

how white people look at blacks, why there's so much racial discrimination

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Introduction

The title “how white people look at blacks” risks treating two large and internally diverse populations as if every member sees race in the same way. A more accurate question is how anti-Black stereotypes were historically created, how they continue to influence perception, and why institutions can produce racial discrimination even when many individuals reject explicit racism. White people do not hold one uniform view of Black people, just as Black communities do not share one experience or political interpretation. Attitudes vary by nation, class, generation, education, religion, ideology, personal relationships, and exposure to accurate information.

The original essay correctly links modern prejudice to colonialism, apartheid, unequal material conditions, and media stereotypes. It also shifts between race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion without distinguishing them. Muslims are members of a religion, Arabs are an ethnolinguistic group, and neither category is a race in a biological sense, although both can be racialized and subjected to group-based suspicion. This revised analysis explains how anti-Black racism operates through history, cognition, representation, and institutions while also considering the related but distinct racialization of Arabs and Muslims.

Race as a Social and Political Category

Modern genetics does not support the idea that humanity is divided into discrete biological races with fixed moral or intellectual traits. Race is a social classification built around selected physical features, ancestry, and political history. Its categories change across countries and periods. A person considered Black, mixed, or White in one society may be classified differently elsewhere.

Calling race socially constructed does not mean racism is imaginary. Laws, property systems, schools, policing, labor markets, borders, and media have used racial categories to distribute opportunity and danger. Social categories become materially real through their consequences.

Slavery, Colonialism, and the Production of

Stereotypes

Anti-Black stereotypes were not neutral observations of existing conditions. They helped justify conquest, enslavement, land seizure, segregation, and labor exploitation. European and American writers portrayed Africans as intellectually inferior, hypersexual, violent, childlike, or incapable of self-government. These claims made domination appear natural rather than political.

The system also created the conditions later cited as proof of inferiority. Enslaved people were denied education and property, then described as uneducated and poor by nature. Colonial governments extracted wealth and disrupted institutions, then represented colonized societies as backward. This circular logic converted the effects of oppression into arguments for continuing it.

Apartheid and Structural Anti-Blackness

South African apartheid formalized racial classification through law. Black South Africans were dispossessed, restricted in movement, denied equal political rights, and forced into unequal labor and residential systems. The end of apartheid in 1994 removed the legal regime but could not instantly reverse accumulated inequalities in land, wealth, education, housing, and employment.

Julius Malema's argument that material conditions shape racial contempt identifies an important mechanism: visible inequality can be interpreted as evidence of personal or group failure when its historical production is ignored. Structural reform therefore matters alongside interpersonal respect. However, claims that no White person can respect a Black person without revolutionary economic change are too absolute. Personal solidarity can exist within unjust systems, though goodwill alone cannot dismantle them.

Explicit Prejudice and Implicit Association

Explicit prejudice involves consciously endorsed beliefs or hostility. Implicit associations are faster learned connections that may influence attention and judgment without deliberate approval. People repeatedly exposed to images linking Blackness with danger may interpret ambiguous behavior differently depending on the person's perceived race.

Implicit-bias language should not become an excuse that removes responsibility. Decisions in hiring, discipline, healthcare, lending, or policing require procedures that reduce subjective discretion, document reasons, and permit review. Training can raise awareness, but one workshop rarely changes institutional outcomes without accountability and redesigned processes.

Stereotype Threat and the Burden of Representation

Racial stereotypes also affect members of targeted groups. A person who knows that others may judge their group as intellectually weak or dangerous may experience additional pressure during an examination, interview, or encounter with authority. This does not mean performance differences are imaginary; it means social meaning can consume attention and increase stress.

Black individuals are also often treated as representatives of all Black people. A mistake by one person may be generalized to a group, while a White person's mistake is more readily understood as individual. This unequal burden is a form of cultural power.

Media Representation

News, film, television, advertising, and digital platforms influence which associations become familiar. Crime reporting can overrepresent certain suspects while giving less attention to structural causes or victimization within Black communities. Entertainment may rely on stereotypes of aggression, poverty, athleticism, servitude, or comic performance. Positive representation can also become narrow when Black characters must be exceptionally respectable to be treated as human.

Representation has improved in many settings, but numerical presence is not enough. Who writes the story, controls production, receives complex characterization, and benefits financially also matters. Media literacy should teach audiences to examine framing, omission, repetition, and the difference between an individual example and a population claim.

Institutional Discrimination

Discrimination does not require an official rule that names race. Housing patterns created by past exclusion can shape school funding, property wealth, environmental exposure, and transportation. Hiring through informal networks may reproduce a workforce that resembles existing leadership. Facial-recognition or risk-scoring systems may inherit bias from data or design choices.

Evidence should be evaluated carefully. A disparity alone does not identify the mechanism, but consistent unequal outcomes warrant investigation. Institutions should examine criteria, compare similarly situated cases, test for adverse effects, and involve affected communities in reform.

