

Understanding racism

What is racism?

The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1998) defines racism as:

'an ideology [belief] that gives expression to myths about other racial and ethnic groups, that devalues and renders inferior those groups, that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society.'¹

Racism is a destructive act. It disables people by decreasing their individuality. It threatens community unity and creates separation in society. It is the opposite of the democratic principles of equal opportunity and the right of all people to be judged fairly.

Racism has its roots in the belief that some people are better because they belong to a particular race, ethnic or national group. Racist attitudes and beliefs engender false impressions about people based on their race and are often formed because of a fear of difference, including differences in customs, values, religion, physical appearance and ways of living and viewing the world. Racism includes negative attitudes towards the use of different languages, 'foreign' accents or the use of non-standard variations of a dominant community language.

Examples of racist actions include ridicule, racist abuse, property damage, racial harassment, racist propaganda, racial slander and physical assault. Racism also includes practices that exploit people or exclude members of particular groups from participating in the society in which they live. Extreme examples of racist behaviour include ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Racist behaviour and systemic racism

Racism or racial discrimination is shown by behaviour that may be overt (direct) or covert (indirect) in nature. There are also instances where organisations or governments put into place systems that are discriminatory to people of a particular race or ethnic group and this is called systemic (or institutional) racism.

Overt racism

Overt racism is the unfair or unequal handling of a person or a group on racial grounds. It involves conscious and deliberate acts of intolerance and hatred perpetrated by individuals or groups. Overt racist beliefs, attitudes and practices are expressed or shown publicly or in an obvious way.

An example of overt racism would be an employer who won't hire someone on the basis of their cultural or linguistic background. This type of discrimination is typically premeditated.

Covert racism

Covert racism expresses racist ideas, attitudes or beliefs in subtle, hidden or secret forms. Often unchallenged, this type of racism doesn't appear to be racist because it is indirect behaviour.

Examples of covert racism include avoiding people on the street or not interacting with them publicly because of their race and the denial of public benefits on the grounds of race; for example informal exclusion of people of certain cultural backgrounds from public places such as night clubs or hotels. Covert racism is the most common form of racism in our society today as overt racism is against the law and considered 'politically incorrect'.

¹ NSW Dept of Education and Training 2005.

Systemic racism

Systemic or institutional racism is differential treatment of racial or ethnic groups through what appear to be neutral rules, policies and procedures by organisations or governments. These procedures disadvantage people from different cultural backgrounds and can result in unfair treatment. For example, a rule that says that no student may wear headwear to school could result in discrimination against students whose religion requires the wearing of headwear. Systemic racial discrimination can occur even when there is no intention to discriminate. Systemic racism is subtle and manifests itself in seemingly innocuous ways.

Further examples of systemic racism include asking people to present birth certificates, to fulfill point system identifications or to read and write English. Members of some minority racial groups may have no access to the necessary documentation or resources to fulfill such requirements and they may use English as a second or third language. Thus, even to participate in a common activity such as getting a driver's license can become something that is more difficult for a person from a racial minority group.

Racism in Australia

In Australia, racism is directly linked to the nation's history of colonisation and migration.

The original Aboriginal residents were largely cast out of their land and discriminated against by the first European settlers. Some Aboriginal people perceive the process of colonisation as an invasion. Racial discrimination has continued to impact on the lives of Aboriginal Australians in the two centuries following European settlement.

The resettlement of people in Australia from all parts of the world has led to the increased cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian population. Intolerance and discrimination have been experienced by many such groups in particular people from language backgrounds other than English, despite the fact that government migration schemes encouraged them to settle in Australia.

Until recent years, racist policies and practices were also incorporated within Australian laws and institutions. The most powerful examples of these practices were the removal of Aboriginal children from their families and the rejection of full residency rights to Aboriginal people. Similarly, the White Australia Policy aimed to restrict immigration to Australia by people from non-European backgrounds.

Racist beliefs are also at the core of the resentment expressed by some Australians at measures taken by governments, such as Aboriginal land rights, to address the disadvantages of particular groups. Such affirmative measures and positive discrimination are frequently seen by critics as the preferential treatment of one group at the expense of another, rather than the means of redressing the disadvantage inherent in society.

This resentment often finds expression in the belief that 'reverse racism' is occurring. The notion of reverse racism is that people from the dominant culture are being discriminated against, or not receiving the same benefits as people from minority groups. All ethnic or cultural groups are capable of discriminating against other groups and all can be in a position of being discriminated against, but it should be noted that minority groups are more likely to suffer from systemic racism.

Racism is detrimental, not only to its victims but to society as a whole. It damages communities by limiting the contributions of their members and disrupts peaceful co-existence and co-operation among groups. Racism damages individuals by destroying their self-confidence and preventing them from achieving their potential. It is particularly damaging for children as it hampers social development and limits educational opportunities. The consequences of racism are social injustice, a less productive economy and a divided community.

Racism and the law

Under Australian law it is illegal for people to behave in a racist manner or to encourage, incite or permit racist acts to occur and the law protects people who make complaints about racial discrimination.

It is against the law to discriminate on the basis of:

- race
- colour
- nationality
- descent
- ethnic or ethno-religious background
- whether a person has a relative or associate who is of a particular race.

Australian legislation relating to racial discrimination addresses many aspects of racist behaviour, but legislation cannot always address the underlying social issues. Education, together with effective legislation, provides the best hope for developing a society free from racism.

The importance of culture, language and identity

Understanding and valuing cultural diversity are the main ways to counteract racism. All people must feel free to explore and express their culture and identity while developing their understanding of the cultural diversity that exists in the world around them.

Culture may be broadly defined as the ways of living built up by a group of human beings, which is passed on from one generation to the next. Every community, cultural or ethnic group has its own unique values, beliefs and ways of living. Culture contributes to how a person is seen by others and how they see themselves.

The shared stories, customs, values and histories distinctive to a person's culture, shape the way they think, behave and view the world. A shared cultural heritage bonds the members of a group together and creates a sense of belonging through community acceptance. Food, clothing, celebrations, religion, story telling and language are part of a person's cultural heritage. The preservation of languages within a multicultural society is critical for the preservation of cultural heritage and identity. Language communicates values, beliefs, customs and feelings. It is the most important way a person's culture and traditions can be saved or preserved.

When Aboriginal language is lost, this usually means the loss of culture and identity. A large number of languages have been lost around Australia. In many places the censorship of Aboriginal languages was used as a deliberate policy in order to suppress and destroy those groups.

Australia's diversity in culture and language has expanded over the past 200 years with the arrival of people from more than 120 cultures from all over the world. Australian governments have adopted multicultural policies, recognising and respecting each person's right to keep and protect their cultural heritage and emphasising the importance of a culture that is free of racism.

Australians working together can and will achieve a more equal and fairer Australian society that respects and values its diversity. We need to foster cultural understanding to rid us of hatred, mistrust and fear.

Reference

New South Wales Department of Education and Training 2005, *Understanding racism: What is racism?* viewed 21 April 2006, <<http://www.racismnoway.com.au/library/understanding/index-What.html>>.