

## Being "Color Blind" Doesn't Make You Not Racist—In Fact, It Can Mean the Opposite

*Experts say the belief makes improving things harder.*

Oprah Magazine

June 12, 2020

The international protests over the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery have just begun to spark positive change, pressuring states from Minnesota to California to rethink how they'll fund law enforcement and address [police brutality](#) in the future. The long-overdue outcry over the ways Black Americans have been mistreated, underserved, [and underpaid](#) has also effectively strong-armed many non-Black people into having tough conversations about race and racial inequality in the U.S.—often, [for the very first time in their lives](#).

Unfortunately, however, I can say firsthand that some people still *really* don't want to talk about it. At all. They'll be the first to tell you they don't have a racist bone in their body, and they don't care if you're white, black, purple, or blue, etc. In fact, they say, they're "color blind"—meaning, they don't even *see* race. And that refusal to see it often goes hand-in-hand with an urgent desire to stop discussing racial disparities as soon as possible.

The current Facebook debates amongst my 40-something, overwhelmingly-white former classmates in the Connecticut suburb that I lived in as a teen are, to put it mildly, a roiling cesspool of feelings. Insults are hurled, former crushes de-friended. One woman's patient explanation of how the ["redlining" housing policies](#) of the 1930s have had lasting effects on economic inequality is rebuffed with angry insinuations that the concept of white privilege is actually "reverse racism."

And then one day, to my pleasant surprise, [I saw an article](#) about how 1,100 people in my old hometown gathered for a Black Lives Matter rally on the town green. This peaceful show of support caused several longtime white male residents to absolutely lose their minds...at least online.

The ignorance in some of my former classmates' posts didn't shock me; as a white [Latinx woman](#) who doesn't "look Puerto Rican," plenty of people felt safe making ugly remarks in my company throughout the five years I lived there. What *did* surprise me was how quickly those who identified as color blind became panicked—or even furious—when their neighbors started wondering whether racism had been living in their own backyards (and town greens) this whole time.

To better understand how color blindness connects to bias—and counter-intuitively helps to uphold racism instead of rendering it powerless—I spoke to two people who literally wrote the book on the subject: Sociologists Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, author of [Racism without Racists](#), and Meghan Burke, author of [Colorblind Racism](#).

### **The concept of color blindness flourished after the civil rights movement.**

"I'm not the first one to say this, but for many white folks, being labeled racist is among their worst fears," Burke says. "And as we're continuing to learn in this country, for many people of color, Black folks in particular, their greatest fear is not surviving an interaction with a police officer. So we're really talking about very different worlds of experience."

Burke says the roots of color blind racism were largely well-intentioned. "It borrows right from that last third of [Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech](#), where he says that he wants people to see his kids for the content of their character, not the color of their skin. So I think it's easy for a lot of well-meaning white folks to hear that and say, 'Well, gosh, okay. Yeah. I *don't* want that to be the primary lens that I use to judge people's character."

### **Colorblindness denies the lived experiences of other people.**

In order to understand how colorblindness winds up denying the lived experiences of other people, Burke continues, "it's also important to get clarity about what is meant by 'racism,' and some of the unintended harm that a colorblind framework can cause." To do *that* first requires a basic understanding of how Americans, and particularly white Americans, think about racism, and the big way sociologists believe that's evolved over the past 150 years.

From the late 1800s to the mid 1960s, the system of racial segregation and oppression known as [Jim Crow](#) made it illegal for Black Americans to have the same social and economic rights as white Americans. When we [see photos](#) of the Black students who comprised the [Little Rock Nine](#) face down hoards of angry white people just to go to school, no one debates what that is: Blatant hate. "The practices of domination were in your face. The ideology was overt," says Bonilla-Silva. After the civil rights movement of the 1960s brought some positive change, he says, those who weren't directly impacted in the years that followed (such as those in suburban white communities) could easily choose to believe that America's big, ugly racist period was a thing of the past.

