to combat racism. In regarding institutional racism as a form of internal colonialism in the US, they stressed that while blacks had the same citizenship status as whites, they stood in as colonial subjects in relation to white society.

Institutional racism is held to be a major cause of racial inequality, such as black poverty and deprived neighbourhoods, due to discriminatory practices by white landlords and property agents, as well as law enforcement and businesses. Stark as well as subtle differences in access to and quality of health provision, including life expectancy, educational qualifications, employment and particularly under-employment [where black people earn significantly less than white people with the same qualifications], the elite professions such as law and medicine, and criminal justice, especially in the policing of drugs and stop and frisk/stop and search, as well as prison populations are some of the main areas where racial orders and inequalities are manifest. In all these areas public organisations express a commitment to non-discrimination or even claim to actively address racial inequalities, yet racial inequalities recur over time. While the impersonal nature of institutional racism was an important break from idea of racism as based on prejudice and stereotyping, the extent of racial inequality in these areas indicates that racism is sometimes intentional, even if disavowed, and that there are still some overt racist practices and organisations.

The idea of institutional racism in both social science and public policy has found it hard to reconcile whether individual/institutional and intended/not intended forms of racism are an either/or dichotomy. Because of this structure/agency problem a third or intervening 'cultural' level between individual and institutions is often drawn upon. In this light institutional racism can be seen as a combination of the occupational culture of an organisation, combined with discriminatory practices (which may be intended or unintended) and the racial disadvantageous outcomes produced by the actions and policies of an organisation. Consequently, institutional racism is manifested through routine practices, where the effect or outcome may be discriminatory even if it is unintended; or it is evident in informal cultural practices, such as taken-for-granted norms and assumptions and stereotypes about minority groups. This approach points to processes as well as structures in producing racial skewed practices and outcomes, and of institutional racism as an interacting and intersecting combination of individual/group, cultural and structural levels. While psychologists might look more at the relation between the first two elements - individual and cultures - sociologists put more emphasis on the interaction between cultural and structural aspects of racism.

Structural racism analyses macro-structural processes where an entire society is structured by race. Ideology is important in this such as when societies, or their political leaders, proclaim a race or colour blind ideology that denies the need for any measures to tackle racism. This

allows the dominant group (whites) to deny racism, by pointing to the relative success of some minority groups. A structural racism perspective stresses these claims are part of the colonial and racist imaginaries that frame the privileges of whiteness that underlie racism.

SEE ALSO: Apartheid and Nelson Mandela; Brown v. Board of Education; Health and Race; Occupational Segregation; Race and Crime; Race and the Criminal Justice System; Race and Schools; Redlining; Residential Segregation; School Segregation, Desegregation

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