

# Aversive Racism

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Aversive racism is a form of contemporary racism that manifests at the individual level. Compared to the traditional form of racism, aversive racism operates, often unconsciously, in subtle and indirect ways. People whose behavior is characterized by aversive racism (aversive racists) sympathize with victims of past injustice, support the principle of racial equality, and regard themselves as nonprejudiced, but at the same time they possess negative feelings and beliefs about blacks or other groups. It is hypothesized that aversive racism characterizes the racial attitudes of many well-educated and liberal whites in the [United States](#), as well the attitudes of members of dominant groups toward minority groups in other countries with strong contemporary egalitarian values but discriminatory histories or policies. Despite its subtle expression, the consequences of aversive racism are as significant and pernicious as those of the traditional, overt form (e.g., the restriction of economic opportunity).

## **NATURE OF THE ATTITUDES**

A critical aspect of the aversive racism framework is the conflict between aversive racists' denial of personal prejudice and the underlying unconscious negative attitudes and beliefs about particular minority groups. Because of current cultural values in the [United States](#), most whites have strong convictions concerning fairness, justice, and racial equality. However, because of a range of normal cognitive, motivational, and sociocultural processes that promote intergroup biases, most whites also develop some negative feelings toward or beliefs about blacks. They are often unaware of these feelings, however, or they try to dissociate such attitudes from their nonprejudiced self-images. The negative feelings that aversive racists have toward blacks do not reflect open hostility or hatred. Instead, aversive racists' reactions may involve discomfort, uneasiness, disgust, and sometimes fear. That is, they find blacks "aversive," while at the same time they find any suggestion that they might be prejudiced "aversive" as well. Thus, aversive racism may often involve more positive reactions to whites than to blacks, reflecting a pro-in-group rather than an anti-out-group orientation, thereby avoiding the stigma of overt bigotry and protecting a nonprejudiced self-image. Recent research in social cognition has yielded new techniques for assessing both unconscious (implicit) and conscious (explicit), attitudes and stereotypes, and these methods provide direct evidence of the dissociated, often ambivalent, attitudes that characterize aversive racism.

In contrast to traditional approaches that emphasize the psychopathology of prejudice, the feelings and beliefs that underlie aversive racism are rooted in normal, often adaptive, psychological processes. These processes include both individual and intergroup factors. Individual-level factors involve cognitive biases associated with social categorization. For instance, when people categorize others as members of specific groups, which often occurs automatically, people evaluate in-group members more favorably than out-group members,

remember positive information better about in-group than about out-group members, and discount negative actions by in-group members more than those by out-group members. In terms of motivation, people have needs for power and status, not only for themselves but also for their groups, and bias can help foster a sense of status and esteem, both individually and collectively. Sociocultural influences also contribute to aversive racists' negative feelings and beliefs. For example, upon categorization, cultural stereotypes are spontaneously activated. Intergroup processes, such as system-justifying ideologies, perceived competition over material resources, or conflict between cultural values, can also form a basis for the negative component of aversive racists' attitudes.

Other forms of contemporary racial biases, such as symbolic racism and modern racism, also recognize the complex nature of whites' racial attitudes. Like aversive racism, Modern Racism Theory posits that whites' attitudes toward blacks have both positive and negative components, but the role of ideology is different. Aversive racism is presumed to reflect the racial biases of political liberals, whereas modern racism is hypothesized to represent the subtle bias of conservatives. Although both aversive racists and modern racists strongly endorse egalitarian values, what they mean by "equality" differs. Whereas aversive racists are concerned about equality of outcomes, modern racists, because of their conservatively based ideologies, emphasize equality of opportunity. Thus, beliefs associated with conservative ideologies, such as the perception that blacks' lack of motivation accounts for racial disparities, can justify discriminatory behaviors.

What distinguishes the aversive racism framework from Symbolic Racism Theory is the nature of the relationship between the components. The aversive racism position proposes that the attitudes of aversive racists involve separate, dissociated positive and negative components, which are in conflict and thus may, at times, be experienced as ambivalence. The concept of symbolic racism, which has evolved over time, emphasizes the blending of the different components into a single orientation. Specifically, symbolic racism reflects the unique assimilation of individualistic values and negative racial affect. It involves both the denial of contemporary discrimination and negative beliefs about blacks' [work ethic](#), which produces resentment of blacks' demands for special benefits because of their race. Thus, although aversive racism and symbolic racism perspectives often predict similar behaviors, such as resistance to policies designed to benefit blacks, they are the result of different underlying processes.

