

RACISM

There are at least three different racist ideologies that were developed in different historic contexts and still coexist in today's society.

1.

Classical or biological racism: This conception of racism was developed in the 18th and 19th centuries based on the scientific theories of the time, which differentiated and ranked the peoples of the world according to their physical attributes. The term “racial” is used to refer to ethnic groups. This ideology, which was constructed at the same time that colonization was occurring, opposed racial intermixing. Even though this notion of biological differences between groups has been debunked by scientific advances, it lingers on in today's discourse and its arguments are still to be found sprinkled through certain political discourse (e.g. the belief that some athletes naturally perform better in certain sports simply because of the colour of their skin).

2.

Racial inferiorization : This conception of racism, while not necessarily based on race, considers that certain groups of human beings are inferior to others. This would justify, for example, exploiting them as factory workers in the context of industrial revolution or taking away their lands in the context of colonization (e.g. the paternalistic approach to First Nations peoples in the Indian Act, which treated them as children unable to take care of themselves; this resulted in their displacement, such as that of the Plains Cree for the expansion of the Canadian railroad, or of workers who had to live in slums near factories, without services).

3.

Differentialist racism: This conception of racism emerged along with the decolonization movements, which resulted in South-North migrations and brought about a sort of neoracism based on culture struggles. This ideology also opposes racial intermixing, since it is perceived as a threat to culture, values, etc. (e.g. discourse opposing immigration from countries where values are considered to be contrary to and irreconcilable with those of the host country; these immigrants or groups are said to threaten our way of life; these immigrants want to impose their values and religion, and threaten equality between men and women).

MANIFESTATIONS OF RACISM

STEREOTYPES/PREJUDICES

A **stereotype** results from a process of categorization, creating an image based on general attributes that describe certain situations or people. Stereotype content is therefore a preconceived, simplistic image that is used to represent the whole. For example, “men like to watch sports and women like romantic movies” is a stereotype.

A **prejudice** is a preconceived notion that conveys emotional reactions, mostly negative, to specific situations or people. For example, “men do not make very good parents because they cannot create emotional bonds with their children” and “women are not good managers because they are too emotional” are prejudices.

Creating and using stereotypes and prejudices are an inevitable part of living in society, insofar as human beings need to simplify, classify and categorize information in order to make sense of the world and their surroundings. This becomes a problem when stereotypes and prejudices lead to actions that are not based on equal treatment or equity for all and may therefore lead to discrimination, which can have serious repercussions.

Stereotypes and prejudices are often amplified by the tendency to, on the one hand, accentuate inter-group differences (the “us-them” dichotomy) and, on the other, to minimize intra-group differences (“they’re all the same”).

It is important, therefore, to become aware of our prejudices and take stock of how they influence processes. We can then learn to distance ourselves from these prejudices by taking a critical look at them and their repercussions.



DISCOURSE

Racism manifests itself in discourse, which in turn spreads and strengthens stereotypes, and may even, in extreme cases, make calls for action that are coloured by stereotypes and prejudices. The discourse can be private, between friends for instance, or public, in the print media, on social media or on the radio. These different communication vehicles have played a pivotal role in most genocides. (See the section below on the forms of racist discourse.)

DISCRIMINATION

When stereotypes and prejudices influence social behaviour and violate the rights of those who are victimized, that is discrimination. Discrimination can occur on different levels, from access to jobs or housing to how people are represented in the media or the political arena. Although certain “positive discrimination” practices are now accepted by society as a way to make amends for unequal treatment associated with prejudices—for example, we know that visible minorities are underrepresented in certain lines of work, so they are given certain advantages in order to get those jobs—discrimination very often remains unconscious and unrecognized. It is therefore difficult to identify and eradicate. (For more information, see the information sheet on discrimination.)

SEGREGATION

Ethno-racial segregation, or isolating people based on their physical or cultural attributes, is a form of discrimination and racism. Using quantifiable data, it dictates where people can live and work based on their belonging in a specific ethno-racial group. This building of physical or psychological barriers between social groups feeds discrimination and social inequalities. Prime examples are apartheid in South Africa and official segregation in the United States during at least the first half of the 20th century. The creation of ghettos is another example of segregation.

