

Chapter Five

What Is Internalized Racism?

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I was recently at a reception honoring a group of prominent African Americans, held at the home of a gracious and generous white woman philanthropist. Many guests arrived before the honorees, and those present included a handful of Black people among the 30 or 40 predominately white guests. The first people to greet me when I walked in were two other African American women I had met briefly over a year before. We struck up a conversation, reminiscing about the event where we'd met.

One of the women walked away for a moment and as she was walking back to our spot the hostess joined her and good-naturedly said to us, "Are all the Black women over here in a corner talking to each other?! Go out and meet people." The three of us froze. And then, very slowly and without speaking of it to each other, we dispersed.

I have no idea what the other women felt, but I was stunned. I was then flooded with feelings and questions. *Irritation*. Would she have made such a statement to a group of white women she neither knew well herself nor knew how they were related to each other? *Embarrassment*. Surely she did not intend to be anything more than a good hostess. Should I let her know that her interruption was offensive? *Confusion*. Was I over-reacting? Under-reacting? *Frustration*. Why did those with white privilege so often racialize trivial matters while avoiding or denying life-and-death, bread-and-butter issues of race and racism? *Shame*. How could I allow her unconscious intrusion to abruptly end my conversation with other Black women?

Though this encounter was pretty inconsequential, it proved to be an effective illustration of the relationship between racism, white privilege and internalized racism. When I shared it a few weeks later during an anti-racism and diversity workshop for a predominantly white group of student leaders at a prestigious college, it resonated deeply with the small group of students of color present. They shared that they often find themselves having to justify to white people on campus their choices to spend time with each other and their need to specifically address the structural racism they experience.

At the end of a simulation designed to raise everyone's awareness of white privilege, an astute African American student pointed out that white privilege is so pervasive that white people do not even notice that they end up together and in the same place: sharing power and privilege that structural racism denies people of color. On the other hand, he noted that people of color are too often left scattered and isolated—afraid, angry, drained or just too far away from each other to explore what we have in common and how best to collectively address the many ways white privilege (a consequence of structural racism) diminishes our lives and our communities.

In pointing out the system of torn relationships, he was essentially describing internalized racism. Just as racism results in the system of structural advantage called white privilege for white people and their communities, internalized racism results in the system of structural disadvantage called internalized racism for peoples and communities of color on inter- and intra-group levels.

Practically speaking, people of color cannot force white people to notice, acknowledge or dismantle racism and the white privilege that results from it. Nor can we continually monitor and check up on their progress. For one thing, a great deal of what happens to hold racism and white privilege in place goes on out of the purview of peoples of color. Ultimately, white people must come to their own understanding of why it is in their interests to dismantle a system that does not work for all humanity and commit to creating something better. The biggest contribution people of color can make to the dismantling of racism and the white privilege it results in is to notice, acknowledge and dismantle internalized racism—that is, to claim and bring forth our full humanity, power and wisdom as co-creators of an anti-racist society and culture. Thus, we will not fully dismantle white privilege until people of color address its counterpart: internalized racism.

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To understand and address internalized racism, it is important to be aware of three major things:

1. As people of color are victimized by racism, we internalize it. That is, we develop ideas, beliefs, actions and behaviors that support or collude with racism. This internalized racism has its own systemic reality and its own negative consequences in the lives and communities of people of color. More than just a consequence of racism, then, internalized racism is a systemic oppression in reaction to racism that has a life of its own. In other words, just as there is a system in place that reinforces the power and expands the privilege of white people, there is a system in place that actively discourages and undermines the power of people and communities of color and mires us in our own oppression.

Individuals, institutions and communities of color are often unconsciously and habitually rewarded for supporting white privilege and power and punished and excluded when we do not. This system of oppression often coerces us to let go of or compromise our own better judgment, thus diminishing everyone as the diversity of human experience and wisdom is excluded. Equally harmfully, the system can trap people and communities of color in an oppositional stance that can undermine creativity as situations are seen through a limited victim/perpetrator lens that cuts us off from the breadth of possibility.¹

2. Because internalized racism is a systemic oppression, it must be distinguished 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.

¹ For more information, see Barbara Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002).

Thus, even people of color who have “high self-esteem” must wrestle with the internalized racism that infects us, our loved ones, our institutions and our communities. Internalized racism must, then, be understood as a system to be grappled with by people and communities of color 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 privilege until our existing racist system is abolished and replaced.

3. Internalized racism negatively impacts people of color intra-culturally and cross-culturally. Because race is a social and political construct that comes out of particular histories of domination and exploitation between Peoples, people of colors' internalized racism often leads to great conflict among and between them as other concepts of power—such as ethnicity, culture, nationality and class—are collapsed in misunderstanding. Especially when race is confused with nationality and ethnicity, internalized racism often manifests in different cultural and ethnic groups being pitted against each other for the scarce resources that racism leaves for people who do not have white privilege. This can create a hierarchy based on closeness to the white norm. At the same time it cripples all of us in our attempt to create a society that works for all of us.

Putting forward this definition of internalized racism that is systemic and structural is not intended to “blame the victim.” It is meant to point out the unique work that people of color must do within ourselves and our communities to really address racism and white privilege. To live and be affected by racism on a daily basis does not guarantee understanding its systemic nature. This is also true of internalized racism. As experiences of race and structural racism become more confusing, complex and obscured, it is imperative that people of color explore and deepen our understanding of internalized racism. As more anti-racist white people become clearer about whiteness, white privilege and “doing the work” with white people, people of color are freed up to look beyond our physical and psychological trauma from racism. We can then focus on other challenges to our ability and need to create what we want for ourselves, our communities, our larger U.S. society, our world.

In trying to understand internalized racism and work toward its elimination, it is important not to confuse internalized racism with other realities that are frequently used to explain or describe “dysfunction” or inadequacy among people of color. It is crucial to understand that internalized racism is not simply:

- Low self-esteem
- Color prejudice or colorism
- Stereotyping
- Self-hatred

These may be and often are symptoms or results of internalized racism, but they are not the thing itself. Internalized racism is the situation that occurs in a racist system when a racial group oppressed by racism supports the supremacy and

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dominance of the dominant group by maintaining or participating in the set of attitudes, behaviors, social structures and ideologies that undergird the dominating group's power and privilege and limits the oppressed group's own advantages. Like systemic racism, it manifests in at least four dimensions:

Inner

Internalized racism affects the inner lives of people of color. Because race is a social and political construct grounded in a history/experience of oppressor-oppressed relationships based on physical characteristics, by definition it offers people of color a very limited sense of self. With internalized racism, this limited sense of self can undermine people of color's belief in our full humanity and disrupt our understanding of our inner life. This manifests in a number of ways, but especially in:

- Having a sense of inferiority to other human beings;
- Being grounded in victimhood—that is, always seeing oneself as a victim and denying one's own power to transform a situation or failing to take responsibility for one's own roles as victimizer or colluder with oppression;
- Being overwhelmed and drained by the emotions we must navigate as a result of having this limited identity thrust upon us;
- Focusing on “reading” and trying to change white people, thus leaving less time, energy and resources for self-development.

One result of internalized racism on the inner dimension is that people of color in the foundation world often feel “damned if they do, damned if they don't,” as they try to walk the tightrope between communities of color and the foundation world. It can also show up in a situation like the one I described at the beginning of this chapter, where people and communities of color are temporarily floored by the plethora of feelings we must navigate in our relentless encounter with racism and white privilege.

The inner dimension of internalized racism is investigated and addressed through methodologies that strengthen a sense of personal power and individual responsibility. Developing a clear sense of one's racial identity and learning to value one's ancestry—knowing one's real history and drawing on the strengths of one's culture—support growth in this dimension. Inner wounds from internalized racism can be healed through spiritual and psychological practices like prayer, ritual, meditation and emotional therapy. Because of its systemic nature, internalized racism cannot be addressed merely at the inner dimension, and so an individual must also develop a sense of purpose and commitment around addressing internalized racism on the other three dimensions.

Doing the inner work of being a human being is never easy. Dealing with the stigma of racism that questions and attacks one's full humanity makes it all the more difficult. For white people, not having to deal with this stigma translates as a white privilege.

Interpersonal

Growing out of the inner dimension of internalized racism is the interpersonal dimension. Continually facing racism and white privilege can negatively impact the ability of people of color to maintain healthy and fulfilling relationships with each other or with those who have white privilege. Internalized racism on this level is like being in relationship with someone who cannot see, but internalizing that you and those like you are invisible.