## **SUBTLE BIAS**

The aversive racism framework also helps to identify when discrimination against blacks and other minority groups will or will not occur. Whereas old-fashioned racists exhibit a direct and overt pattern of discrimination, aversive racists' actions may appear more variable and inconsistent. Sometimes they discriminate (manifesting their negative feelings), and sometimes they do not (reflecting their egalitarian beliefs).

Because aversive racists consciously recognize and endorse egalitarian values and because they truly aspire to be nonprejudiced, they will not discriminate in situations in which strong social norms would make discrimination obvious to others and to themselves. Specifically, when people are presented with a situation in which the normatively appropriate response is clear (i.e., in which right and wrong is clearly defined), aversive racists will not discriminate against blacks. In these contexts, aversive racists will

be especially motivated to avoid feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that could be associated with racist intent. To avoid the attribution of racist intent, aversive racists will either treat blacks and whites equally or they will respond even more favorably to blacks than to whites. In such a situation, wrongdoing, which would directly threaten their nonprejudiced self-image, would be too costly. However, because aversive racists still possess feelings of uneasiness, these feelings will eventually be expressed, but they will be expressed in subtle, indirect, and rationalizable ways. For instance, discrimination will occur in situations in which normative structure is weak, when the guidelines for appropriate behavior are vague, or when the basis for social judgment is ambiguous. In addition, discrimination will occur when an aversive racist can justify or rationalize a negative response on the basis of some factor other than race. Under these circumstances, aversive racists may engage in behaviors that ultimately harm blacks, but they will do so in ways that allow them to maintain their self-image as nonprejudiced and that insulate them from recognizing that their behavior is not color-blind.

Evidence in support of the aversive racism framework comes from a range of paradigms. For instance, white bystanders who are the only witness to an emergency (and thus are fully responsible for helping) are just as likely to help a black victim as a white victim. However, when white bystanders believe that others also witness the emergency (distributing the responsibility for helping), they are less likely to help a black victim than a white victim. In personnel or college-admission selection decisions, whites do not discriminate on the basis of race when candidates have very strong or weak qualifications. Nevertheless, they do discriminate against blacks when the candidates have moderate qualifications and the appropriate decision is therefore more ambiguous. In these circumstances, aversive racists weigh the positive qualities of white applicants and the negative qualities of black applicants more heavily in their evaluations. Analogously, aversive racists have more difficulty discounting incriminating evidence that is declared inadmissible when evaluating the guilt or innocence of black defendants relative to white defendants in studies of juridic decisions. In interracial interactions, whites' overt behaviors (e.g., verbal behavior) primarily reflect their expressed, explicit racial attitudes, whereas their more spontaneous and less controllable behaviors (e.g., their nonverbal behaviors) are related to their implicit, generally unconscious attitudes.

Aversive racism also contributes to opposition to policies designed to benefit blacks, such as [affirmative action](#), but also primarily in rationalizable ways. Whites generally support the principle of [affirmative action](#) more than specific policy implementations, which contain elements that allow them to rationalize opposition on the basis of factors other than race (e.g., unfairness). Thus, aversive racists' responses to public policies are substantially influenced by how these policies are framed. They express general support for affirmative action when addressing historical and contemporary discrimination, but they tend to oppose a policy when it is portrayed as benefiting blacks in particular, or when the description implies it involves quotas or reverse discrimination.

Generally, then, aversive racists may be identified by a constellation of characteristic responses to racial issues and interracial situations. First, aversive racists, in contrast to old-fashioned racists, endorse fair and just treatment of all groups. Second, despite their conscious good intentions, aversive racists unconsciously harbor feelings of uneasiness towards blacks, and thus they try to avoid interracial interaction. Third, when interracial interaction is unavoidable, aversive racists experience anxiety and discomfort, and consequently they try to disengage from the interaction as quickly as possible. Fourth, because part of the discomfort that aversive racists experience is due to a concern about acting inappropriately and appearing prejudiced, aversive racists strictly adhere to established rules and codes of behavior in interracial situations that they cannot avoid. Fifth, their feelings will get expressed, but in subtle, unintentional, rationalizable ways that disadvantage minorities or unfairly benefit the majority group. Nevertheless, in terms of conscious intent, aversive racists do not intend to discriminate against people of color—and they behave accordingly when it is possible for them to monitor the appropriateness of their behavior.