Perceptions of Discrimination

Current surveys show that Americans disagree sharply about the scale of racial discrimination. Pew Research Center reported in 2024 that three-quarters of Black adults said they had experienced racial discrimination regularly or from time to time. A 2025 survey found that most Americans believed Black people faced at least some discrimination, but Black adults were substantially more likely than White adults to say Black people faced a great deal of it (Pew Research Center, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2025; Said, 1978).

These differences matter because people often evaluate institutions through different experience. Someone who has not personally recognized discriminatory treatment may interpret inequality as evidence that the problem has ended. The absence of awareness is not proof of absence.

Racialization of Arabs and Muslims

The original essay also discusses Arabs and Muslims before and after September 11, 2001. The categories should not be confused. Arabs include Muslims, Christians, members of other religions, and nonreligious people. Most Muslims worldwide are not Arab. Sikhs and other South Asian people have also been attacked because aggressors wrongly perceived them as Muslim or Middle Eastern.

Racialization occurs when diverse people are assigned a single visible identity and treated as a security threat. Images of the permanently foreign, violent, fanatical Arab or Muslim existed before September 11 and intensified through terrorism coverage, war, and political rhetoric. Criticism of a government, ideology, or religious practice is not automatically prejudice; the problem arises when collective guilt replaces evidence about individuals.

Why Generalization Persists

Human beings use categories to process information, but social power determines which generalizations become dangerous. Out-group members may be perceived as more alike than members of one's own group. Dramatic examples are easier to remember than ordinary lives, and fear-based political messages receive attention.

People also protect beliefs connected to identity. Evidence challenging a stereotype may be dismissed as an exception, while confirming incidents are treated as typical. Reducing prejudice therefore requires sustained exposure to counterevidence, relationships under conditions of equality, and institutions that do not reward sensationalism.

Intergroup Contact

Meaningful contact can reduce prejudice when groups meet with equal status, cooperate toward common goals, and receive support from authorities. Contact under hierarchy may have the opposite effect. A person who encounters another group only through service work, policing, or television has a distorted sample.

Schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, and civic organizations can create cooperation, but diversity without inclusion may leave social networks segregated. People need opportunities to speak, share authority, and challenge unequal treatment safely.

Education and Historical Literacy

Education should explain slavery, colonialism, segregation, apartheid, migration, civil-rights movements, and contemporary inequality without reducing Black history to suffering. Black intellectual, artistic, scientific, political, and everyday life belongs within the general curriculum.

Teaching should also avoid assigning guilt or innocence solely by ancestry. Students are responsible for how they understand and respond to inherited institutions, not for personally committing events before their birth. Historical literacy creates responsibility by clarifying how the present was made.

Economic Inequality and Racial Interpretation

Economic reform is important because wealth affects housing, education, health, legal assistance, and political influence. Yet class and race are not interchangeable. A wealthy Black person may still face racial profiling, while a poor White person can face severe class disadvantage without anti-Black racism.

Policies should address both universal needs and group-specific barriers. Broad investment in healthcare, wages, housing, and schools can reduce inequality, while fair-lending enforcement, voting protection, anti-discrimination law, and targeted repair may address mechanisms universal programs miss.

Law, Policy, and Organizational Practice

Anti-discrimination rules need accessible reporting, independent investigation, protection from retaliation, and meaningful remedies. Employers can standardize interview questions, publish promotion criteria, review pay, and reduce reliance on informal sponsorship. Schools can examine discipline and placement patterns. Media organizations can diversify decision-making and audit

recurring frames.

Data must be used ethically. Racial information can reveal inequality, but it can also expose individuals or reinforce crude categories. Collection should have a defined purpose, privacy protection, and a plan for action.

Language and Respect

The language used to discuss racism should not reproduce it. The phrase “the blacks” can reduce people to a category, while “Black people” recognizes personhood and reflects common contemporary usage in the United States. Terms vary across societies, and people should be allowed to describe their own identities.

Respect also means avoiding the expectation that Black colleagues or students must educate others about racism. Institutions should invest in scholarship, training, and professional expertise while listening to lived experience (Bonilla-Silva, 2022).

Conclusion

There is no single answer to how White people view Black people because neither population is uniform. Anti-Black racism is better understood as a historically produced system of stereotypes, institutional practices, and unequal material conditions that can influence perception even when explicit racial hatred declines. Slavery, colonialism, segregation, and apartheid created both degrading ideas and durable distributions of power.

Media representation, implicit association, residential and economic structures, and political rhetoric can continue those patterns. The racialization of Arabs and Muslims demonstrates a related process of collective suspicion, but race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion must be distinguished. Progress requires accurate history, equal-status contact, fair institutional procedures, economic opportunity, legal enforcement, and complex representation. The goal is not to decide whether one entire race respects another. It is to identify the specific mechanisms that deny people equal dignity and to change them (Steele, 2010).

References

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