Pointing to 40 years of data, Bonilla-Silva says that racism instead became embedded in what he calls "now you see it, now you don't-type practices" that are harder to call out—which, conveniently, makes it tougher to pin them squarely on discrimination. Bonilla-Silva uses the example of a realtor who's been told they can't talk about race. If a person of color such as himself tells that realtor, "Hey, I want to live in a mixed neighborhood," the response might be, "Hey, don't talk about that! I don't see race, we're all humans." Instead, "[we 'steer' people into different neighborhoods](#)—a Black neighborhood, a Latino neighborhood, a white neighborhood. So you don't need to talk about race to produce racialized outcomes."

### **"Not seeing" race denies systemic racism.**

As everyone is steered into unofficially-segregated parts of a city or town, it can be easy for those in white-majority communities to never think about the laws, zoning, and social policies that promote gaps in education and wealth equality along racial lines—particularly if they're only interacting with those who look like them, and who share similar world views. Burke says the wish to believe that everybody has an equal shot at success is deeply tied to our collective American belief in "individualism," or the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant. In the individualist way of thinking, problems like poverty and health problems are cast as personal moral failings that can be overcome, not symptoms of a larger broken system.

Individualist thinking also often blames anti-Black violence, such as police brutality, on a villainous person—such as Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd. "In that way of thinking,

the bigger problem is the bad actor," Bonilla-Silva says. "And yes, there are bad actors and bad cops. But as a system, racism doesn't depend on bad people to remain in place."

He also asserts that even police violence enacted by Black law enforcement, such as the [officers arrested](#) for tasing two Atlanta college students during a May protest, doesn't mean the racial politics of police brutality aren't real. "Systemic racism can be enacted and performed by Black bodies and brown bodies," says Bonilla-Silva.

### **So how can people move away from color blind thinking?**

If you're someone who was raised to "not see color," and you'd like to become actively anti-racist instead, first accept that a major shift in thinking won't happen overnight. One objective is to move away from thinking of racism solely as views and acts committed at the individual level, and instead a system of moving parts. Burke says that ongoing self-examination is crucial, and so is believing others' painful life experiences instead of minimizing them to maintain your comfort. "I still honor this process. Trying to do this self interrogation to really think about how I could do better," says Burke. "And I think we have to listen to the voices of Black folks, other people of color, and other marginalized folks broadly in all of our spaces."

You can also dive into the wealth of [great podcasts](#) and [books about race](#) in America. (Realizing that I don't read enough work by Black authors has been part of my own recent self-examination.) Resist the urge to [ask a Black person in your life to explain things](#), or worse, expect them to soothe any guilt you may be feeling. I recently heard one anti-racism advocate recommended buddying up with a fellow non-Black friend, keeping a text thread for sharing questions and resources to educate each other.

What if you're already on board with doing the work, but want to win your frustrating Facebook "friends" over? (Ahem.) That typically requires a big time investment, Burke says, with a varying payoff. "When I was on it, I tried to thoughtfully engage in the right moment with the right person, with the right issue to say, 'Let's unpack this a little bit.' And sometimes people would say that that was effective for them. But boy, it takes time."

In other words, you need to have ongoing Facebook conversations, not just one. "There's no perfect post, no one answer. It has to be two people who are really having a conversation. And even then, it's what people do after that conversation that matters."

"Every time that someone says, 'I'm color blind,' you have to tell them, 'okay, so you have a racially integrated life? You live in a mixed neighborhood? And then they may say, 'well, my neighborhood is...it's just a regular neighborhood,' says Bonilla-Silva. 'You mean white then, again?' And then they just get totally discombobulated, cannot articulate the word. Yeah. And then you keep pressing yet to show that their colorblindness is just a set of rules—because in truth, their lifestyle is often totally white neighborhoods, friends, and associations."

As for me, I'll continue to pipe up on Facebook, in what I now refer to as "the Hometown Dialogues." But talking with Bonilla-Silva and Burke has made me think my limited free time is best spent on more direct action and self-education instead. After all, I was raised to be color blind too, and discarding that way of

thinking means continually engaging with Black people and Black culture in highly imperfect ways. I can't do that part for other white people. I can only help us fumble forward together.

