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The Definition of Institutional Racism

The History and Implications of Institutional Racism

by [Tom Head](#)

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The term "[institutional racism](#)" describes societal patterns that impose oppressive or otherwise negative conditions on identifiable groups on the basis of race or ethnicity. Oppression may come from the government, schools or the court.

Institutional racism shouldn't be confused with individual racism, which is directed against one or a few individuals. It has the potential of negatively affecting people on a large scale, such as if a school refused to accept any African Americans on the basis of color.

The History of Institutional Racism

The term "institutional racism" was coined at some point during the late 1960s by [Stokely Carmichael](#), who would later become known as Kwame Ture. Carmichael felt that it was important to distinguish personal bias, which has specific effects and can be identified and corrected relatively easily, with institutional bias, which is generally long-term and grounded more in inertia than in intent.

Carmichael made this distinction because, like [Martin Luther King Jr.](#), he had grown tired of white moderates and uncommitted liberals who felt that the primary or sole purpose of the civil rights movement was white personal transformation. Carmichael's primary concern – and the primary concern of most civil rights leaders at the time – was societal transformation, a much more ambitious goal.

Contemporary Relevance

Institutional racism in the U.S. results from the social caste system that sustained – and was sustained by – slavery and racial segregation. Although the laws that

enforced this caste system are no longer in place, its basic structure still stands to this day. This structure may gradually fall apart on its own over a period of generations, but activism is often necessary to expedite the process and provide for a more equitable society in the interim.

Examples of Institutional Racism

Opposing public school funding is not necessarily an act of individual racism. One can certainly oppose public school funding for valid, non-racist reasons. But to the extent that opposing public school funding has a disproportionate and detrimental effect on minority youth, it furthers the agenda of institutional racism.

Many other positions that are contrary to the civil rights agenda, such as opposition to [affirmative action](#), can also have the often unintended effect of sustaining institutional racism.

Racial profiling occurs when any group is targeted for suspicion based on race, ethnic origin, or because they belong to another recognized protected class. The most well-known example of racial profiling involves law enforcement zeroing in on African American males. Muslims have also been subjected to racial profiling after 9/11, including anyone with a Middle Eastern appearance regardless of that individual's true religious beliefs.

Looking to the Future

Various forms of activism have famously fought institutional racism over the years. Abolitionists and suffragettes are prime examples. The Black Lives Matter movement was launched in the summer of 2013 after the 2012 death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the subsequent acquittal of his shooter, which many felt were based on race.

Also Known As: societal racism, cultural racism