Racism Essay, Research Paper

Racism, Personal/Institutional

Summary

1Personal Racism occurs when individuals (or small groups of individuals) hold attitudes of prejudice and/or engage in discriminatory or similar behavior. Among the manifestations of personal racism are stereotyping individuals on the basis of alleged racial differences, the use of derogatory names and references, discriminatory treatment during the course of interpersonal contacts, and threats and acts of violence against members of a minority group that is alleged to be racially inferior. Much controversy today surrounds the use even innocently of words, phrases, and symbols of minority groups (and others) often find the utterance of words like ?chink? and ?spic?, to use of phrases like ?colored people? or ?those people?, to display of ?White Power? bumper stickers or the southern confederate flag. Some whites dismiss the concerns people of color have over such behaviors. They attack and ridicule demands that such behavior cease as a call for ?political correctness? and portray the latter as an infringement on their rights to free speech. Many people do not make the effort to understand just why some forms of expression are offensive. Personal racism goes well beyond the use of offensive speech and other forms of expression, however. Here are a few examples to better explain this. 1. A personnel officer hires people of color only for low-level, low-paying jobs, based on stereotypes about their abilities or fear that placing people of color in supervisory positions will bring about negative reactions from white workers. 2. A real estate agent shows people of color only homes for sale in minority or mixed neighborhoods under the belief that people should live ?with their own kind.? 3. A Store clerk in an all-white neighborhood follows after the occasional minority group member who comes to shop and makes it clear the person is being watched, under the rationale that such shoppers are probably there to steal. Personal racism involves acts by individuals. Such acts may, or they may not, be approved by others in the organization, community, or other setting in which they take place, and may be so subtle that they go unnoticed. When we think of racism, often it is only personal racism and its most visible forms at that–that comes to mind. But the damage that is done by personal racism, as tragic and painful as it may be, in no way has the same broad impact as institutional racism. It is ti this second form that we no turn.

2Institutional racism is our major concern in this chapter. The term institution, as used here, refers to an organizational structure created to perform certain services or tasks within a society. Business and industry, unions, the political system, education, the mass media, the legal system, all may be thought of as institutions. Ideally, such organizational structures can be made to function so as to take the interests of all social groups into account. In reality, of course, they can be made to perform so as to provide advantages or benefits to some groups over and above others. Institutional racism involves the treatment accorded specifically to minority peoples at the hands of such institutions.

The term institutional racism draws attention to the fact that groups such as Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, and Asian Americans, by virtue of their historical exclusion from key institutional policymaking and decision-making roles, frequently find themselves victimized by the routine workings of such organizational structures. Unlike some forms of personal racism, the racism that occurs through the day-to-day and year-to-year operation of larger scale institutions is often difficult to detect without careful investigation. It is a form of racism that whites are in a position to express, since it is primarily they who fill command positions in such institutions. Institutional racism is a societal phenomenon that whites are in a key position to set in motion and sustain. The key element is power over organizational structures and their operations. Since people of color generally lack access to positions of power in the key institutions that affect them, they are incapable of discriminating against whites at this level. One can talk, for example, about incidents of ?black racism? at the personal level. But it should be remembered that minorities have never had, and do not have today, the means to practice racism on the same institutional scale and thus with the same broad effects as whites.

Evaluation

1Racism is the belief that human beings can be divided into races and that members of some races are inferior to members of other races. Usually, this attitude also involves the belief that one’s own race is superior to other races. People who believe in racism are called racists. They claim that members of their own race are mentally, physically, morally, or culturally superior to those of other races. Because racists assume they are superior, they feel they deserve special rights and privileges.

Groups, as well as individuals, differ. But there is no scientific evidence to support claims of superiority or inferiority for these differences. Social scientists emphasize that no two groups have exactly the same environment. As a result, many group differences are largely the result of different environments. Scientists have long debated the relative importance of heredity and environment in determining these differences. But most scientists believe that heredity and environment interact in complex ways. In addition, most anthropologists today reject the idea that human beings can be divided into biologically defined races.

2Racism is widespread and has caused major problems, even though no scientific proof supports racist claims. Claims of racial superiority and inferiority have been used to justify discrimination, segregation, colonialism, slavery, and even genocide (extermination of an entire people).

Racism is a form of prejudice. Many people tend to consider their own appearance and behavior as normal and therefore desirable. They may distrust or fear people who look or act differently. When differences are obvious–such as in skin color or religious worship–the distrust becomes greater. Such attitudes can lead to the belief that people who look or act differently are inferior. Many people do not bother to look for the same qualities in other groups that they admire in their own. Also, they do not recognize the different but equally good qualities that members of other groups possess.

Racism in the United States has been directed mainly by the white majority against ethnic minority groups. Such groups include African Americans, American Indians, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans. These minorities have been discriminated against in such areas as housing, education, and employment.

3Individual and institutional racism. In the United States, sociologists distinguish between individual and institutional racism. Individual racism refers chiefly to the prejudicial beliefs and discriminatory behavior of individual whites against minority groups. It is based on racial assumptions of superiority and inferiority.

Institutional racism refers to the policies of communities, schools, businesses, and other groups that restrict the opportunities of minority groups. Institutional racism may or may not have been intentionally set up to practice discrimination. Yet it has produced harmful results. For example, a company may hire only college graduates for work that does not require a college degree. But a far smaller number of blacks than whites have had the opportunity to earn a degree. Thus, the company policy lessens the job opportunities of blacks even though the firm might not have intended to do so.

History. Racism has existed since the beginning of history. More than 2,000 years ago, the ancient Greeks and Romans made slaves of people whom they regarded as inferior. Jews have long been persecuted on religious and cultural grounds. For hundreds of years after Marco Polo’s travels to China in the 1200’s, the Chinese regarded Westerners as “hairy white barbarians.”

Between the 1700’s and early 1900’s, Europeans gained control of large parts of Asia and Africa. These colonialists justified their domination on the grounds that the black-, brown-, and yellow-skinned “races” had to be “civilized” by the “superior” whites. This civilizing mission came to be called the “white man’s burden.” By the mid-1900’s, most colonialism had ended. But its effects on the world are still felt today. For details, see the articles on AFRICA (History) and ASIA (Results of colonialism; The spread of Communism).

From the 1600’s to the mid-1800’s, many whites in the United States held blacks in slavery. Slavery was a major cause of the American Civil War (1861-1865). The slaves were freed during the 1860’s, but segregation and discrimination against blacks continued. In the mid-1900’s, the U.S. government passed laws designed to give equal opportunities to blacks. Even so, racial problems–which began with slavery and were fostered by discrimination and segregation–continue to plague the United States.

Genocide is the most extreme result of racial hatred. Adolf Hitler, the ruler of Nazi Germany, preached that Germans belonged to the “superior Aryan race,” and that Jews and other non-Aryan peoples were inferior. Hitler’s belief in German superiority and his hatred of Jews resulted in Nazi

policies that brought the murder of about 6 million Jews during the 1930’s and 1940’s. See JEWS (Beginnings of Nazi persecution).

In the late 1940’s, the government of South Africa established a racial policy called apartheid, one of the world’s most complete systems of racial separation. It called for separate institutions and residences for whites and nonwhites. In 1991, South Africa repealed the last of the laws that formed the basis of apartheid. However, blacks were not allowed to vote in national elections until 1994. Blacks and other nonwhites continue to face unofficial segregation and discrimination in South Africa.