"It's like we can't get out of our own way," Burke says. "It's similar to what Robin D'Angelo has talked about in her book, [White Fragility](#). It all becomes this thing where the comforts and the privileges of white folks get protected—instead of Black lives."

## **11 Terms You Should Know to Better Understand Structural Racism**

Aspen Institute

July 11, 2016

Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been part of the social, economic, and political systems in which we all exist. It is part of America's past and its present.

This glossary describes terms related to structural racism and terms used to promote racial equity analysis. It was created by the Aspen Institute Roundtable on Community Change, a group that worked with leading innovators to produce strong and reliable frameworks for successful and sustainable community change and development.

### **Structural Racism:**

A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to perpetuate racial group inequity. It identifies dimensions of our history and culture that have allowed privileges associated with "whiteness" and disadvantages associated with "color" to endure and adapt over time. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice. Instead it has been a feature of the social, economic and political systems in which we all exist.

### **Racial Equity:**

Racial equity refers to what a genuinely non-racist society would look like. In a racially equitable society, the distribution of society's benefits and burdens would not be skewed by race. In other words, racial equity would be a reality in which a person is no more or less likely to experience society's benefits or burdens just because of the color of their skin. This is in contrast to the current state of affairs in which a person of color is more likely to live in poverty, be imprisoned, drop out of high school, be unemployed and experience poor health outcomes like diabetes, heart disease, depression and other potentially fatal diseases. Racial equity holds society to a higher standard. It demands that we pay attention not just to individual-level discrimination, but to overall social outcomes.

### **Systemic Racism:**

In many ways "systemic racism" and "structural racism" are synonymous. If there is a difference between the terms, it can be said to exist in the fact that a structural racism analysis pays more attention to the historical, cultural and social psychological aspects of our currently racialized society.

### **White Privilege:**

White privilege, or "historically accumulated white privilege," as we have come to call it, refers to whites' historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, decent jobs and liveable wages, homeownership, retirement benefits, wealth and so on. The following quotation from a publication by Peggy Macintosh can be helpful in understanding what is meant by white privilege: "As a white person I had been taught about racism that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage. . . White privilege is an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in every day, but about which I

was meant to remain oblivious.” (Source: Peggy Macintosh, “Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” excerpted from *Working Paper #189 White Privilege and Male Privilege a Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies*. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for the Study of Women (1989).)

### **Institutional Racism:**

Institutional racism refers to the policies and practices within and across institutions that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favor, or put a racial group at a disadvantage. Poignant examples of institutional racism can be found in school disciplinary policies in which students of color are punished at much higher rates than their white counterparts, in the criminal justice system, and within many employment sectors in which day-to-day operations, as well as hiring and firing practices can significantly disadvantage workers of color.

### **Individual Racism:**

Individual racism can include face-to-face or covert actions toward a person that intentionally express prejudice, hate or bias based on race.

### **Diversity:**

Diversity has come to refer to the various backgrounds and races that comprise a community, nation or other grouping. In many cases the term diversity does not just acknowledge the existence of diversity of background, race, gender, religion, sexual orientation and so on, but implies an appreciation of these differences. The structural racism perspective can be distinguished from a diversity perspective in that structural racism takes direct account of the striking disparities in well-being and opportunity areas that come along with being a member of a particular group and works to identify ways in which these disparities can be eliminated.

### **Ethnicity:**

Ethnicity refers to the social characteristics that people may have in common, such as language, religion, regional background, culture, foods, etc. Ethnicity is revealed by the traditions one follows, a person’s native language, and so on. Race, on the other hand, describes categories assigned to demographic groups based mostly on observable physical characteristics, like skin color, hair texture and eye shape.

### **Cultural Representations:**

Cultural representations refer to popular stereotypes, images, frames and narratives that are socialized and reinforced by media, language and other forms of mass communication and “common sense.” Cultural representations can be positive or negative, but from the perspective of the dismantling structural racism analysis, too often cultural representations depict people of color in ways that are dehumanizing, perpetuate inaccurate stereotypes, and have the overall effect of allowing unfair treatment within the society as a whole to seem fair, or ‘natural.’

