

# THE PSYCHOLOGY OF Racism

*How can psychological insights help us to better recognise racism and what we can do about it?*



**DR KEON WEST**

Dr West is a Reader in Social Psychology at Goldsmiths, University of London. He is also the director of Equalab, the president-elect of the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, and an editorial board member for the journal *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

WORDS JOSEPHINE HALL

racism can be more subtle and difficult to detect. Concealed in the fabric of society, covert racism discriminates against individuals through evasive or seemingly passive methods. This includes, but is not limited to: microaggressions,

Psychology can help us to understand many different human behaviours, thoughts and emotions. So, why not racism? How could psychology help us to reduce, and eventually eradicate, racism for future generations?

As Dr Keon West, a social psychologist who specialises in prejudice, points out – even pinning down the definition of racism is quite tricky. Race is a social construct, but racism is very real and has many far-reaching and devastating effects on millions of people's lives worldwide. It includes prejudice and discrimination directed at a person, simply because of their race.

Most of us know overt racism when we see it, but sometimes

“SOMETIMES RACISM CAN BE MORE SUBTLE AND DIFFICULT TO DETECT”

stereotyping, racial profiling and colour-blindness. The scars of covert racism can be seen in terms of poor health, inadequate information, and lost opportunities.

Racism can also be unconscious. In 1998, a team of social psychologists at the Universities of Washington and Yale published a milestone paper that introduced a tool to measure “the unconscious roots of prejudice” that they said affected 90-95% of people. Since then, the Implicit Association Test has been used in countless other studies and social experiments, and has become central to our understanding of racism.

It is now widely accepted in psychology that we all have unconscious or implicit biases. This is why those who might otherwise consider themselves ‘good people’ can still do and say racist things, as Dr West explains:

“We have a skewed idea of what racism is. We imagine that only really bad, mean, nasty, cartoon-like villains are racist. Which is not true.”

The science shows that the impact of racism is still very real, whether it's intentional or not. So, why are so many of us accidentally being racist? »

## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF RACISM

In 2005, Dr Joy DeGruy coined the term 'Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome': "a condition that exists when a population has experienced multigenerational trauma... and continues to experience oppression and institutionalised racism today." Research published in 2019 also proposed that people who experience racism suffer 'skin-tone trauma', which can affect their mental and physical health (leading to problems such as low self-esteem and hypertension). A common misconception is that people who experience racism become paranoid or over-sensitive. On BBC Radio 4 in 2019, Dr Katy Greenland spoke about the findings from her research, which suggest the opposite: "People from minority groups actually work really, really hard to understand their experiences as okay, as not racist. To me, this is an act of resilience... It's very difficult and very painful to say 'that's because of the colour of my skin'. You can feel like you're being rude, ungrateful, or politically extremist. And generally people don't like it."

“ WE DIVIDE THE WORLD INTO ‘US’ AND ‘THEM’ BASED THROUGH A PROCESS OF SOCIAL CATEGORISATION ”

### It could have something to do with heuristics

The work of Herbert Simon, a Nobel-prize winning psychologist, in the 1950s demonstrated that humans were limited in their ability to make rational decisions. In 1973, psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman took this a stage further with their research on cognitive bias, introducing the specific ways of thinking people rely on to simplify the decision-making process.

They called these mental shortcuts that help guide our decision making 'heuristics', naming three in particular: 'availability', 'representative' and 'affect'.

In brief terms, the 'affect' heuristic involves making choices that are influenced by the individual's emotions at that moment. The 'representative' heuristic is when we estimate the likelihood of an event by

comparing it to an existing prototype in our minds.

The 'availability' heuristic operates under the principle that 'if you can think of it, it must be important'. It involves

making decisions based on how easily we can bring something to mind, and often leads to us assuming that those events are more frequent or probable than others. This means we tend to overestimate the probability and likelihood of similar things happening in the future. For example, researchers have found that people who are more easily able to remember seeing antidepressant advertising were also more likely to give high estimates about the prevalence of depression.

There are several theories as to why we rely so heavily on these mental shortcuts but, to put it simply, we have to make hundreds, maybe even thousands, of decisions each day, and heuristics enable us to think through the possible outcomes quickly and arrive at a potential solution.

### And what does that have to do with racism?

These mental shortcuts definitely help speed up our problem-solving and decision-making processes, but they can also lead to inaccurate judgements

about how often things occur and about how representative things may be.

Heuristics can also contribute to stereotypes and prejudice. As we use shortcuts to classify and categorise people, we can often overlook more relevant information and create categorisations that are not in tune with reality.

An understanding of heuristics and the potential biases they introduce can be useful in anti-racism work. There have been countless other psychological studies, experiments and theories that can help us explain or better understand prejudice and racism. For Dr West, there are two that are particularly useful:

### Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is one of the most popular theories for understanding prejudice. It looks at behaviours, which is not by any means all that racism is about, as Dr West explains:

"There are other questions about motivation, thought behind it, and how people feel about it. But SIT works really well for a number of reasons."

