

Cultural racism found to worsen health inequities between racial groups

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Racism expressed through cultural norms can perpetuate negative health outcomes for non-white groups, according to a study by UC Berkeley School of Public Health.

Researchers reviewed sociological and [racism](#) research to determine the effects of cultural racism on [public health](#) for the report, published in the *Milbank Quarterly*. The authors concluded that this type of racism can create similar [health](#) disparities as overt and institutional forms of racism.

Cultural racism is the widespread values and beliefs that normalize white socioeconomic power. It's made visible by way of the language, [symbols](#), and media of dominant social groups, according to lead author and health equity researcher Dr. Eli Michaels, who received her Ph.D. from Berkeley Public Health in 2022 and is now a health equity researcher at Mathematica.

"Mounting evidence shows that [chronic stress](#) is associated with negative health outcomes because the body constantly has to adapt," said Michaels. Racism activates the body's stress response which, when done over and over again, puts the body in a chronic state of distress.

This can lead to numerous health issues, such as increased risk of chronic illness and even death. Moreover, increased stress coupled with [limited resources](#) can elicit maladaptive coping mechanisms, like [substance abuse](#) and risk-taking, that can create another layer of secondary health problems.

These findings corroborate prior research that shows discrimination worsens health inequities between white and non-white groups by using a non-systematic literature review of empirical evidence. As a conceptual paper, the study contributes a novel correlation between cultural racism and its effect on public health.

"There's been plenty written about cultural racism, but this was the first application putting it in this framework," said Michaels. "I think cultural racism in particular has been overlooked because it's hard to see."

The authors recommend that future research should measure cultural racism to better understand its scope and impact on public health. In terms of solutions at the institutional level, Michaels believes that corporate policies that address harmful language and symbols can affect change, such as the NFL team Washington Commanders changing their name and removing offensive Native American imagery from their branding in 2020. Individual interventions, too, such as workplace trainings that address cultural sensitivity, can help.

Dr. Amani Allen, a prominent race and socioeconomic health researcher at Berkeley Public Health and study co-author, was a key impetus for the seven-year long study. Tracy Lam-Hine of Stanford University School of Medicine, Thu Nguyen of Harvard University, and Gilbert Gee of UCLA co-authored the report.

More information: ELI K. MICHAELS et al, The Water Surrounding the Iceberg: Cultural Racism and Health Inequities, *The Milbank Quarterly* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/1468-0009.12662](https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-0009.12662)

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