### **National Values:**

National values are behaviors and characteristics that we as members of a society are taught to value and enact. Fairness, equal treatment, individual responsibility, and meritocracy are examples of some key national values in the United States. When looking at national values through a structural racism

lens, however, we can see that there are certain values that have allowed structural racism to exist in ways that are hard to detect. This is because these national values are referred to in ways that ignore historical realities. Two examples of such national values are 'personal responsibility' and 'individualism,' which convey the idea that people control their fates regardless of social position, and that individual behaviors and choices alone determine material outcomes.

**Progress & Retrenchment:**

This term refers to the pattern in which progress is made through the passage of legislation, court rulings and other formal mechanisms that aim to promote racial equality. *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Fair Housing Act are two prime examples of such progress. But retrenchment refers to the ways in which this progress is very often challenged, neutralized or undermined. In many cases after a measure is enacted that can be counted as progress, significant backlashes—retrenchment—develop in key public policy areas. Some examples include the gradual erosion of affirmative action programs, practices among real estate professionals that maintain segregated neighborhoods, and failure on the part of local governments to enforce equity oriented policies such as inclusionary zoning laws.

## Explainer: what is systemic racism and institutional racism?

The Conversation

February 4, 2020

At the 2020 BAFTA awards, Joaquin Phoenix [called out systemic racism](#) in the film industry in his acceptance speech for leading actor.

He said:

*I think that we send a very clear message to people of colour that you're not welcome here. I think that's the message that we're sending to people that have contributed so much to our medium and our industry and in ways that we benefit from. [...]*

*I think it's more than just having sets that are multicultural. We have to do really the hard work to truly understand systemic racism.*

“Systemic racism”, or “institutional racism”, refers to how ideas of white superiority are captured in everyday thinking at a [systems level](#): taking in the big picture of how society operates, rather than looking at one-on-one interactions.

These systems can include laws and regulations, but also unquestioned social systems. Systemic racism can stem from [education, hiring practices or access](#).

In the case of Phoenix at the BAFTAs, he isn't calling out the racist actions of individuals, but rather the way white is [considered the default](#) at every level of the film industry.

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton first wrote about the concept in their 1967 book [Black Power: The Politics of Liberation](#).

They wrote:

*When a black family moves into a home in a white neighborhood and is stoned, burned or routed out, they are victims of an overt act of individual racism which most people will condemn. But it is institutional racism that keeps black people locked in dilapidated slum tenements, subject to the daily prey of exploitative slumlords, merchants, loan sharks and discriminatory real estate agents. The society either pretends it does not know of this latter situation, or is in fact incapable of doing anything meaningful about it.*

### Invisible systems

Systemic racism assumes white superiority individually, ideologically and institutionally. The assumption of superiority can pervade thinking consciously and unconsciously.



One most obvious example is [apartheid](#), but even with anti-discrimination laws, systemic racism continues.

Individuals may not see themselves as racist, but they can still benefit from systems that privilege white faces and voices.

Anti-racism activist Peggy McIntosh popularised the understanding of the systemic nature of racism with her famous "[invisible knapsack](#)" quiz looking at white privilege.

The quiz asks you to count how many statements you agree with, for items such as:

- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented
- I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race
- I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.

The statements highlight taken-for-granted privileges, and enable people to understand how people of colour may experience society differently.

### **Cultures of discrimination**

Under systemic racism, systems of education, government and the media celebrate and reward some cultures over others.

In employment, names can influence employment opportunities. A [Harvard study found](#) job candidates were more likely to get an interview when they "whitened" their name.

Only 10% of black candidates got interview offers when their race could be implied by their resume, but 25% got offers when their resumes were whitened. And 21% of Asian candidates got interview offers with whitened resumes, up from 11.5%.

Systemic racism shows itself in who is disproportionately impacted by our justice system. In Australia, Indigenous people make up 2% of the Australian population, but 28% of the adult prison population.

