

Theories of racial superiority developed and flourished in earlier centuries and still survive today, but much present day racism is not based on conscious scientific beliefs. The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines racism as

- ‘1 a a belief in the superiority of a particular race; prejudice based on this.
 - b antagonism towards, or discrimination against other races, esp. as a result of this.
- 2 the theory that human abilities etc. are determined by race.’
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In the same dictionary the definition of ‘race’ includes human divisions identified by ‘distinct physical characteristics’ and nations that are regarded as having ‘distinct ethnic stock’. Today, treating someone badly because of nationality alone is usually also regarded as racism.

Many today do not hold conscious views of racial superiority but retain stereotypes about people from different countries or ethnic backgrounds that lead to discriminatory attitudes and actions. They may be unaware of their own attitudes or rationalise them. We all see nasty graffiti and the brick through the window as racism but a casual lack of understanding of peoples’ needs can be just as hurtful. The official report of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry states that

‘Racism in general terms consists of conduct or words or practices which disadvantage or advantage people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. In its more subtle form it is as damaging as in its overt form.’ [Read report here](#)

Individual racism often has an element of intent but Institutional Racism (where there is collective failure to deal with people properly) may well be unintentional. It is similar to Systemic Racism where policies, practices and systems that work against certain groups of people become embedded in organisations. For example, deciding to treat everyone in exactly the same way may sound fair, but may disadvantage a group whose needs are not met by that policy.

Racial Discrimination

The Equality Commission NI (ECNI) describes discrimination thus:

‘Discrimination is not simply unfairness. To be discriminated against means to be treated less favourably than others. Race discrimination is less favourable treatment on the grounds of colour, race, nationality or ethnic or national origin, or on the grounds of belonging to the Irish Traveller community.’

Direct Discrimination is to be treated less favourably because of your racial or ethnic background.

Indirect Discrimination is where a provision, criterion or practice is applied equally but puts someone from a particular race or ethnic background at a disadvantage.

Equality Commission Definition of Racial Harassment: ‘Harassment based on racial grounds occurs when unwanted conduct based on race or ethnic or national origins has the purpose or effect of violating someone’s dignity or creating an environment that is intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive. ... Racial harassment can include the making of racist jokes, banter, insults or isolating individuals.’

For further information on definitions of discrimination and service provision visit the ECNI [web site](#).

Additionally, the ECNI would like to see the law on racial discrimination strengthened to bring us in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. [Find out more here](#).

PSNI Definition of a Racist Incident

‘A racist incident is defined as any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim or any other person. A racial group can be defined as a group of persons defined by reference to race, colour, nationality or ethnic or national origins (this includes UK National origins i.e. Scottish, English, Welsh and Irish) and references to a person’s racial group refer to any racial group into which he/she falls. Racial group includes the Irish Traveller community.