Robbie W.C. Tourse
Johnnie Hamilton-Mason
Nancy J. Wewiorski

Systemic Racism in the United States

Scaffolding as Social Construction

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Robbie W.C. Tourse
Boston College School of Social Work
Chestnut Hill, MA, USA

Johnnie Hamilton-Mason
Simmons College School of Social Work
Boston, MA, USA

Nancy J. Wewiorski
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
Bedford, MA, USA

To our families who have lived and continue to live through the struggles against racism with grace and dignity

Foreword

W. E. B. DuBois, the famous sociologist, wrote that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the color line (DuBois, 2007, p. 15). How has that problem continued into the twenty-first century—with such insistence? In the first two chapters of this book (see pages 1–23), authors Tourse, Hamilton-Mason, and Wewiorski provide a conceptual framework to address that question, highlighting "scaffolding" as a cohesive structure of reinforcement and continuation of racism.

> *"It is the scaffolding … that supports and maintains racial discrimination … that helps to prevent the collapse of this morphing entity… Racism morphs, but the scaffolding continues to hold it in place… It is the structural stability of the scaffolding, based on interchangeable parts and cross bracing, that has enabled and promoted the evolution of racism to forms that are now more sophisticated and often less capable of being identified"* (p. 7).

Faced with a moment of great urgency to discuss race in America, people of concern and goodwill seek frameworks in which to discuss such a socially charged topic. This book provides a particularly coherent framework for such discourse because the authors analyze how the social system is constructed, functions, and persists.

To understand the framework the authors create to define, describe, and discuss Systemic Institutional Racism, consider the following visual exercise:

- IMAGINE a construction toy/game with interlacing pieces in colors red, yellow, orange, and blue.
- CONSTRUCT a creative form from each color.
- CONNECT the four color forms to each other—to make a single form.
- NAME the completed form "A S*ocial Construction*."
- IDENTIFY and name those parts of the final social construction form: "poles" that anchor the structure vertically, and "rungs" that brace the structure by going around the poles.
- SHOW how the structure has "interchangeable" and "interconnected" parts reinforcing the structural form and preventing its collapse.

When the authors' conceptual framework is visualized, we see why comments like "I don't see color," or "Some of my best friends are…," simply miss or avoid the power of firmly constructed reality. In a systemic framework, color is not simply a category; it is both constructed in a particular manner and *also* connected to the larger constructed framework. