



**MCARI**  
Minnesota Collaborative Anti-Racism Initiative

# SYSTEMIC RACISM: DAILY STRATEGIES FOR SURVIVAL AND BEYOND

DRAFT 11-06

## Facilitator Notes

These three interlinked sessions can be used in succession or can be separated and worked into the modules of the workbook *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*. They are designed to be used with small groups or with larger groups (that are racially homogenous or mixed).

There are brief notations for facilitators at several points in each session. However, it will be necessary for facilitators to thoroughly get "inside" of each session and develop additional hints and steps as needed to weave these sessions into the modules of the workbook.

**Note:** Since the sessions are separated and there is a substantial time-lapse between them, it will be necessary to create some additional steps to recall the previous sessions (as each depends on the "ground" covered in the previous session).

A page that develops a framework of aims and objectives for the sessions precedes the three-session design. This framework looks at the sessions from five different perspectives in order to be as clear as possible about the function and role of the sessions, taken together as a whole.

It is important to be clear that these three sessions are not about enabling participants to understand or deal with multicultural diversity. We presume that in order to develop a genuine appreciation for and skills in dealing with diversity, we have to first understand systemic racism. In American society, this is the issue that makes our growing diversity continually problematic for us.

Following is brief background commentary for facilitators regarding race and racism in America. This commentary is intended to strengthen facilitators' abilities to guide groups through the three-session design. It is certainly not exhaustive and is not intended to answer all the important questions about racism.



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### **“Four Features of Racism”**

**An introduction for facilitators to some underlying assumptions regarding racism as helpful background to this exercise.**

Racism is a background constant in this society. This brief commentary describes some the contours of this background constant. It will stimulate an “imagination shift” for some, if not all of us. We will learn to view racism from another perspective – one that reveals aspects and dimensions that are not part of usual conversations about the issue.

There are four striking features in the contours of racism that will provide focus and “relief” in our work (in the same manner that mountains stand out in a relief map).

1. **Race matters.** In this nation racial identity makes a difference – it matters. The fact that it matters still today is a reflection of the internal, psychic apartheid that was and is associated with legal, sociological apartheid. What began as an economic and political strategy, enforced by legal code, soon invoked a mythological context that assigned – and still assigns – social and moral superiority and inferiority. This suggests that race matters for all of us – not just for People of Color.
2. **Racism is more than the historical Black-White dichotomy.** It reflects the original racial binary of this nation – white and non-white. Everything flows from the original need to ascertain and legally define who is non-white. And, thus, through a process of elimination, who is white. This is especially important to understand today in the light of the dramatic demographic changes occurring across America. Every community “of Color” is subject to the power of this original binary. Public discourse about racism tends to be framed in a manner that suggests the real issue is just about black and white. We are frequently silent about the unique struggles for access experienced by other communities of Color. Our silence tends to make many people invisible (like American Indian communities) and keeps many other agendas “off the table.” (It is important to explore the malleability and ambiguity of the “color line” that separates the two poles of the binary – even when encoded in law.)
3. **Racism and other oppressions intersect.** *They are interlocking and develop a strong synergy.* Many thoughtful commentators have suggested that the trilogy of race, class and gender are intertwined in

such an intimate fashion in this society that you can't touch one without invoking the other two. Of course, there are many other circles of interlocking oppressions that emanate from and are associated with these three classical oppression systems: heterosexism, ageism, ableism, "lookism," etc. An important feature of racism for our work is the way it functions uniquely in relation to other forms of systemic oppression. In a fashion similar to the *warp and weft* dynamic of a woven cloth, racism cuts across other oppressions. Racial identity tends to shape how we experience other socially created identities. For example, one's experience of gender is relativized by race. A white male's experience of gender is dramatically different than an African-American male's experience. Race is the most powerful factor in the experiential difference. This means that racial identity powerfully influences how we experience other systemic oppressions.