SLAVERY

Reducing people to slavery means turning them into goods or possessions. Stereotyping, segregation, dehumanization and discrimination help create a social hierarchy of groups of humans and make slavery possible. Racist ideologies can be seen as grounds for justifying the slave trade because the dominant groups or those in a position of authority feel that they have the right to control the lives and bodies of members of other groups. There are many instances of slavery in the history of humankind, and it still exists in various parts of the world. The enslavement of Blacks and Indigenous people from the 17th to the 19th century in Canada is but one example.

GENOCIDE

In extreme cases, racism leads to genocide. In fact, all manifestations of racism contribute to dehumanizing the victims in the eyes of the majority or dominant group. If they are no longer considered human, it becomes easier to subject them to discriminatory measures and even plan to murder them.

EXPRESSION OF RACISM IN DISCOURSE

It is possible to list the manifestations of racism in discourse and to place them on a continuum of racism whose successive levels very often form a spiral.

These arguments, known as fallacies, may be used in a social debate. Even though fallacies are never valid, they are not always racist. For example, saying that students never study except to pass an examination is a gross overgeneralization. It becomes racist when it is based on stereotypes or prejudices associated with one or more forms of racism—for example, saying that Asian students never study except to pass an examination.



Here are some examples of fallacies that allow racist discourse.

NEGATIVE DIFFERENTIALISM

When the private or public discourse categorizes groups using the “them” and “us” dichotomy, “us” expresses normality, i.e. the way things should be, while “them” represents a group that is fundamentally different, substandard, and therefore potentially dangerous to “us.”

SUBORDINATION/INFERIORIZATION OF THE OTHER

In racist discourse, considering the Others to be different and substandard quickly results in considering them to be inferior. It is then said that this group’s values or customs are backward, barbaric, impure, etc.

GENERALIZATION OF AN ENTIRE GROUP

Generalization occurs when a certain behaviour or ideas are attributed to all members of a group. One hears statements such as “Muslims are like this or like that” or “all Jews are wealthy”, etc.

SELF-VICTIMIZATION

At this stage of racist discourse, the dominant group declares itself to be a victim of the Others or in danger. This is where we find discourse that degrades other groups (e.g. “welfare recipients take advantage of us”) or that makes the Others scapegoats by accusing them of being responsible for economic or political problems.

CATASTROPHISM

In the discourse, the idea is conveyed that action is urgently required or else the dominant culture or values will be undermined, or even disappear. Alarmist discourse calling for the protection of the French language in Québec to avoid the decline of a national identity can sometimes, and among other examples, fall into this category.

DEMONIZATION OF THE OTHER

The discourse implies that the Others actively seek and work to destroy the culture and values of the dominant society. To say that some immigrants come to our country to impose their way of life on us is an example of this type of fallacy.

EXPULSION

Racist discourse thus moves very quickly into gathering together and incorporating arguments justifying the need to expel the Others from society. This can be physical, like deportation, or psychological and symbolic, such as denying people access to jobs or certain places (e.g. in the 1930s, in Manitoba, Jews were banned from accessing certain beaches).

POLITICAL LEGITIMIZATION (HIGH-LEVEL RACISM)

Political legitimization occurs when politicians take up the above-mentioned arguments and transform them into legislation or use them to make and justify their decisions (e.g. the January 27, 2017, executive order under the Trump administration temporarily banning all refugees and nationals of seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States, to ensure the safety of the U.S. population).

For more information:

To learn more about the history of slavery in Canada, see: <http://>

To learn more about the levels of racism, see M. Potvin, "The Reasonable Accommodations Crisis in Quebec: Racializing Rhetorical Devices in Media and Social Discourse", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, no. 50 (2014) : 1-25.

J. Sanders and al., "A Framework for Anti-Racism Publication in Palliative Care: Structures, Processes, and Outcomes", *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management* 63, no. 3 (2022): 337-343.