

Guiding principles for anti-racist research, the ‘bodycam’ for racial economic injustice

By **Valerie Wilson** • June 15, 2022

Phrases like anti-racist, racial equity, and racial justice have quickly become part of the standard lexicon of people and institutions grappling with what it really means to be diverse, equitable, and inclusive. These concepts, however, are more than just “woke” or “progressive” jargon. They are standards for making and sustaining meaningful changes that help to dismantle social, economic, and political structures that perpetuate racial inequality. (See “Key concepts and definitions” below.)

In recent years, highly publicized killings of Black Americans—many at the hands of police officers who faced little or no accountability—have garnered international attention due to the widespread use of video recording devices. These horrific images of blatant disregard for Black lives have placed a spotlight on this nation’s long history of anti-Black racism, sparking protests against systemic racism across the United States and in countries throughout the world.

While nothing matches the gravity of the loss of a life, patterns of persistent unexplained racial economic disparities are also symptoms of systemic or structural racism. And in some ways, the racial economic injustice that can be revealed and documented in anti-racist research is analogous to footage of racial violence captured by body cameras and on smartphones. In both instances, however, interpretation of that evidence dictates the response. What appears to be overwhelming evidence of racial injustice to some may lead others to question the character or actions of the person being subjected to violence or economic deprivation.

The goal of anti-racist research is not simply to recite the problem of racial inequity, but also to question its causes, expose its consequences, and propose ways to resolve it. Economists and other social scientists use data and statistical methods to model the processes of human decision-making and evaluate the effects of policy decisions. Those same tools also help to expose how race is used to systematically assign access, opportunity, power, and economic resources exclusive of individual skill, ability, effort, or merit.

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Key concepts and definitions

Anti-Blackness refers to the visible and less visible ways of voiding Blackness of value (dehumanizing Black people) while systematically and structurally marginalizing Black people and their issues (Council for Democratizing Education)

n.d.).

Anti-racism is the stance of actively working against systems of racial oppression to create a more equitable world. “Anti-racism refers to taking a committed stand against racism, a stand that translates into action that interrupts racism in all of its forms, whether personal or institutional, blatant or routine, intended or unintended” (Trepagnier 2010). Anti-racism requires action, and it requires consistently working against racism. It requires people to first learn about themselves and their internalized oppression or sense of superiority. It ensures that there are multiple racial perspectives on issues, and its practitioners commit to continuously educating themselves on issues related to race and racial injustices.

Racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if one’s racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. Racial equity is one part of racial justice and requires work to address root causes of inequities and not just their manifestation. This work includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race (Center for Assessment and Policy Development n.d.).

Racial justice is the proactive advancement and reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes, and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts, and outcomes for all (Lawrence and Keleher 2004).

Structural/systemic racism in the United States is the normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics—historical, cultural, institutional, and interpersonal—that routinely advantage white people while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color. It is a system of hierarchy and inequity primarily characterized by the preferential treatment, privilege, and power of white people at the expense of Black, Latino, Asian, Pacific Islander, indigenous, Arab, and other racially oppressed people (Lawrence and Keleher 2004).

White supremacy is the term used to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as “white,” and the practices based on this assumption (DiAngelo 2017).

“People of color” in this essay refers collectively to people in the following race/ethnicity categories: Black, Latinx, Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI), and people who identify as Indigenous or multiracial. We use the collective term “people of color” to reflect a shared, although varied, experience with systemic racism in America.

“Latinx”—a gender-neutral term that may be used interchangeably with Latino/Latina or Hispanic—is an ethnic category, not a racial category. In addition to self-

identifying as Latinx, Latinx Americans may also self-identify as any race—Black, white, or another race.

According to the Center for Assessment and Policy Development, racial equity is the condition that would be achieved if one's racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares. Clearly we have not reached that condition: Statistical analysis often reveals that racial identity is a measurable, significant, and persistent predictor of social and economic outcomes. This relationship—indicative of a group effect that often outweighs individual choices or actions—makes the issue of race central to all economic research and policymaking.

