



Racism, Systemic Racism, & White Supremacy: What's the Difference?

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NRPA Quick Read

The terms “racism,” “systemic racism” and “white supremacy” often are used interchangeably, but are they really the same? Here we lay out the definitions for these terms to help you determine which word is best to use in different contexts.

Racism: Racism is the prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism from the dominant (white) race directed at a person or group based on their minority racial or ethnic group. It often is used to describe the actions that an individual or collective take that exhibit hatred toward a historically excluded racial group. However, racism does not have to be intentional and conscious hate; rather, racism is most often an unintentional and unconscious demonstration of white dominance toward people of color. It is the basis for social stratification and differential treatment (systemic racism) that gives the advantage to the dominant group.

Systemic racism: Racism isn't just about discrimination from one person to another, but also about how longstanding institutions and laws support attitudes of superiority or inferiority between racialized groups. Systemic racism in the United States involves one group (the dominant, white group) having the power to carry out discrimination through society, using that power to shape cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices. This creates an environment where outcomes will automatically favor white people because of the unfair disadvantages laid upon Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latino, Hispanic and Indigenous peoples. Systemic racism is not a single rule or law, it is racism that is woven into the fabric of society and unfairly elevates white people over everyone else, whether it is obvious or not.

White supremacy: The term white supremacy refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantages and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not — both at a collective and an individual level (i.e., systemic racism). People often use the term to conjure up images of white supremacist hate groups, but many scholars believe it more accurately describes a political, economic and cultural system in which white people overwhelmingly control power, material resources as well as conscious and unconscious ideas of entitlement. White supremacy excludes non-white people from voting rights, land ownership, labor protections, political representation and the protection of the courts.

Using terminology to perpetuate racism

Some use the term racism as shorthand to describe systemic racism. For example, some blame racism for neighborhoods with decaying infrastructure because the bigoted nature of white



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flight lowered tax revenues. Some prefer the term white supremacy to systemic racism, because they feel it better describes the pervasiveness and hierarchy of systemic racism throughout U.S. culture. While each of these definitions are different, they all are connected by the ways in which they prop up whiteness as dominant and racial “otherness” as submissive.