



Internalized Racism: a definition

by Donna Bivens

From our work at WTC, we have come to see racism and the internalization of racism as the primary assaults on our love for ourselves and each other. I understand love here as our ability to care for ourselves and each other spiritually, emotionally, physically and intellectually and to do it in a way that does not split us off from ourselves - body from mind, spirit from emotion, individual from community and so forth. Like most progressive anti-racism trainers, we define racism as having to do with power.

Separating it from the human flaws we all share such as prejudice and scapegoating, we see racism as a system of oppression based on race that in this country is perpetrated by white people against people of color. It involves an unequal distribution of systemic power for people with white-skin privilege in four main areas:

1. the power to make and enforce decisions;
2. access to resources, broadly defined;
3. the ability to set and determine standards for what is considered appropriate behavior; and
4. the ability to define reality.

This inequality is generally the result of a history of colonialism, genocide and oppression in which the material, intellectual, spiritual and emotional resources of one people are put in service of another through force, deception and disrespect for their ways. The struggle against racism for white people is a long and difficult one that involves their learning to live in the world as peers with people of color. To do this requires no less than for them to dismantle oppressive structures that give them an unjust power over peoples of color and to learn to live in this country and the world as nothing more or less than a part of the whole. This is long hard work.

In the meantime the racism manifests as a relentless attack on the individual and collective lives of people of color. We experience this attack as violence against our heads, minds, bodies and spirits that often results in some form of internalized racism - not to mention our decreased life expectancies - again, broadly defined.

But internalized racism is not simply a result of

racism. In doing this work we have come to see it as a systemic oppression with a life of its own. That is, not only is there a system in place that upholds the power of white people, there is a system in place that undermines the power of people of color and teaches us to fear our own power and difference. Seeing internalized racism as a systemic oppression allows us to distinguish it again from human wounds like self-hatred or "low self esteem" to which all people are vulnerable. It is important to understand it as systemic because that makes it clear that it is not a problem simply of individuals. It is structural. Thus, even people of color who have "high self-esteem" must grapple with internalized racism. We must understand internalized racism as a system to be grappled with in the same way that even the most committed anti-racist white people must continue to grapple personally and in community with their own and other white people's racism until the oppressive structures, ideologies and systems are abolished and replaced.

In putting forward a definition of internalized racism that is systemic and structural, we are not in any way suggesting that people of color "blame the victim." However, we are saying that the resources of people of color doing anti-racism should be channeled as much as possible into people of color - into helping each other to understand and confront the systemic nature of racism and of internalized racism. I take my own early life in African American community as proof that to live racism on a daily basis does not guarantee understanding its systemic nature. Much of the time that people of color spend helping white people understand racism could and should go into helping people of color get clearer about internalized racism - especially as the debates on race and racism become more confusing, complex and obscured. As more white people become clearer about white identity and how to "do the work" with white people, people of color are freed up to look beyond our physical and psychological trauma from racism to other questions about our ability to create what we want for ourselves and our peoples. To this end we offer the following definition of internalized racism.

Definitions Useful in Doing Anti-Internalized Racism Work

Internalized Racism: What it is NOT

In trying to understand internalized racism and work toward its elimination, it is important that we do not confuse internalized racism with other realities that are frequently used to explain or describe "dysfunction" among people of color. We need to understand that internalized racism is not simply the following

- low self-esteem,
- color prejudice/colorism
- stereotyping, or
- self-hatred.

These may be and often are symptoms or results of internalized racism but they are not the thing itself.

Internalized Racism: What it IS

Internalized racism is the situation that occurs in a racist system when a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and dominance of the dominating group by maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group's power. It involves at least four essential and interconnected elements:

1. Decision-making

Due to racism, people of color do not have the ultimate decision-making power over the decisions that control our lives and resources. As a result, on a personal level, we may think white people know more about what needs to be done for us than we do. On an interpersonal level, we may not support each other's authority and power – especially if it is in opposition to the dominating racial group. Structurally, there is a system in place that rewards people of color who support white supremacy and power and coerces or punishes those who do not.

2. Resources

Resources, broadly defined (e.g. money, time, salaried work etc), are unequally in the hands and under the control of white people. Internalized racism is the system in place that makes it difficult for people

of color to get access to resources for our own communities and to control the resources of our community. We learn to believe that serving and using resources for ourselves and our particular community is not serving "everybody." There is also often a self-imposed barrier that makes it difficult for us to respectfully access the resources of other peoples, particularly other peoples of color.

3. Standards

With internalized racism, the standards for what is appropriate or "normal" that people of color accept are white people's or Eurocentric standards. We have difficulty naming, communicating and living up to our deepest standards and values, and holding ourselves and each other accountable to them. Too often, we instead grab onto standards set in reaction to the abuse of systemic racism.

4. Naming the problem

There is a system in place that misnames the problem of racism as a problem of or caused by people of color and blames the disease - emotional, economic, political, etc. - on people of color. With internalized racism, people of color might, for example, believe we are more violent than white people and not consider state-sanctioned political violence or the hidden or privatized violence of white people and the systems they put in place and support.

racial hostility is the problem of people of color. It is not one that is resolved personally or interpersonally because it is bound up with the racist structures, institutions and ideologies that control people's lives.

The hardest, but most transformational, work for anti-racist white people and people of color is the work within ourselves and our own communities. It is essential that we make the leap of faith that lets us know that we must trust each other to define the work for our own communities and do it. ▼

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Structural Impact of Racism on People of Color: Cross Racial Hostility

Hostility is created in a racist system when one oppressed racial group supports the oppression of another oppressed racial group by supporting, benefiting from, maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating race's supremacy. At the same time that racism is white people's problem, cross