While most people willingly accept race or ethnicity as an accident of birth, according to the National Human Genome Research Institute (2022), there is no evidence that the groups we identify as distinct races have distinct unifying genetic identities. Rather, the Institute's Glossary of Genetic Terms states:

Race is a fluid concept used to group people according to various factors including ancestral background and social identity. Race is also used to group people that share a set of visible characteristics, such as skin color and facial features. Though these visible traits are influenced by genes, the vast majority of genetic variation exists within racial groups and not between them. **Race is an ideology and for this reason, many scientists believe that race should be more accurately described as a social construct and not a biological one.**

This conclusion shatters the racist notion of innate superiority or inferiority based on race, exposing the sheer mythology of a central tenet of the American eugenicists' movement: the idea that white Anglo-Saxons were genetically superior to other racial and ethnic groups. Unfortunately, those racist ideas would become linked to the establishment of modern economics by several founding and early 20th-century leaders of the American Economic Association who invoked eugenics in their writings and speeches on economic policy issues such as immigration and labor reform (Leonard 2005).

Those racist roots linger today in economic models that include race as an exogenous variable—something caused by factors outside of the model that explains outcomes defined within the model—leaving us to grapple with the question of what race represents and why racial identity has any correlation with economic outcomes so essential to standard of living or quality of life. In fact, as depicted in the interactive chartbook in Chapter 9 of this volume, persistent racial (and ethnic) disparities are observed in an incredibly vast array of outcomes including employment status, educational attainment, wages, income, poverty, wealth, life expectancy, incarceration rates, and voting. The remarkable consistency of disparities in these and many other outcomes points toward the true significance of race and the structural nature of racial and ethnic inequality.

In the United States, race is an integral part of our nation's social and economic hierarchy. While the experience of racism and discrimination is not exclusive to Black Americans, this

nation's racial hierarchy is anchored in the history and ongoing legacy of anti-Black racism. The use of skin color as the primary basis for identifying race in the United States created an immediate distinction between Blackness and whiteness, acting as a clear and immutable marker of group membership. Anti-Blackness—the dehumanization and systematic marginalization of Black people—was used to justify the enslavement of (Black) Africans in the service of capitalism with the economic benefits accruing to those of (white) European descent (Williams 1994). This set into motion an entire system of laws and practices that not only served to oppress and marginalize generations of Black Americans and other people of color, but also fueled white supremacy.

In *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontent*, author Isabel Wilkerson connects the structural nature of racial inequality to America's caste system, comparing it to the structure of an old house:

Like other old houses, America has an unseen skeleton, a caste system that is as central to its operation as are the studs and joists that we cannot see in the physical buildings we call home. Caste is the infrastructure of our divisions. It is the architecture of human hierarchy, the subconscious code of instructions for maintaining, in our case, a four-hundred-year-old social order. (Wilkerson 2020, 17)

Knowledge of this racial hierarchy resides in our collective subconscious and often shows up in research and policy. For example, racial/ethnic disparities are typically expressed as outcomes for Black, Latinx, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, or Native Americans relative to white Americans. In describing the nature of those disparities, they are often presented as a deficit or disadvantage for people of color rather than an advantage for those who identify as white. Though this kind of comparison is common, and in some cases appropriate (I use it myself), the problem is that, without the necessary context, whiteness becomes framed as the norm or standard by which everyone else is measured, rather than one of many socially constructed identities we call race. The result is a one-sided discussion or analysis of race that focuses only on the inadequacy of those outside of whiteness and—in both subtle and not-so-subtle ways—conflates observed racial differences in economic outcomes with inherent group characteristics.

This racial coding of social and economic outcomes is revealed in just how often seemingly neutral words and phrases, such as *race*, *low-performing*, *poverty*, or *high crime*, invoke Blackness along with false narratives built upon centuries of racist ideology and stereotypes. And in practice, this racial coding unfairly imposes on Black people and other people of color the burden of having to prove what they *are not* instead of the freedom to express what they *are*.

The charge for those wanting to produce anti-racist research and policy is to provide the figurative “bodycam” footage that will help to deliver racial justice and achieve racial equity. To do that we must actively work to present a historically honest and balanced examination of race that unpacks the correlation between race and socioeconomic outcomes.

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