

Racism in the Structure of Everyday Worlds: A Cultural-Psychological Perspective

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Abstract

Theory and research in cultural psychology highlight the need to examine racism not only “in the head” but also “in the world.” Racism is often defined as *individual prejudice*, but racism is also systemic, existing in the advantages and disadvantages imprinted in cultural artifacts, ideological discourse, and institutional realities that work together with individual biases. In this review, we highlight examples of historically derived ideas and cultural patterns that maintain present-day racial inequalities. We discuss three key insights on the psychology of racism derived from utilizing a cultural-psychology framework. First, one can find racism embedded in our everyday worlds. Second, through our preferences and selections, we maintain racialized contexts in everyday action. Third, we inhabit cultural worlds that, in turn, promote racialized ways of seeing, being in, and acting in the world. This perspective directs attempts at intervention away from individual tendencies and instead focuses on changing the structures of mind in context that reflect and reproduce racial domination.

Keywords

racism, cultural psychology, social inequality

The American idea is the nation’s holiday garb, its festive dress, its Sunday best. It covers up an everyday practice of betraying the claims of equality, justice, and democracy.

—John Hope Franklin (2007, para. 5)

The term *racism* is often used synonymously with prejudice (biased feelings or affect), stereotyping (biased thoughts and beliefs, flawed generalizations), discrimination (differential treatment or the absence of equal treatment), and bigotry (intolerance or hatred). This practice implicitly conceptualizes racism as a set of basic social-psychological processes underlying the psychology of individuals (i.e., stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination) merely applied to the context of race. Though sometimes specified, the context of race is not necessarily treated as distinctive in social-psychological research; instead, the psychological consequences and antecedents for racism are typically extrapolated from minority (vs. majority), low-status (vs. high status), subordinate (vs. dominant), and out-group (vs. in-group)

research paradigms. This approach can obscure the particular role that race, embedded in historical and cultural contexts, has played in organizing which persons and identities recurrently compose marginalized and dominant groups.

Conventional understandings of racism typically locate the driving force in the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of biased and prejudiced individuals. Individualist ideologies that prevail in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and Democratic (WEIRD; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) settings inform both laypersons’ (particularly White Americans in this case) and psychological science’s conception of racism as individual-level phenomena (e.g., Adams, Edkins, Lacka, Pickett, & Cheryan, 2008; Sommers & Norton, 2006). Without denying the role of individuals in the psychology of racism,

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there are limitations when racism is exclusively explained as rooted inside individual minds.

Discussing racism beyond the individual may be particularly challenging to conventional understandings because one cannot easily dismiss racism as due to “a few bad apples” or as a problem relegated to the past. Critics within psychology have referred to this individualizing construction of racism as the “prejudice problematic” and have identified significant problems with it (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, p. 201). Decreases in overt expressions of racial bias might suggest that racial prejudice (and therefore racism) is less extreme in modern America; however, many psychologists suggest that racial bias has gone underground, and they have mounted substantial evidence that it instead thrives in subtle forms. However, whether it is old-fashioned and hostile (e.g., Allport, 1954), more subtle (e.g., microaggressions; Sue, 2010), ambivalent (e.g., aversive racism; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986), unconscious (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995), or suppressed for fear of social sanctions (Plant & Devine, 1998), the problem with restricted focus on individual bias is that it obscures the institutional, systemic, and cultural processes that perpetuate and maintain race-based hierarchies. Taken together, the empirical evidence suggests that measuring racism only as overt individual bias may systematically understate the ongoing significance of racism. A cultural-psychology approach adds to this discussion by considering racism as a set of ideas, practices, and materials embedded in the structure of everyday cultural worlds.

