



## Equity vs. Equality and Other Racial Justice Definitions

Posted August 24, 2020, By the Annie E. Casey Foundation

# Equity vs. Equality and Other Racial Justice Definitions

Often, race-focused conversations derail because people are using the same terms in different ways. One of the challenges of communicating effectively about race is to move people from the narrow and individualized definition of racism to a more comprehensive and systemic awareness.

To illuminate racism, we need to “name it, frame it and explain it.”

Establishing a shared language to present data, describe conditions and outcomes and identify root causes of inequities serves an important function. A common language creates a narrative that makes it easier to communicate the commitment to racial equity, both internally and externally, and it creates a platform for coordinated work toward equitable outcomes.

The following are definitions of core concepts that can help groups develop a shared language for racial equity and inclusion:

## Definitions and core concepts

### Equity

Equity is defined as “the state, quality or ideal of being just, impartial and fair.” The concept of equity is synonymous with fairness and justice. It is helpful to think of equity as not simply a desired state of affairs or a lofty value. To be achieved and sustained, equity needs to be thought of as a structural and systemic concept.

### Equity vs. Equality

Equity involves trying to understand and give people what they need to enjoy full, healthy lives. Equality, in contrast, aims to ensure that everyone gets the same things in order to enjoy full, healthy lives. Like equity, equality aims to promote fairness and justice, but it can only work if everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things.

### Systemic Equity

Systemic equity is a complex combination of interrelated elements consciously designed to create, support and sustain social justice. It is a dynamic process that reinforces and replicates equitable ideas, power, resources, strategies, conditions, habits and outcomes.

### Inclusion

Inclusion is the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure. More than simply diversity and numerical representation, inclusion involves authentic and empowered participation and a true sense of belonging.

## **Racial Justice**

Racial justice is the systematic fair treatment of people of all races that results in equitable opportunities and outcomes for everyone. All people are able to achieve their full potential in life, regardless of race, ethnicity or the community in which they live.

A “racial justice” framework can move us from a reactive posture to a more powerful, proactive and even preventive approach.

## **Race**

Race is a socially constructed system of categorizing humans largely based on observable physical features (phenotypes), such as skin color, and on ancestry. There is no scientific basis for or discernible distinction between racial categories.

The ideology of race has become embedded in our identities, institutions and culture and is used as a basis for discrimination and domination.

## **Racism**

The concept of racism is widely thought of as simply personal prejudice, but in fact, it is a complex system of racial hierarchies and inequities. At the micro level of racism, or individual level, are internalized and interpersonal racism. At the macro level of racism, we look beyond the individuals to the broader dynamics, including institutional and structural racism.

## **Internalized Racism**

Internalized racism describes the private racial beliefs held by and within individuals. The way we absorb social messages about race and adopt them as personal beliefs, biases and prejudices are all within the realm of internalized racism.

For people of color, internalized oppression can involve believing in negative messages about oneself or one’s racial group. For white people, internalized privilege can involve feeling a sense of superiority and entitlement, or holding negative beliefs about people of color.

## **Interpersonal Racism**

Interpersonal racism is how our private beliefs about race become public when we interact with others. When we act upon our prejudices or unconscious bias — whether intentionally, visibly, verbally or not — we engage in interpersonal racism. Interpersonal racism also can be willful and overt, taking the form of bigotry, hate speech or racial violence.

## **Institutional Racism**

Institutional racism is racial inequity within institutions and systems of power, such as places of employment, government agencies and social services. It can take the form of unfair policies and practices, discriminatory treatment and inequitable opportunities and outcomes.

A school system that concentrates people of color in the most overcrowded and under-resourced schools with the least qualified teachers compared to the educational opportunities of white students is an example of institutional racism.

## **Structural Racism**

Structural racism (or structural racialization) is the racial bias across institutions and society. It describes the cumulative and compounding effects of an array of factors that systematically privilege white people and disadvantage people of color.

Since the word “racism” often is understood as a conscious belief, “racialization” may be a better way to describe a process that does not require intentionality. Race equity expert John A. Powell writes:

“‘Racialization’ connotes a process rather than a static event. It underscores the fluid and dynamic nature of race... ‘Structural racialization’ is a set of processes that may generate disparities or depress life outcomes without any racist actors.”

## Systemic Racialization

Systemic racialization describes a dynamic system that produces and replicates racial ideologies, identities and inequities. Systemic racialization is the well-institutionalized pattern of discrimination that cuts across major political, economic and social organizations in a society.

Public attention to racism is generally focused on the symptoms (such as a racist slur by an individual) rather than the system of racial inequity.

## Racial Privilege and Racial Oppression

Like two sides of the same coin, racial privilege describes race-based advantages and preferential treatment based on skin color, while racial oppression refers to race-based disadvantages, discrimination and exploitation based on skin color.

## Continue learning about racial equity and inclusion

The Annie E. Casey Foundation offers a variety of reports and resources to help promote racial equity and inclusion in America. Explore the resources below to learn more and help promote equity and inclusion in your life:

- Learn 7 steps to advance and embed racial equity and inclusion within your organization in the [\*Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide\*](#).
- Learn about institutional racism and how to develop and support leadership that contributes to racial justice in [\*Leadership and Race\*](#).
- Learn about children living in high-poverty areas across the nation and the risks of concentrated poverty on children in [\*Children Living in High-Poverty, Low-Opportunity Neighborhoods\*](#).
- Learn how work requirements have changed over time and the efforts that are underway to help low-income workers build greater economic stability in [\*Taking Action: Positioning Low-Income Workers to Succeed in a Changing Economy\*](#).
- Learn about adultification bias, the stereotypes commonly applied to Black women and girls, and how Black female students are treated differently than their white peers in [\*Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias\*](#).

## This post is related to:

- [Racial Equity and Inclusion](#)