The Definition of Institutional Racism

The History and Implications of Institutional Racism

Adaptation of article by Tom Head, ThoughtCo.

The phrase "institutional racism" describes social patterns that enforce oppressive or negative conditions on minority groups on the basis of race or ethnicity. Institutional racism is not the same as individual racism, which is discrimination aimed at one or a few individuals.

The History of Institutional Racism
The phrase "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 separate personal bias (which has a specific impact and can be identified and corrected somewhat easily) with institutional bias, which is usually long-term and less outwardly identifiable.

Contemporary Relevance
Institutional racism in the U.S. results from the social caste system that helped– and was helped by – slavery and racial segregation. This structure may eventually fall apart on its own over a long period of time, but activism is often necessary to speed up the process and create a more equitable society in the meantime.

Examples of Institutional Racism
- Opposing public school funding is not necessarily an act of individual racism. But because opposing public school funding has an unfair and harmful effect on minority youth, it supports institutional racism.
- Other actions that work against civil rights, such as opposing affirmative action, can also support institutional racism.
- Racial profiling happens when any group is considered suspicious based on their race, ethnic origin, or because they belong to another minority group.

Looking to the Future
Many activists have famously fought institutional racism over the years. The Black Lives Matter movement began in the summer of 2013 after the 2012 death of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin and the following freeing of his shooter, which many felt were based on race.