In relationships with those with white privilege, this can manifest in a number of ways, including uncontrolled and inappropriately expressed rage at white people for their unwillingness and/or inability to be aware of and take responsibility for their privilege. Conversely, it can also manifest as putting white people on a pedestal and relating to them as an inferior.

In relationships with other people of color, it can manifest in a myriad of ways, including projecting one's own sense of inferiority and inadequacy onto those of the same race. This results in distrust and a lack of confidence in our ability or acceptance and support of each other's leadership. Another example is an inability to engage conflict creatively—that is, in a way that leads to an expanded sense of self through connection to and interdependence with others. The complexity of community building initiatives demands exceptional conflict resolution and communication skills, as people of color from the foundation world and from the community attempt to work across huge differences of perception and of ways of dealing with (or ignoring!) conflict, learning and transformation.

Further, in interpersonal relationships, it is imperative that people of color practice caregiving with white people—and even other people of color—rather than caretaking. The healing professions make a distinction between the two by pointing out that with caretaking one takes over the care of a person who cannot or will not care for him or herself. With caregiving, on the other hand, the receiver of care remains fully responsible for his/her own process. Through honoring this distinction people of color, among ourselves and in relationships with white people, develop and maintain authentic alliances and equal relationships in our anti-racism work.

Some methodologies that address the interpersonal dimension of internalized racism include finding new ways to engage conflict and communicate across difference, such as Nonviolent Communication (when it is practiced with an understanding of systemic power) and transactional analysis as practiced by some anti-racism trainers. Indigenous cultures—whether Native American, African or Asian—offer tremendous resources for addressing this dimension through technologies for conflict resolution, consensus building and the sustaining of community that are too often overlooked by peoples of color even as white people embrace and appropriate them.

Institutional

A consequence of systemic racism is the fact that people of color do not benefit from, or share ownership and leadership in the institutions that shape our lives. Within this dimension of internalized racism, people of color often question or subvert our own power in white-controlled institutions in the following ways:

- *Decision-making:* Due to racism, people of color too often do not have the ultimate decision-making power over the decisions that control our lives and resources. As a result, we may assume white people know more about what needs to be done for us and for society than our own People do. We may also fail to support each other's authority and power—especially if it challenges white privilege. 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.
- *Resources:* Within racist systems, resources (broadly defined to include money, time, salaried work, information, connections, etc.) are unequally in the hands and under the control of white people. As a result of internalized racism, people of color may be stumped as to how to get access to resources for our own communities and confused about our right to control those resources. We may internalize the idea that serving and using resources for ourselves and our particular community is not serving “everybody.” With internalized racism 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.

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.

One well-meaning foundation, in a promotional pamphlet, praised a community of color for completing a major development project with volunteers and a two-person staff. In the same publication, the foundation told the story of a white activist who had come to the foundation with ideas on slips of scrap paper and had been supported to build a well-staffed nonprofit over a number of years. The “making do” that communities of color are often forced into, due to lack of resources and the lack of respect for and trust in our leadership, often leads to the continuing impoverishment of our communities. To reject internalized racism is to demand to be educated about the larger system and methods for success in it, while holding onto and sharing our own core values, wisdom and understandings. This is a difficult feat at best!

There are many steps to addressing internalized racism within the institutional dimension. First, awareness must be raised to help people be able to see systemic racism and explain its inner workings. Too often, people are not aware of how systems in place trump personal power and make people vulnerable to policies, practices and procedures that violate their deepest values. After this, what is needed are organizational and institutional efforts to create environments where racial disparities are acknowledged and addressed and where there is a lived commitment to creating shared ownership, leadership, and benefit across difference. This is long, hard work for any institution.

Cultural

Because it is based in dehumanizing relationships, systemic racism decimates cultures—clearly those of its victims, but ultimately also those of its perpetrators. This is because ultimately it violates any real culture's deepest values by supplanting it with a false culture created in oppressor-oppressed identities². This goes to the very roots of our culture in the U.S. For example, in his book *The Anti-Social Contract*, political theorist Y.N. Kly writes of the subversion of this country's founding ideals:

They [Locke, Rousseau, and Hobbes]³ brought the important news that by nature all men are free and equal and that they have rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of property. But the American colonists, having accepted these ideas while at the same time enslaving the Africans and dispossessing the Native Americans, found themselves in a dilemma wherein they wished to continue these ideas, to identify with key ideals, but at the same time to continue to profit from the anti-ideal, which the Lockean belief in self-interest led them to believe in equally. The result was the American 'trick': the surrender of morality and higher aspirations to self-interest... By ignoring the equal humanity of its minorities[sic], America began the long process of denying the reality of its history.⁴