4. **Identity formation** is the core feature of racism that reveals its forcefulness. Racialization assigns all individuals to a racial category and then interprets the social meaning of that category. This assignment process is lifelong and cumulative. Individuals in this society are racialized. Even those who come here from abroad, perhaps from societies where the race dynamic is not as pronounced, find themselves quickly enfolded in this dynamic process. Racism shapes individual identity. It also shapes institutional and cultural identity. This tri-fold racializing process happens synergistically and cumulatively.

These four features provide a background framework for our initial exploration of the dynamics of racism. They illuminate the forcefulness of racism in our society. They provide clues to understanding its present day role and its historical resiliency.



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### **A framework for three interlinked sessions**

#### **Participant Profile: *Who are these sessions intended for?***

This series is designed to be used in conjunction with the modules in *Getting Ahead in a Just-Gettin'-By World*. They can be used with a group that is racially mixed or with a racially homogenous group.

#### **Rational Objective: *What do you want participants to be "clear" about when the session is over?***

This series of exercises is designed to identify and clarify the daily barriers racism presents for People of Color and highlight the advantages it creates for white people. They are further intended to illuminate racism as an embedded reality in American society and underscore the importance of intentional strategies to confront and overcome the daily challenges it presents.

#### **Experiential Aim: *What do you anticipate participants will experience/feel during this session?***

These exercises are intended to occasion the experience, in general, of "Oh, I see!" For People of Color, they are meant to confirm deeply felt intuitions and insights, validate familiar coping strategies, and build confidence in the ability to overcome the daily challenges of racism.

For white people, the exercises will elicit a combination of incredulity and confirmation of deep insight and awareness. They will further experience an impetus to be intentional and "open-eyed" regarding the normally unacknowledged advantages they are given on a daily basis in relation to race.

#### **Enhanced Capacities: *What new or enhanced abilities do you intend participants will have?***

These exercises are intended to develop the capacity to discern the subtleties of embedded racism in everyday circumstances and the capacity to describe some of the contours of systemic racism.

#### **Shifts in perspective and mental models: *What new perspectives/perceptions are you intending to share?***

These exercises are designed to shift participants' view of racism from individual prejudice (attitude) and intentional discrimination to a more nuanced understanding of racism as an embedded, systemic reality that shapes everyday experiences – even without the clear presence of racial prejudice.

## **“The Exercise”**

### **SYSTEMIC RACISM: Daily strategies for survival and beyond**

#### **Setting the Stage**

Set the stage for this series of exercises by posing these questions:

“Is racial bias real? Is it a social constant – an ever present feature of our society?”

Entertain a couple of brief responses – “Yes”

You’re not looking for any answers for these, just putting the questions in the room.

“As we deal with poverty, how do we come to a deeper understanding of the daily challenges of racism?”

“How can we plan and anticipate these challenges more effectively?”

These questions highlight the primary aim of this divided racism module and its exercises.

**The flow of this module is: first**, we’ll explore what it means for an issue to be systemic; **second**, we’ll watch a short video and talk about it; **third**, we’ll apply the insights gained from the video to our own experience. We’ll also explore strategies for dealing with daily experiences of racism.

#### **Movement One      *Exploring a systemic issue: handedness***

**Use this exercise before introducing the Four Areas of Research in Module 4.** It helps people get a handle on what it means when we say something is systemic or embedded in our society.

Introduce this part of the exercise by asking: “Do we have any left-handed people in the room? Raise your hand if you’re left-handed.”

1. Explore our social bias for right-handedness:

“Lefties, would you say that our society is biased for right-handedness? What are some illustrations?”

(Get out several illustrations of our bias - scissors, notebooks, etc. Ask left-handed folk to talk about their experience with this bias. If there are no lefties in the room, then the right-handed people will also be able to illustrate. Facilitator should be prepared to help the process.)