A Cultural-Psychological Approach to Racism

In contrast to the individualist conception of racism that prevails in mainstream U.S. society, our conception is that it is a “quintessentially cultural-psychological and socioeconomic phenomenon consisting of patterns of historically derived and selected ideas and their material instantiation in institutions, practices, artifacts, and other manifestations of ‘mind-in-context’” (Salter & Adams, 2013, p. 413). Racism as mind in context draws on foundational cultural-psychological writings that define cultural psychology as the study of mutual constitution: the idea that psyche and culture are inseparable outgrowths of one another (Shweder, 1990). This perspective suggests that there is a dynamic relationship between psychological manifestations of racism in the mind and psychological manifestations of racism in the world. In one direction (i.e., culture shapes psyche), people live in cultural worlds that promote and facilitate context-specific ways of seeing and being in the world. This direction emphasizes that tendencies of racism are not simply the natural outgrowth of some

innate disposition but instead emerge as people interact with cultural worlds that promote and facilitate racialized experiences and racist habits of mind. In the other direction (i.e., psyche shapes culture), people shape and maintain the context via selected preferences, practices, and actions. The racist realities that people inhabit (and inherit from previous generations) arise and persist through everyday action as people selectively reproduce some features of the social context and fail to reproduce others.

When racism is theorized through this framework, racism is simultaneously the budding product of psychological subjectivity and the structural foundation for dynamic reproduction of racist action. Three key insights on the psychology of racism are derived from utilizing a cultural-psychology framework: (a) Dynamic reproduction of racist action can be found embedded in the structure of everyday worlds, (b) people inhabit cultural worlds that afford or promote particular racialized ways of processing and seeing the world, and (c) people shape, produce, and maintain racialized contexts through their selected preferences, practices, and actions. While cultural psychologists have applied these cultural-psychological concepts to understand diversity and social inequality broadly, few have utilized this framework to understand racism specifically. Not only is culture crucial to understanding racism according to this framework, but race and racism are fundamental phenomena in understanding American culture.

Racism in the structure of everyday worlds

To say that racism is located in the structure of everyday worlds is to acknowledge the extent to which racism constitutes modern society. The racism of modern society not only is a function of its distant origins but also refers to manifestations embedded in practices, artifacts, discourse, and institutional realities (e.g., legal, educational, and economic systems). Rather than something extraordinary or rare, racism is akin to the water in which fish swim (see Brown et al., 2003).

For instance, representations of race, ethnicity, and nationality have never been just reflections of neutral categories; rather, they are historically derived ideas about superiority and inferiority. Contemporary racial categories and understandings of those concepts have their cultural-psychological roots in colonization and the transatlantic slave trade (Guthrie, 2004). Europeans constructed their identity as “White” and imagined themselves as more developed and more human in comparison with the darker-skinned “others” (whether African or indigenous) whom they dominated (Feagin, 2010). Such ideologies of human evolution not only persist in

contemporary representations (e.g., associations between people of African descent and apes; Eberhardt, 2005) but also serve to justify violence against racialized others (Goff, Eberhardt, Williams, & Jackson, 2008). Ideologies regarding race are not just beliefs but instead are realized (i.e., made real) in such foundational institutions as the U.S. Constitution, which limited the full benefits of U.S. citizenship to people construed as White males. The legacy of this material association is evident in the observation that White Americans apply the category “American” more strongly to people of European descent than to racial minorities in the United States (Devos & Banaji, 2005).

Racism-relevant ways of seeing the world

Empirical and statistical realities indicate that Black Americans face disparities in education, employment, health, and income (e.g., American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Educational Disparities, 2012; U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2016); yet many White Americans believe that the average Black American fares about the same or better than most White Americans (Morin, 2001, Norton & Sommers, 2011). White Americans also tend to see less racism in contemporary U.S. society than do people from many racial minority groups (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2014). A cultural-psychological account of why this perceptual difference exists suggests that there are cultural-psychological tools that make it easier to acknowledge racial realities: For example, research on the Marley hypothesis indicates that White American students perceive little racism in U.S. society because they are relatively ignorant about critical historical knowledge (i.e., concerning past racism; Bonam, Das, Coleman, & Salter, 2017; Nelson, Adams, & Salter, 2013).

