



National Commission to Address  
Racism in Nursing

## Defining Racism

*(June 2021)*

**RACISM:** Assaults on the human spirit in the form of biases, prejudices, and an ideology of superiority that persistently cause moral suffering and perpetuate injustices and inequities.

*(National Commission to Address Racism in Nursing, April 2021)*

*The following document reflects the thought work of the National Commission to Address Racism in Nursing. Convened in January 2021, the Commission's vision is that the nursing profession exemplifies inclusivity, diversity, and equity creating an antiracist praxis and environments. More information on the Commission is available here:*

<https://www.nursingworld.org/practice-policy/workforce/clinical-practice-material/national-commission-to-address-racism-in-nursing/>.

### Overview

Words matter, and so does context alignment. This is especially true when there is discussion of and engagement in long-standing situations where harm often results in ways that challenge the deepest moral codes and the ability to trust others or ourselves. How nurses frame racism shapes the constellation of possibilities of the work of the National Commission to Address Racism in Nursing (the Commission). Clearly stating a working definition of racism was necessary in order to create a common baseline for nurses and others who are holding conversations, reflecting on their behavior individually or collectively, and reading or referring to the proceedings and deliberations of the Commission. The development of this definition was informed by both the literature and the words and stories of nurses. Agreement on a common definition was foundational for the work ahead.



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## Definition

Commissioners reflected on existing definitions of racism, looking for alignment with experiences within nursing and health care and for the passion that is necessary when considering a deeply troubling, long-standing systemic problem. The conclusion reached was that for the Commission's work to minimize confusion, maximize curiosity, and be in sync with forthcoming works, a newly created definition was needed.

**RACISM:** Assaults on the human spirit in the form of biases, prejudices, and an ideology of superiority that persistently cause moral suffering and perpetuate injustices and inequities.

With this definition, the Commission sought to 1) accurately capture the vulnerabilities as felt and experienced by those who have been in the crosshairs of racism and 2) reveal the character of both historical and present-day acts of racism in the nursing profession. In the end, the Commission drew upon the existing definitions and added to them to create a holistic definition that speaks to multiple aspects of racism. The Commission's definition reflects a "cause and effect"—the actions, behaviors, and thinking of an individual and/or group that directly impact another individual and/or group. Biases, prejudices, and an ideology that considers an individual or an identified group of people as superior result in suffering of others and contribute to injustice and inequity.

## Underpinnings

Everybody has a story. Stories create the space for turning to one another, questioning with curiosity, and listening without interruption to understand the lived experience and memories that define and shape identity. According to Christina Baldwin, an expert on storycatchers, we must respect how stories map the lives of us all. Baldwin notes that a story has the following elements:

**Chronology** . . . it begins and ends.

**Character** . . . it happens to somebody.

**Scene** . . . it happens someplace.

**Insight** . . . it offers a point/lesson.

As storycatchers, the Commission believes it was important to consider racism in nursing by hearing the experiences of nurses. Through a recounting by nurses on the Commission and a series of listening sessions, nurses of color shared their experiences of racism in academic and health care settings and the impact of racism on their professional practice and advancement within the profession. Common themes informed the Commission's deliberations. The listening sessions also made clear that the roots of racism in nursing run deep, and nurses' stories make visible the harm done.



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A review of the literature, both within and outside nursing, provided important insights. This review focused on identifying existing definitions or concepts of racism that could either be adopted by the Commission or inform the development of a new definition. High-level findings from an initial review of the literature reveal:

- Before 2018, authors typically shared their personal viewpoints on racism. However, few articles involved empirical scientific investigation or measure of structural, institutional, interpersonal, or internalized racism in health care.
- Inclusion of the word “racism” was typically limited to the discussion section. This may reflect the concern that it was not politically safe to use the term “racism” and/or the research was not valued by gatekeepers of publications, resulting in the exclusion of scholarly work in this area. This may also have resulted in persistent spinning in the space of political safety and tinkering around the edges. Failure to call out racism in nursing contributed to ignorance on the part of students, the profession, recipients of nursing care, and the broader public, resulting in both physical and moral harm.
- Articles often condemned racism but failed to generate real momentum for change.

The Commission considered historical and contemporary definitions and concepts of racism in the health care and racial equity space, including those expressed by:

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

“The congenital inferiority and worthlessness of a people.”

**Dr. Ibram X. Kendi**

“Racism is a marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities.”

“**Racial inequity** is when two or more racial groups are not standing on approximately equal footing.”

“A **racist policy** is any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups. By policy, I mean written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people.”



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“A **racist idea** is any idea that suggests one racial group is inferior to or superior to another racial group in any way. Racist ideas argue that the inferiorities and superiorities of racial groups explain racial inequities in society.”

**Dr. Camara P. Jones**

“Racism is a system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call ‘race’), that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources.”

**Institutionalized Racism Concepts**

- Different access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race.
- Explains the association between social class and race.

**Personally Mediated Racism Concepts**

- Different assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of others, determined by race.
- Different actions based on those assumptions.
- Prejudice and discrimination.

**Internalized Racism Concepts**

- Acceptance by the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth.
- Accepting limitations to one’s full humanity as determined by others.

The Commission’s final definition is also well grounded in nursing’s foundational documents, the *Code of Ethics for Nurses with Interpretive Statements* (2015) and the newly revised *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition* (2021). The Code of Ethics obligates all nurses to:

- Respect the human dignity and rights of all individuals regardless of status.
- Provide nursing services according to need, setting aside bias or prejudice.
- Contribute to a moral environment that demands respectful interactions among colleagues.



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- Integrate social justice to address unjust systems and structures.

A new section in *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice* speaks to respect, equity, inclusion, and social justice. This publication notes that “as systems of care, institutions, and policies have evolved, persons and entities in power positions set the specifics of care and the tone of care delivery. Such systems, whether purposefully or inadvertently, have created situations that respect some persons and disregard others.”

## Conclusion

One by-product of creating a new definition of racism is that the nursing profession has added to the understanding of what racism is and does to those who encounter it—a win for both the future and humanity.

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