A study into how systemic racism impacts this [over-representation](#) in Victoria named factors such as over-policing in Aboriginal communities, the financial hardship of bail, and increased rates of drug and alcohol use.

Australia's literature, theatres and art galleries are all [disproportionately white](#), with less than 10% of artistic directors from culturally diverse backgrounds.

### **A way forward**

Systemic racism damages lives, restricting access and capacity for contribution.

It damages the ethical society we aspire to create.

When white people scoop all the awards, it reinforces a message that other cultures are just not quite good enough.

Public advocacy is critical. Speaking up is essential.

Racism is more than an individual issue. When systemic injustices remain unspoken or accepted, an unethical white privilege is fostered. When individuals and groups point out systemic injustices and inequities, the dominant culture is made accountable.

Find out if your children's school curriculum engages with Indigenous and multicultural perspectives. Question if your university course on Australian literature omits Aboriginal authors. Watch films and read books by artists who don't look like you.

As Phoenix put it in his speech:

*I'm part of the problem. [...] I think it is the obligation of the people that have created and perpetuate and benefit from a system of oppression to be the ones that dismantle it. That's on us.*

Understanding systemic racism is important. To identify these systemic privileges enables us to embrace the point of view of people whose cultures are silenced or minimised.

When we question systemic racism, worth is shared and ideas grow.

## **“What’s ‘Colorism’?”**

Teaching Tolerance

Fall 2015

When I began teaching in Boston, I was struck by how often students of color referred to each other as “light-skinned” or “dark-skinned.” Almost daily, I witnessed high school students identify, categorize and stereotype their peers based on skin tone. Having grown up African American in Louisiana, I was used to white people’s ideas of white superiority and even those “colorstruck” black people who preferred lighter skin. But I did not expect that so many young people of diverse ethnicities—including Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Cape Verdeans—would actively engage in everyday forms of skin-color bias. As one teacher in one classroom, what was I to do?

Any response to this question is complicated due to the deep legacy and influence of skin-color preference in the United States and in other parts of the world. Within-group and between-group prejudice in favor of lighter skin color—what feminist author Alice Walker calls “colorism”—is a global cultural practice. Emerging throughout European colonial and imperial history, colorism is prevalent in countries as distant as Brazil and India. Its legacy is evident in forums as public as the television and movie industries, which prefer to cast light-skinned people of color, and as private as the internalized thoughts of some Latino, South-Asian or black parents who hope their babies grow up light-skinned so their lives will be “just a little bit easier.”

It makes sense that teenagers—who are working out their own identities on a day-to-day basis—also engage in color-conscious discourse. But how do young people negotiate such powerful stereotypes, particularly when many of the contributing elements are out of their control?

### **Research Shows ...**

Skin-color bias affects perceptions and interactions in ways that are at once subtle and profound. Since Kenneth and Mamie Clark’s famous doll study of the 1950s, researchers have known that young people of color are profoundly aware of our nation’s disdain for all that is dark. Color-conscious banter between students reflects unconscious *and* unspoken biases—otherwise called implicit biases—that favor lighter skin.

A more modern example of research on colorism comes from Eddie Fergus, an assistant professor of education at New York University who conducted a study on Latino high school males. Fergus found that Mexican and Puerto Rican males with white-looking skin are perceived as white and sometimes treated more favorably, while boys of the same ethnicity who had darker complexions are perceived as black and often experience discrimination. Not only did the boys in the study navigate the world as Mexican and Puerto Rican, but each navigated different racial expectations based on external reactions to their appearances. Despite being close or even related, people of the same ethnicity face different expectations, different realities and—potentially—different educational and economic outcomes, solely based on their skin color.

Fergus’ findings are not unique. Implicit bias related to skin color—within and between racial groups—is so sweeping that, until relatively recently, it has remained largely unquestioned and unexamined. And

such bias is not just a failure of adulthood. Developmental psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer found in a [CNN-commissioned pilot study of skin-color bias among U.S. children](#) that white children attribute positive traits to lighter skin and negative traits to darker skin, and—while black children also show some racial bias toward whiteness—white children in particular hold on to these prejudices more strongly as they grow older. “Our children are always mirrors,” says Spencer in a CNN broadcast. “And what we put out there, kids report back. ... We are still living in a society where dark things are devalued and light things are valued.”