2. What is the significance of these daily inconveniences/hassles?

“What do these daily inconveniences/hassles tell us about our society – what do they mean?” (Encourage discussion of this question)

*Summary from facilitator:* “These examples demonstrate how we have normalized right-handedness in our society. These daily

inconveniences are not simply manifestations of our individual, personal prejudice against “lefties,” are they? It doesn’t mean that the right-handed folks have something against left-handed folks. They are the effects of us having normalized right-handedness over a period of many generations. That is, being right-handed is the norm and being left-handed is different. Many things we use and even things we do are based on right-handedness. We shake hands or take an oath with our right hand. Even though, now, we are becoming more sensitive, it remains the case that right-handedness is the norm in our society. (Share illustrations and further explanation as necessary. Such as that the architectural standard for design is a 6 foot, right-handed male.)

3. Handedness: a systemic feature of our society:

*Summary from facilitator:* Handedness illustrates what a systemic issue is. It is “built-in” to our social processes and is expressed in the daily experiences of living. It is part of the way things are and how they operate. Another way to say it is that it is *embedded* in our society and institutions.

**Movement Two                      *Exploring Everyday Racism***

**Use this section in Module 5 after exploring the hidden rules of economic class**

Introduce this section by saying: “We’ve talked about the hidden rules of class. Now let’s look at other hidden rules. We are going to explore racism as a systemic issue, like handedness, and the ways it is present in everyday life.”

“What were some of the unvoiced expectations/assumptions that are expressed in the everyday experiences we mentioned that illustrate our bias for right-handedness?”

*Racism is this kind of an issue; it is embedded – built-in. But, it is much more destructive than handedness!*

Further introductory words connecting to the previous exercise can be done as needed.

1. Contextualizing the video:

We’re going to watch a video entitled *True Colors*. It is several years old (produced by ABC) and documents the experience of two professional housing testers from Chicago. ABC takes these two men – one Black, one White – to St. Louis and puts them in situations where they can secretly film and document their experiences. The video’s producers intend to draw our attention, especially, to the experiences of the Black tester in order to demonstrate how race matters in our society. Your special assignment is to watch the White tester and record all the advantages you see him receiving while the Black tester is routinely inconvenienced, hassled, ignored and insulted.

(Note: this video is broadly available in public libraries and resource centers. While it is several years old, its timeliness is striking!)

2. Video: *True Colors* (the video is about 20 minutes long)

3. Process/discuss the video

*Sample discussion format:* First, we simply want to recall the video:

“What scenes stood out for you, what do you remember? (get out several) Who were the main characters – what were their names? Who were other people in the video? (get a few out)”

Now, let’s explore our reactions to the video: “When were you most engaged? Did you have any emotional reactions – when? What emotions did you feel?”

“So, then, what was going on in this video? What did it illustrate about racism? Were you able to connect the video to our discussion on handedness? How? What did it illustrate about race and social norms?”

“Finally, let’s review the advantages experienced by the white tester (John). What did you write down? (Get out a long list on a flip pad) What do these tell us about racism? For those of you who are white, did any of these seem familiar – remind you of any of your experiences? Who benefits in these daily experiences? In what ways? Are most white people aware of these benefits/advantages?”

*Transition summary:* Clearly, John and Glen’s experiences were not simply illustrations of individual prejudice and discrimination. They illustrated something much more subtle and deeply embedded. Most of us who are white tend to be unaware of the many ways we benefit from the built-in biases that have normalized our racial identity. So, now we need to deepen our exploration of these dynamics and relate them to our own experiences. (elaborate further as needed)

**Movement Three *Survival and Beyond: strategies & resources***  
**Use this section in Module 6 as an addition to the introduction of resources.**

Let’s look at the picture of ‘exploitation’ again. (refer to the T-graph drawn in step 4 of J Pfarr Exploitation illustration.) We’re going to talk about this some more in relation to race. We will look more deeply at this issue in order to begin the process of crafting personal strategies for dealing with racism in our daily lives. (Remember and recall the video and discussion done in Module 5 sufficiently for this next discussion.)