SIT says that the groups that people belong to, as defined by wider society, are an important source of our pride and self-esteem. Because of this, we tend to divide the world into 'us' and 'them' through a process of social categorisation. In doing so, we are prone to exaggerating both the differences between groups and the similarities within the same group.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed that we go through three mental processes when evaluating others as 'us' or 'them' (ie, 'in-group' and 'out-group'). These are, in order: categorisation, identification and comparison.

The final stage is critical to understanding prejudice. Once we have categorised and identified ourselves as part of a group, we then tend to compare 'our' group with other groups, in order to maintain our self-esteem. This competition can lead to hostility, prejudice and even discrimination.

### System Justification Theory

"System Justification Theory (SJT) says that people feel really uncomfortable with the idea that the world they live in is unpredictable, unstable or unfair. So they tend to privilege whatever system they live in," Dr West explains.

SJT refers to our inclination to defend and bolster the status quo and to see it as good, fair, legitimate and desirable. A consequence of this propensity is that existing societal structures tend to be preferred, simply because they exist - sometimes at the expense of both the collective and individual self-interest. Dr

West explains why this theory, and the wealth of related research, is so important:

"It helps us explain why, for example, Black people sometimes collaborate in racism. It would be all too neat if it was simply that white and Black people don't like each other. But often Black people work actively to keep other Black people down, or they accept the stereotypes about the group."

### Systemic and institutional racism

Racism is not only ingrained in our individual psychological processes, but it is also found at historical and cultural levels within the structures of our societies. Focusing purely on individual prejudice can conceal the role that institutional processes play in maintaining race-based hierarchies.

An example of systemic racism is the practice of 'redlining' in the United States. Redlining »



## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### PREJUDICE

Prejudice refers to biased thinking, and preconceived opinions that are not based on reason or actual experience. It includes dislike, hostility or unjust behaviour deriving from these unfounded opinions.

### DISCRIMINATION

Discrimination consists of actions against a group of people. Discrimination can be based on age, religion, health and other indicators.

### COLOUR-BLINDNESS

Colour-blindness is when people say they 'don't see colour', so therefore they can't be racist. This attitude denies the lived experiences of people who experience racism, and helps to uphold white supremacy.

### MICROAGGRESSION

Microaggressions are defined as the everyday, subtle - intentional and often unintentional - interactions or behaviours that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalised groups. For example, commenting on how well an Asian American speaks English.

### RACIAL PROFILING

Racial or ethnic profiling is the act of suspecting or targeting a person on the basis of assumed characteristics or behaviour of a racial or ethnic group, rather than on individual suspicion.

was a discriminatory practice that saw the Federal Housing Administration put several services out of reach for certain people. This included outlining so-called 'risky' neighbourhoods - where predominantly Black and Latino people lived - on maps, to discourage mortgage lenders from investing there.

The Fair Housing Act of 1968 explicitly prohibited this type of racial discrimination, but it was difficult to entirely stamp out. In 2018, an investigation by the Center for Responsible Lending found that Black, Latino and Asian applicants were turned away for loans at a higher rate than whites in many US cities.

In 2020, a travelling exhibit called *Undesign the Redline* showed how the policy paved the way for urban decay and white flight in the 1960s and '70s, mass incarceration in the '80s and '90s, the foreclosure crisis of the 2000s, and the gentrification of today - and how it has prevented African American communities from building generational wealth.

We can see institutional racism at work in many different structures, all over the world. It is clear in healthcare, particularly in maternal mortality figures. Recent reports in Australia show incidences of maternal death in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women are more than three times as high as that for non-Indigenous women. The figures are similar in the US, and a 2019 MBRRACE-UK report shows that Black women in the UK are *five times* more likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth than white women.

Since the murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the rise in global anti-racist movements such as Black Lives Matter, the general public has been reminded of the systemic racism within our criminal justice systems. In 2016, community activist Raull Santiago explained how in Brazil, a person is killed several times:

"First, they are killed by the actual bullet. Then, they are killed by the media narrative, which parrots the police version of events by describing that person as a criminal and assassinating their reputation. And finally, they are killed by the legal systems that fail to hold perpetrators accountable."

#### How do we feel when we're told we've done something racist?

Even if we know about unconscious bias, we know about systemic racism, we even understand some of the psychological theories behind our innate prejudices - if we're actually told we're being racist, we can still be reactive or defensive. This can make the experience even more traumatic for the person affected by the racism in the first place. This could be partly because of shame.

Dr Brené Brown is a research professor, known for studying courage, vulnerability,

shame and empathy. In her 2020 episode of the 'Unlocking Us' podcast, *Brené on Shame and Accountability*, she examines the role that shame plays in anti-racism work and the resistance to it.