Follow-up research has considered the cultural tools that promote ignorance about racism. The focus of our own work in this regard has been representations of history. In one study, we explored displays for Black History Month from predominantly White and predominantly Black high schools in the United States. Displays from predominantly White schools tended to highlight abstract conceptions of diversity or focused on individual achievements while ignoring the racial barriers that made such achievements extraordinary. In contrast, displays from predominantly Black schools made more explicit reference to racism (Salter & Adams, 2016). Results of subsequent studies indicated that exposure to representations of history from predominantly Black schools afforded greater perceptions of racism and support for antiracist policy than did exposure to representations of history from predominantly White schools (Salter & Adams, 2016).

Another tool for the production of ignorance about racism is colorblind ideology, which mandates that one should proceed without seeing race and act accordingly (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Claims that “race doesn’t matter” strategically afford denial of current realities regarding racial inequalities (Mueller, 2017). Without explicitly advocating overtly racist ideologies, people in dominant groups can deploy individualist, egalitarian, meritocratic, or otherwise colorblind-laden discourses that appear to be “race neutral” but have racism-legitimizing consequences (e.g., opposition to affirmative action; Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Every, 2005). In particular, these ideologies afford the possibility for people in positions of dominance to attribute their advantages to their own hard work while attributing disadvantages of racialized others to personal irresponsibility. In other words, individualist ideologies of colorblind meritocracy serve to rationalize inequality and make it possible for people to accept racist injustice that they would otherwise find difficult to swallow. It is not surprising, then, that American participants prefer messages about social inequalities that emphasize individual blame (vs. systemic blame). This preference is especially strong when the audiences for those messages are racial minorities whom participants perceive to be in greater violation of, and therefore in greater need of lessons about, meritocratic ideals (Salter, Hirsch, Schlegel, & Thai, 2016).

Producing (and reproducing) racism through preferential selection

Representations of history, themselves, are not only illustrative of how context can shape our view of the world, but they are also an example of racism reproduced through preference and selection. Because the timeline of events transcends the individual life span, memory of the collective past necessarily requires mediation by cultural tools (e.g., schools, textbooks, museums, national holidays, and other commemoration practices; Wertsch, 2002). Thanksgiving, for example, commemorates the triumph of the Pilgrims—with the help of friendly Indians—over cold, hunger, and impending death, along with several invented traditions (e.g., parades, football; Adamczyk, 2002). Thanksgiving commemorations, though, are largely silent about historical wrongdoing perpetuated by early American settlers against indigenous peoples. This silence is embedded and reproduced in cultural practice: Annual presidential speeches for the “first American Thanksgiving” are saturated with national glorification themes (e.g., American exceptionalism, manifest destiny) and minimize the experiences of indigenous peoples (Kurtiş, Adams, & Yellow Bird, 2010).

These cultural tools are not neutral but instead arise and persist in attunement with popular beliefs and

desires. Hegemonic commemoration practices—those that through exercise of power acquire a status of commonsense truth—tend to achieve prominence because they resonate with powerful interests. However, our concern here is the more dynamic process by which ordinary people in the course of everyday action shape collective memory by selecting or reproducing some features of the past while deselecting or omitting others. For example, when Kurtiş and colleagues (2010) asked White Americans to select a proclamation for commemoration of the U.S. Thanksgiving holiday, participants preferred and recommended representations that were silent about both the participation of indigenous societies and their subsequent destruction as a result of colonial violence. A similar pattern emerged in our research on representations for Black History Month, in which White American participants (who were unaware of the source of stimuli) preferred relatively sanitized representations from predominantly White schools over more critical representations from predominantly Black schools (Salter & Adams, 2016). In both studies, patterns of preference were strongest among participants who strongly identified as American or White. Overall, these studies illustrate how people preferentially select some representations of the past and decline to select others, thereby investing in racism-affording constructions of reality that serve interests of maintaining White racial dominance (cf. Lipsitz, 2006).