The association of dark skin with criminality has become one of the most deep-seated stereotypes in American society, many social scientists say. Multiple studies have shown that dark-skinned people are perceived to be more suspicious, more likely to misbehave and more likely to commit crimes.

Recent research by psychologist Phillip Goff and his colleagues at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) found that police officers routinely overestimate the ages of black and Latino children, but not white children. Participants in the study estimated black boys as young as 10 to be an average of four and a half years older than they actually were. What’s more, the participants in the study who reported the most dehumanizing ideas about black individuals (viewing them as nonhuman and apelike) also overestimated black children’s ages to the largest extent, were more likely to presume black children were guilty and were more likely to support the use of force against them.

### **Why Care About Colorism?**

What relevance do these studies hold for educators? First, they force the realization that implicit bias is pervasive and must be examined if we are to serve students of all skin colors equally well. Jerry Kang, a law professor at UCLA, notes that teachers with unchecked implicit biases are likely to interpret student behavior and performance through the prism of stereotypes that can have long-term effects on how students see themselves and on their opportunities. “Educators, like lawyers and judges, probably assume that they don’t have bias because they chose to enter a profession helping others,” he says. “But whatever assumptions others have, teachers also have.” Fergus describes moments in which teachers will experience “color triggers” when talking with students about race-related topics, behaviors and ideologies. Without self-reflection and acknowledgement of bias, these triggers can cause educators to react in ways that are counterproductive to anti-racist classroom discourse.

Another reason schools should pay attention to the research on colorism? It offers the opportunity to launch necessary conversations. “My principal and just about all my colleagues are afraid to talk about race at all or how our interactions with students may differ based on how we see them,” says Katherine\*, a white teacher at an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York. Adds her colleague Zack\*, “There are many problematic things—interactions with students and blatant statements—that simply go unchecked.” Both educators acknowledge that the leadership at their school keeps the conversation focused on “academic achievement,” with no acknowledgement of the racialized discipline and achievement patterns they continue to witness. In order to sustain themselves, they support each other through critical research-driven discussions about justice, race and teaching and learning.

These types of investigations and conversations also help teachers avoid the pitfalls of colorblindness, which can be a major obstacle in redressing institutional and internalized racism. While many people,

educators included, do not want to talk about who does and does not benefit in a system that is supposed to be “equal,” the false colorblind premise that underpins the rhetoric of equality is not lost on many young people. Jasper\*, an Asian-American teacher in Sacramento, observes that his overwhelmingly black middle school students are very aware that their teachers treat them slightly differently. “Students say that the afterschool teachers, who happen to be black, prefer the lighter-skinned students,” he says, “which is funny because some of our strongest students are dark-skinned.” To Jasper, this revelation shows that moving beyond colorblindness—and *colorism* blindness—is not simply about white people learning about the experiences of people of color. “It’s about how each of us, regardless of our own color, owns up to our own bias[es] and then does some thing about it,” he says.

### **Suggestions for Teachers**

Returning to the question I have tried to answer for myself over the years: What does one teacher in one classroom do to help address an issue as pervasive as colorism? Staying current on the research related to colorism and implicit bias is an important first step. You can also do what Jasper does: Pose questions about color, status and bias to your students. “When I asked students to think about the famous black women they know, and if they are light-skinned, they smile,” he chuckles. “They haven’t articulated or thought about these issues as deeply. They collect the data of their experience, but have not come up with an hypothesis as 12-year-olds.” Or, you can do what the Brooklyn teachers have done by building a community of critically minded teachers in and beyond your school.

Teachers may not be able to control what happens within their institutions, but they can facilitate critical conversations within their classrooms and professional learning communities. Perhaps in doing this work, a colleague or two may begin to see—and ideally talk about—colorism.

*\*Teachers' names have been changed.*