## **COMBATING AVERSIVE RACISM**

Traditional prejudice-reduction techniques have been concerned with changing conscious attitudes (“old-fashioned racism”) and blatant expressions of bias. Attempts to reduce this direct, traditional form of racial prejudice have typically involved educational strategies to enhance knowledge and appreciation of other groups (e.g., multicultural education programs), emphasize norms that prejudice is wrong, and involve direct (e.g., mass media appeals) or indirect (dissonance reduction) attitude-change techniques. However, because of its pervasiveness, subtlety, and complexity, the traditional techniques for eliminating bias that emphasized the immorality of prejudice and illegality of discrimination are not effective for combating aversive racism. Aversive racists recognize that prejudice is bad, but they do not recognize that *they* are prejudiced.

Nevertheless, aversive racism can be addressed with techniques aimed at its roots at both the individual and collective levels. At the individual level, strategies to combat aversive racism can be directed at unconscious attitudes. For example, extensive training to create new, counter-stereotypic associations with social categories (e.g., blacks) can inhibit the unconscious activation of stereotypes, an element of aversive racists' negative attitudes. In addition, aversive racists' conscious attitudes, which are already egalitarian, can be instrumental in motivating change. Allowing aversive racists to become aware, in a nonthreatening way, of their unconscious negative attitudes, feelings, and beliefs can stimulate self-regulatory processes that not only elicit immediate deliberative responses that reaffirm conscious nonprejudiced orientations (such as increased support for policies that benefit minority groups), but that also produce, with sufficient time and experience, reductions in implicit negative beliefs and attitudes.

At the intergroup level, interventions may be targeted at processes that support aversive racism, such as in-group favoritism. One such approach, the Common In-group Identity Model, proposes that if members of different groups are induced to conceive of themselves more as a single, superordinate group, or as subgroups within a more inclusive social entity, rather than as two completely separate groups, attitudes toward former out-group members will become more

positive through processes involving pro-in-group bias. Thus, changing the basis of categorization from race to an alternative dimension can alter perceptions of “we” and “they,” thus undermining a contributing force to contemporary forms of racism, including aversive racism. For example, black interviewers are even more likely to obtain the cooperation of white respondents than are white interviewers when they emphasize their common group membership (e.g., shared university identity, as indicated by insignia on their clothes) than when they do not. Intergroup interaction within the guidelines of the Contact Hypothesis and anti-bias interventions with [elementary school](#) children that emphasize increasing their social inclusiveness can also reduce bias through the processes outlined in the Common In-group Identity Model.

Despite apparent and consistent improvements in expressed racial attitudes over time, aversive racism continues to exert a subtle but pervasive influence on the lives of black Americans and members of other disadvantaged groups. Although the expression of this form of bias is more subtle than are manifestations of old-fashioned racism, aversive racism has consequences as significant as blatant bias. Even though it is expressed in indirect and rationalizable ways, aversive racism operates to systematically restrict opportunities for blacks and members of other traditionally underrepresented groups.

In addition, because aversive racists may not be aware of their implicit negative attitudes and only discriminate against blacks when they can justify their behavior on the basis of some factor other than race, they will commonly deny any intentional wrongdoing when confronted with evidence of their bias. To the extent that minority-group members detect expressions of aversive racists' negative attitudes in subtle interaction behaviors (e.g., nonverbal behavior) and attribute the consequences of aversive racism to blatant racism, aversive racism also contributes substantially to interracial distrust, miscommunication, and conflict. Nevertheless, aversive racism can be addressed by encouraging increased awareness of unconscious negative feelings and beliefs, emphasizing alternative forms of social categorization around common group membership, and providing appropriate intergroup experiences to support the development of alternative implicit attitudes and stereotypes and to reinforce common identities.

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"Aversive Racism." [Encyclopedia of Race and Racism](#). Retrieved February 05, 2019 from Encyclopedia.com:

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