Turning to Culture to Understand Racism

Taking a cultural-psychology approach has important implications for understanding the topic of racism beyond individual bias. Consider one of the most robust demonstrations of bias as a basic psychological phenomenon: the *minimal-group paradigm* (see Otten, 2016, for a review). Dividing people into groups on the basis of arbitrary distinctions and dimensions—coin flips, dot estimation, and artistic preferences—is enough to guide resource allocations such that people show in-group favoritism (e.g., Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). Importantly, while we can create or manufacture bias, these biases do not necessarily resonate outside of the laboratory. In minimal-group paradigms, once participants leave that context, there are few cues identifying individuals who were arbitrarily assigned to a group on the basis of their tendency to overestimate dots, for example, or the consequences associated with conferring advantages or disadvantages to them. The power undergirding racism is that although race, too, is manufactured, there is constant cultural reinforcement and selection of “race” as a meaningful construct in American society. Outside of the laboratory, there

are many historical and contemporary cues conferring advantages and disadvantages to various racial groups.

Interventions could be aimed at these real-world, societal cues. Rather than attempt to control expression of culturally constituted, individual bias, a more effectual use of personal agency may be to reconstruct worlds that promote antiracist tendencies. Given our own work on representations of history and their corollaries with social consciousness, recent examples of antiracism, such as reclaiming Columbus Day for indigenous peoples (Chappell, 2016), dismantling prominent Confederate monuments in New Orleans (Gonzales, 2017), and enacting new ethnic-studies requirements in Nevada (NV Legis. Assemb., 2017), are promising directions. To return to the metaphor that racism is like the water in which fish swim, a cultural-psychological approach suggests that the solution to the problem of racism is not to change the fish so that it can survive in toxic water but instead to change the water the fish has to live in. It may do little good to address racism by changing people’s dispositions if they will return to the same racist worlds that constituted those dispositions in the first place. Regardless of personal intention, unwitting engagement with racist affordances—for example, holidays that celebrate accomplishments of European settlers using forced labor from enslaved Africans to work land stolen from indigenous peoples—can direct a person to act in the service of continued racial domination. Importantly, focusing on the context does not absolve people from the responsibility to resist or counteract racism interpersonally. Instead, it suggests an additional channel for people’s intentional, agentic activity. This departs from conventional understandings that direct efforts for remedy toward changing hearts and minds or intergroup tolerance, insisting “Can’t we all just get along?” (Dixon, Tropp, Durrheim, & Tredoux, 2010). Instead, this perspective suggests that energies should be directed toward identifying and dismantling the cultural-psychological structures that are the source of injustice and promote individual bias in the first place.

Recommended Reading

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- Adams, G., Salter, P. S., Pickett, K. M., Kurtiş, T., & Phillips, N. L. (2010). Behavior as mind in context: A cultural psychology analysis of “paranoid” suspicion in West

African worlds. In B. Mesquita, L. F. Barrett, & E. R. Smith (Eds.), *The mind in context* (pp. 277–306). New York, NY: Guilford. Provides three case examples that demonstrate not only how behaviors are products of actions within a context but also how they condition future behavior.

- Kurtiş, T., Salter, P. S., & Adams, G. (2015). A sociocultural approach to teaching about racism. *The Race and Pedagogy Journal*, 1(1), Article 1. Retrieved from <http://soundideas.pugetsound.edu/rpj/vol1/iss1/1>. Provides a practical example of how a cultural psychological approach can be utilized in a classroom to increase student awareness of racism.
- Salter, P. S., & Adams, G. (2013). Toward a critical race psychology. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, 7, 781–793. Highlights how applying *critical race theory* in psychological science may inform new directions in the psychological study of racism.
- Declaration of Conflicting Interests**
- The author(s) declared that there were no conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship or the publication of this article.
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