# Definition of Systemic Racism in Sociology

## Beyond Prejudice and Micro-Agressions

By Nicki Lisa Cole, Ph.D. Updated July 03, 2019

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Systemic racism is both a theoretical concept and a reality. As a theory, it is premised on the research-supported claim that the United States was founded as a racist society, that racism is thus embedded in all social institutions, structures, and social relations within our society. Rooted in a racist foundation, systemic racism today is composed of intersecting, overlapping, and codependent racist institutions, policies, practices, ideas, and behaviors that give an unjust amount of resources, rights, and power to white people while denying them to people of color.

## Definition of Systemic Racism

Developed by sociologist Joe Feagin, systemic racism is a popular way of explaining, within the social sciences and humanities, the significance of race and racism both historically and in today's world. Feagin describes the concept and the realities attached to it in his well-researched and readable book, *Racist America: Roots, Current Realities, & Future Reparations*. In it, Feagin uses historical evidence and demographic statistics to create a theory that asserts that the United States was founded in racism since the Constitution classified black people as the property of whites. Feagin illustrates that the legal recognition of racialized slavery is a cornerstone of a racist social system in which resources and rights were and are unjustly given to white people and unjustly denied to people of color.

The theory of systemic racism accounts for individual, institutional, and structural forms of racism. The development of this theory was influenced by other scholars of race, including Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, Oliver Cox, Anna Julia Cooper, Kwame Ture, Frantz Fanon, and Patricia Hill Collins, among others.

Feagin defines systemic racism in the introduction to the book:

Systemic racism includes the complex array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the white racist ideologies and attitudes created to maintain and rationalize white privilege and power. *Systemic* here means that the core racist realities are manifested in each of society's major parts [...] each major part of U.S. society--the economy, politics, education, religion, the family-- reflects the fundamental reality of systemic racism.

While Feagin developed the theory based on the history and reality of anti-black racism in the U.S., it is usefully applied to understanding how racism functions generally, both within the U.S. and around the world.

Elaborating on the definition quoted above, Feagin uses historical data in his book to illustrate that systemic racism is primarily composed of seven major elements, which we will review here.

## The Impoverishment of People of Color and Enrichment of White People

Feagin explains that the undeserved impoverishment of people of color (POC), which is the basis of the undeserved enrichment of white people, is one of the core aspects of systemic racism. In the U.S. this includes the role that Black slavery played in creating an unjust wealth for white people, their businesses, and their families. It also includes the way white people exploited labor throughout the European colonies prior to the founding of the United States. These historical practices created a social system that had racist economic inequality built into its foundation and was followed through the years in numerous ways, like the practice of "redlining" that prevented POC from buying homes that would allow their family wealth to grow while protecting and stewarding the family wealth of white people. Undeserved impoverishment also results from POC being forced into unfavorable mortgage rates, being channeled by unequal opportunities for education into low-wage jobs, and being paid less than white people for doing the same jobs.

There is no more telling proof of the undeserved impoverishment of POC and the undeserved enrichment of white people than the massive difference in average wealth of white versus Black and Latino families.

## Vested Group Interests Among White People

Within a racist society, white people enjoy many privileges denied to POC. Among these is the way that vested group interests among powerful whites and "ordinary whites" allow white people to benefit from a white racial identity without even identifying it as such. This manifests in support among white people for political candidates who are white, and for laws and political and economic policies that work to reproduce a social system that is racist and has racist outcomes. For example, white people as a majority have historically opposed or eliminated diversity-increasing programs within education and jobs, and ethnic studies courses that better represent the racial history and reality of the U.S. In cases like these, white people in power and ordinary white people have suggested that programs like these are "hostile" or examples of "reverse racism." In fact, the way white people wield political power in the protection of their interests and at the expense of others, without ever claiming to do so, maintains and reproduces a racist society.

## Alienating Racist Relations Between White People and POC

In the U.S., white people hold most positions of power. A look at the membership of Congress, the leadership of colleges and universities, and the top management of corporations makes this clear. In this context, in which white people hold political, economic, cultural, and social power, the racist views and assumptions that course through U.S. society shape the way those in power interact with POC. This leads to a serious and well-documented problem of routine discrimination in all areas of life, and the frequent dehumanization and marginalization of POC, including hate crimes, which serves to alienate them from society and hurt their overall life chances. Examples include discrimination against POC and preferential treatment of white students among university professors, more frequent and severe punishment of Black students in K-12 schools, and racist police practices, among many others.

Ultimately, alienating racist relations make it difficult for people of different races to recognize their commonalities, and to achieve solidarity in fighting broader patterns of inequality that affect the vast majority of people in society, regardless of their race.

## The Costs and Burdens of Racism are Borne by POC

In his book, Feagin points out with historical documentation that the costs and burdens of racism are disproportionately borne by people of color and by black people especially. Having to bear these

unjust costs and burdens is a core aspect of systemic racism. These include shorter life spans, limited income and wealth potential, impacted family structure as a result of mass incarceration of Blacks and Latinos, limited access to educational resources and political participation, state-sanctioned killing by police, and the psychological, emotional, and community tolls of living with less, and being seen as "less than." POC are also expected by white people to bear the burden of explaining, proving, and fixing racism, though it is, in fact, white people who are primarily responsible for perpetrating and perpetuating it.

## The Racial Power of White Elites

While all white people and even many POC play a part in perpetuating systemic racism, it is important to recognize the powerful role played by white elites in maintaining this system. White elites, often unconsciously, work to perpetuate systemic racism via politics, law, educational institutions, the economy, and via racist representations and underrepresentation of people of color in mass media. This is also known as white supremacy. For this reason, it is important that the public hold white elites accountable for combatting racism and fostering equality. It is equally important that those who hold positions of power within society reflect the racial diversity of the U.S.

## The Power of Racist Ideas, Assumptions, and World Views

Racist ideology—the collection of ideas, assumptions, and worldviews—is a key component of systemic racism and plays a key role in its reproduction. Racist ideology often asserts that whites are superior to people of color for biological or cultural reasons, and manifests in stereotypes, prejudices, and popular myths and beliefs. These typically include positive images of whiteness in contrast to negative images associated with people of color, such as civility versus brutishness, chaste and pure versus hyper-sexualized, and intelligent and driven versus stupid and lazy.

Sociologists recognize that ideology informs our actions and interactions with others, so it follows that racist ideology fosters racism throughout all aspects of society. This happens regardless of whether the person acting in racist ways is aware of doing so.

## Resistance to Racism

Finally, Feagin recognizes that resistance to racism is an important feature of systemic racism. Racism has never been passively accepted by those who suffer it, and so systemic racism is always accompanied by acts of resistance that might manifest as protest, political campaigns, legal battles, resisting white authority figures, and speaking back against racist stereotypes, beliefs, and language. The white backlash that typically follows resistance, like countering "Black Lives Matter" with "all lives matter" or "blue lives matter," does the work of limiting the effects of resistance and maintaining a racist system.

## Systemic Racism Is All Around Us and Within Us

Feagin's theory and all of the research he and many other social scientists have conducted over 100 years illustrates that racism is in fact built into the foundation of U.S. society and that it has over time come to infuse all aspects of it. It is present in our laws, our politics, our economy; in our social institutions; and in how we think and act, whether consciously or subconsciously. It's all around us and inside of us, and for this reason, resistance to racism must also be everywhere if we are to combat it.