
I. IS RACISM A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE?

OVERVIEW

Part I lays the foundation for the rest of the book. It situates current antiracism efforts, including this book, within the historical context of public health, showing that the field has a long, rich history of social change, community organizing, policy advocacy, and scholarship aimed at achieving health equity.¹⁻⁴

It is difficult to discuss racial phenomena without understanding the key terms “ethnicity,” “race,” and “racism.” These terms can be used in different ways in different circumstances; therefore, the unit presents several widely utilized definitions for the terms “ethnicity,” “race,” and “racism” (Table I-1).

Chapter 2, by Jenkins, Schoenbach, Rowley, and Ford, who are leading practitioner-scholars in the field, critically surveys the history of the field of public health, shedding particular light on efforts to address, illuminate, undermine, and undo racism. These efforts often challenged the field’s status quo and pushed beyond its conventions.

Chapter 3, the only such chapter in the book, contains the transcript of an interview one of the editors, Derek Griffith, conducted with David Williams, a leading scholar on the relationship between racism and health. It offers readers insight into his experiences helping forge a program of research on the health effects of racism. It explores three topics: (1) factors that shaped his interests in and scholarship on racism and discrimination, (2) examples of how racism as a scientific issue was challenged and contested over time, and (3) lessons learned and examples of promising new areas of research and practice.

Racism can operate in the academic settings where students are trained to become health equity advocates, researchers, and champions. Chapter 4 by Airhihenbuwa and Iwelunmor, leading scholars of culture and health, discusses the challenges of naming, seeing, understanding, and addressing racism in the citadel of academia. The authors draw on their personal experiences to illustrate how administrators, faculty, and staff in positions of power may perpetuate inequities and miss opportunities to strive toward achieving equity in these settings. They encourage institutional leaders to learn from their stories and recommend bold, transparent steps to cultivate environments that are safe, supportive, and equitable for all.

Table I-1. Defining Ethnicity, Race, and Racism

Source	Definition
Ethnicity	
Bhopal (2004) ⁵	"The social group a person belongs to, and either identifies with or is identified with by others, as a result of a mix of cultural and other factors including language, diet, religion, ancestry, and physical features traditionally associated with race."
Ford and Harawa (2010) ⁶	"[A] context-specific, multilevel (i.e., group-level, individual-level), multi-factorial social construct that is tied to race and used both to distinguish diverse populations and to establish personal or group identity . . . ethnicity comprises two dimensions; the attributional dimension describes the unique socio cultural characteristics (e.g., culture, diet) of groups while the relational dimension captures characteristics of the relationship between an ethnically defined group and the society in which it is situated."
Johnson (2000) ⁷	"Ethnicity is a concept referring to a shared culture and way of life, especially as reflected in language, folkways, religious and other institutional forms, material culture . . . and cultural products."
Kagawa-Singer (2000) ⁸	"[A] subcultural group within a hierarchical power structure of a multicultural society. Ethnicity is defined as one's identification with a particular ethnic group and the group's sense of collective identity, belonging, and continuity."
US Office of Management and Budget ⁹	An official designation that is independent of racial identity and made up of two categories only: Hispanic or Latino and <i>not</i> Hispanic or Latino.
Race	
Bhopal (2004) ⁵	"By historical and common usage the group (sub-species in traditional scientific use) a person belongs to as a result of a mix of physical features such as skin colour and hair texture, which reflect ancestry and geographical origins, as identified by others or, increasingly, as self identified. The importance of social factors in the creation and perpetuation of racial categories has led to the concept broadening to include a common social and political heritage, making its use similar to ethnicity."
Haney Lopez (1994) ¹⁰	"[A] vast group of people loosely bound together by historically contingent, socially significant elements of their morphology and/or ancestry:"
Johnson (2000) ⁷	"A socially constructed set of categories used primarily as a basis for social inequality and social oppression. Distinctions such as 'black' and 'white' have little basis in scientifically identifiable genetic differences but have great significance in people's perceptions, evaluations, and behavior toward other people."
LaVeist (1994) ¹¹	"Race is a concept that is determined fundamentally by political and social forces without regard to biogenetics or scientific rigor."
US Office of Management and Budget ⁹	Standards developed by the US Office of Management and Budget to guide the collection of data on race. At minimum, five categories are to be used: White, Black or African American, Asian, Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native. People may indicate one or more categories.

(Continued)

Table I-1. (Continued)

Source	Definition
Racism	
Gilmore (2007) ¹²	“[T]he state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.”
Herman (1996) ¹³	“[C]onditions based on the fabrication of race. Racisms are defined as exclusions from goods and services, opportunities and privileges, rights and powers, and even social responsibilities and burdens of those defined as racially other.”
Jones (2000) ¹⁴	“[A] system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what [people] call ‘race’), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources.”
Krieger (2008) ¹⁵	“[I]nstitutional and individual practices that create and reinforce oppressive systems of race relations whereby people and institutions engaging in discrimination adversely restrict, by judgment and action, the lives of those against whom they discriminate.”
Paradies et al. (2015) ¹⁶	“[O]rganized systems within societies that cause avoidable and unfair inequalities in power, resources, capacities and opportunities across racial or ethnic groups. Racism can manifest through beliefs, stereotypes, prejudices or discrimination. This encompasses everything from open threats and insults to phenomena deeply embedded in social systems and structures.”
Van den Berghe (1967) ¹⁷	“Any set of beliefs that organic, genetically transmitted differences (whether real or imagined) between human groups are intrinsically associated with the presence or absence of certain socially relevant abilities or characteristics, hence that such difference are a legitimate basis of invidious distinctions between groups socially defined as races.”
Williams and Mohammed (2013) ¹⁸	“[A]n organized system premised on the categorization and ranking of social groups into races and devalues, disempowers, and differentially allocates desirable societal opportunities and resources to racial groups regarded as inferior.”

Source: Created by Adrian M. Bacong and Attallah S. Dillard.

Note: Effective communication is essential to understand and address any issue and this is particularly true with sensitive or controversial topics. However, many of the terms used to discuss race, ethnicity, and racism have multiple definitions, none of them necessarily incorrect. Race and ethnicity are social constructs; their meanings change over time and their relevance depends on the context in which they are being used. How many of these definitions do you use? In what situations do you use them? Are there any that are new to you? How might you use the multiple definitions to discuss race, ethnicity, or racism constructively in the future? Sources for the terms are listed in alphabetical order. The order is not meant to signify the importance of one definition over another. Rather, the order displays the diversity in definitions.

This part of the book concludes with the first of “A Note From the Battlefield,” which are brief excerpts from an interview conducted with the founder and CEO of Healthy African American Families, II, Loretta Jones (also known as Miss Loretta), and her daughter, Felica Jones. This note is a caution to academic and other researchers

about the potentially disrespectful treatment of community members in collaborative research endeavors.

At first glance, racism may seem like it is too big and complex an issue to tackle with public health tools. Part I shows that public health professionals have addressed it in the past and that we can use that knowledge to continue forging ahead.

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