1. Exploring the cumulative effects

Now, let’s talk a bit about the cumulative effects of these every day experiences on individuals – both People of Color and White people. For People of Color, what are the cumulative effects of these daily inconveniences, hassles, embarrassments, and insults? (facilitator:

think in terms of stress, frustration, anger, bitterness, numbness, jadedness; think also of physiological impacts: hypertension, weakened immune system, illness, etc. Remember the video True Colors if this exercise is being used in a different module. Refer back to and recall the video. Do enough recall with participants that the video and the group's conversation about it are "back in the room").

For White people, what are the cumulative effects of experiencing yourself, daily, as normative, racially speaking. How do the advantages that have been normalized impact the experience of being White? (subtle messages of confirmation, trust, being given the benefit of the doubt, etc.) While there are regular experiences of inconvenience for all of us – and frustrating hassles; for white people these are not related to race. They may be related to class, age, ability, gender, sexual orientation, etc. – but not race. And, they are not as predictable and consistent as the advantages related to race. (This underscores the fact that the experience of poverty is typically not the same for White people as it is for People of Color. Race lays a subtle layer over the experience of poverty which tends to moderate the experience and provide a different set of options.)

## 2. Strategies for Survival and Beyond

For People of Color: "What personal, family, and community strategies (including church) *work* when it comes to the daily challenge of managing, negotiating, handling these daily assaults upon your humanity?" (brainstorm some examples under each category – perhaps in small groups, or, if the entire group is small in number, do as a whole). (facilitator note: you are interested in the impact of people hearing one another's experience in this arena; of sharing strategies that work. Some people will recognize approaches they have done intuitively – naming them will be helpful. Others will hear new ideas and will recognize the importance of being intentional, especially when it comes to preparing children for life in this society.)

For White people: "what strategies can you employ to "see" and "understand" these episodes that make racial consciousness the norm for People of Color and socialize Whites to be racially unconscious?" Work with the same categories – personal, family, community. What actions might you take when you "see" a situation that is advantaging you while putting a Person of Color at a disadvantage?

## 3. Resources and Support

**Introduce this section in Module 8 as part of personal assessment of resources.**

(Facilitator: This can be a small group conversation and then listing as a whole group or a conversation/brainstorming with the entire group. Develop a list of resources and support needed using a flip pad for insights.)

Questions for People of Color:

“What support networks and resources are needed for you to thrive in the midst of these daily challenges?”

“Do these networks and resources exist, now? If not, how can you work with others to create them?”

Questions for White people:

“What do you need to maintain and deepen your awareness of the subtle ways race matters in your life?”

“What resources might assist you in thinking through ways you can be an ally to People of Color as a White person who daily accesses advantage and support from the systems of this society?”

### **Postlude            *Pulling It All Together***

**This section can be used as part of Module 11 personal planning.**

We have seen – and have done some work on – the importance of being intentional about strategies that help us survive, thrive and provide support for one another in the face of the daily challenges of systemic racism.

Clearly, we cannot understand these daily experiences of advantages based on white racial identity and disadvantages for people of color that we have discussed as simply expressions of personal prejudice and white bigotry. They are the result of “built-in” biases – they are systemic. They result from white identity being normalized in this society – much like we have normalized right-handedness (but with much more destructive results). They reflect advantages that most white folk are unaware of. We tend to frame our public conversations about racism only in terms of individual race prejudice and personal bigotry. Consequently, our society has not recognized and claimed responsibility for the subtle – and not so subtle – advantages that are automatically provided based on race (to white people).

This built-in advantage for white society affects our relationships with each other in ways that we normally do not see or talk about.

For white people: In the midst of dealing with poverty, are there ways that I can use the subtle advantages of white identity to help my family or friends of color and my community?

For people of color: Are there ways that I can counter the internalized messages from exploitation based on poverty and racial identity?