Dr Brown talks about how shame is a 'fear of disconnection' and something we all experience, often daily. It's also completely logical to avoid feeling shame. Not only is it traumatic to experience, research also shows high levels of shame are associated with poor mental health.

From a social psychology perspective, Dr Keon West explains why shame can be a useful emotion in every society: 'If there's something we disapprove of, we attach



## 4 TIPS FROM DR BRENÉ BROWN

When we're held accountable for racism, we can go into fight-or-flight mode. Here are tips to overcome that, from *Brené on Shame and Accountability*\*:

### GET YOUR THINKING BRAIN BACK

Helpful mantra: "I am here to get it right, I am not here to be right."  
Brené's motto: "Don't talk, text or type" until you're thinking clearly.

### CREATE A 'BLIND SPOT' WARNING ĀSTEM

If you're held accountable for racism, recognise potential 'blind spots' in your attitudes and responses. "One of the [blind spot indicators] that I look for in my life, is when I start thinking, 'This has gone too far now'. Indicator light: What's gone too far? Think through it."

### AVOID 'ARMOURING-UP'

Getting defensive can be an automatic response, but it isn't constructive. "The greatest barrier to courage is armour, is how we self-protect when we're afraid. It is the same armouring-up process that we use when we're held accountable for racism and we feel shame."

### TAKE ACTION

"What am I going to do differently? How am I going to think about the language that I'm using?" Action is probably the best cure for the shame we experience around accountability."

\*Quotes have been edited for brevity and clarity. Find the podcast and full transcript at [brenebrown.com](https://www.brenebrown.com)

shame to it, and people stop doing it. That's the function of it," he explains.

It can be misused, but it can also be used well. We shame people who are predatory towards other people, we shame people who steal, we shame people who vandalise property... and this is important because otherwise people keep doing those things.

"I think it's an important emotion that *has* to be part of anti-racism work. And not everyone will always be on side, just like not everyone will always agree that they shouldn't steal from you. Personal feelings are one thing, but societal feelings are another and they are important."

#### So, what can we do to try to change our mindsets?

Having an increased awareness of some of the psychological considerations of racism and anti-racism work can be a constructive first step towards changing things. It's important to be able to acknowledge the racist systems in place and actively work against them, as Dr West explains:

"You don't have to be completely free of racism to start on anti-racism work, because if you had to do that, very few people would ever be able to do it. But you just have to be able to recognise the system for what it is and then say, I can do *this thing* to *this part* of it to help reduce the effects of that system. And if you can do that, then you're being anti-racist, and if you don't do that then you're being collaborative with the system."

This includes recognising the systems at work within ourselves and the part we, sometimes unconsciously, play in upholding societal racial inequalities.

Dr West also speaks about how it is far more useful to focus on what's *happened*, than on the identity or soul of the person.

"It's not necessarily helpful to draw sharp dividing lines. Almost everyone has done racist things at some point, and so drawing sharp dividing lines between the racists and the non-racist people is less helpful than one might imagine. If you get caught up in arguing about the *soul* of the person, you can waste a lot of time. But you can show that the specific thing someone did was racist, whether their soul is racist or not. And that's really important."

#### What needs to be done on a societal level?

Unconscious bias training has become a popular tool in anti-racism work. It hit the headlines in 2018 when Starbucks closed 8,000 branches across the US to implement the training, after an employee in one of its Philadelphia stores called the police on two Black men who had simply sat down.

## “IT'S IMPORTANT TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE RACIST SYSTEMS IN PLACE AND ACTIVELY WORK AGAINST THEM”

"I think unconscious bias training is incredibly important," says Dr West, "but we shouldn't pretend that it's more important than changing the structures of society." He goes on to elaborate:

"The science doesn't show that it's all unconscious - there's quite a lot of *conscious* bias. Quite a lot of bias is presented in a way that is subtle, or that is excused, or below a certain threshold so that whoever's doing it won't get in trouble, but that's not the same as unconscious."

In terms of systemic racism, Dr West talks about how we need to be willing to take a broader, braver approach to solving the problem:

"Throughout history, humans have done a lot of *aggressive* discrimination,

followed by 'we're going to stop now'. For example, in the UK, they enslaved people for 400 years, and when they stopped they didn't say 'here's 400 years of back pay', they actually said to the owners 'here's a bunch of money, we're sorry for taking your property away'.

"We have to start taking a good hard look at what's happened and say 'we had an active policy to do this specific thing at this time, we need an active policy to undo all the stuff that we did before'. We did this stuff and we did it *actively* and *clearly*, so we need to have a space where we're *undoing* that stuff *just as* actively and *just as* clearly." ■

\*Interview quotes have been edited for brevity and clarity\*