Many of the crises we currently face as a nation, and much of our inability to imagine a future that is just and sustainable, are the results of this long-denied history so comfortable with deceit and self-deception. For people of color, this results in a painful struggle to align our culture with the ideals of U.S. culture, and yet avoid the minefields of a society founded on our oppression. Within this dimension, internalized racism is manifested in two primary ways:

- **Standards:** With internalized racism, the standards for what is appropriate or "normal," which people of color accept, are white people's standards: Eurocentric at best, U.S. popular consumer culture at worst. We have difficulty knowing, naming, communicating and living our own deepest standards and values, and holding ourselves and each other accountable to them. Too often, we grab onto standards set in reaction to the abuse of systemic racism.
- **Naming the problem and defining or framing reality:** 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 they are more violent than white people and not consider

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² For more information, see James Baldwin, "On Being White and Other Lies" (*Essence Magazine*, April 1984).

³ Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) were political philosophers whose theories combined to put forth the idea of a "social contract" between a government and its citizens that promotes and protects the common good.

⁴ Y.N. Kly, *The Anti-Social Contract* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1997), p. 8.

state-sanctioned political violence or the hidden or privatized violence of rogue corporations and the systems white people put in place and support.

This dimension is addressed by clarifying the distinction between race, ethnicity and culture and by actively raising awareness about and deconstructing the false culture of race. It demands frank explorations of values and vision and a willingness to engage in healthy conflict to clarify them across difference. Transformation at this dimension requires a commitment to real culture change within communities, within our nation, and across the globe.

In addition to racism and internalized racism, people of color must also be aware of and address cross-racial hostility—a term coined by writer Gloria Anzaldua. Cross-racial 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 white privilege is white people's problem, cross-racial hostility is a problem peoples of color must address. 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. Peoples of color must work with each other to decenter whiteness in our relationships. We must learn to appreciate and learn from and about each other directly and not through a white medium.

People of color can create spaces to investigate and work toward dismantling oppressive structures—particularly internalized racism and cross-racial hostility—that limit us and we can challenge and support each other to take and develop leadership.

Support for Each Other

The hardest, but most transformational, work for anti-racist white people and people of color is the work within ourselves and our own communities. In the foundation world (and elsewhere), white people who try to use their privilege to end racial disparities and people of color committed to addressing internalized racism must make the leap of faith required to trust and support each other to define the work for our own communities. We must do this even as we share both resources and the struggle for justice, equality and our humanity.

In homogeneous settings, white people can help each other to understand white privilege and to challenge each other to truly accept the leadership of and to equitably share benefit and ownership with people of color. People of color can create spaces to investigate and work toward dismantling oppressive structures—particularly internalized racism and cross-racial hostility—that limit us and we can challenge and support each other to take and develop leadership.

In heterogeneous settings, all must make sure that systemic racism, white privilege and internalized racism are understood and addressed. We can then work to build inclusive and intercultural cultures that refuse to accept racial disparity and that bravely expose the lies of race and racism.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS⁵

1. How do you see internalized racism impacting you personally or the communities or groups that you work with?
2. What challenges are you facing in dealing with or addressing internalized racism in your current work? What are the opportunities for addressing it in your current work situation?
3. The concept of the “false culture of race” suggests that there is a more authentic culture available to us. What new cultural possibilities (if any) does this idea open up for you?
4. In what ways do people of color, as individuals and as a collective, perpetuate racism in your institution?
5. In what ways does internalized racism interfere with the functioning of teams?
6. How does your institution keep people of color divided and competing with one another for access and resources? How can people of color collectively resist these dynamics?
7. Think of a situation in which you (depending on your position) exercised or colluded with white privilege. What would need to change at the inner, interpersonal, or institutional level in order for this to have had a different outcome?
8. What does it mean for people of color to hold their institution accountable?
9. What relationship do people of color have as individuals and as a collective to people of color in communities of resistance?
10. When you consider the four levels on which internalized racism operates (inner, interpersonal, institutional and cultural) where do you imagine the most possibilities for change?

⁵ Questions 4, 5, 6, and 8 and 9 were adapted from Crossroads Ministry, “Strategy for Building Anti-Racist Collectives” (www.crossroadsministry.org).

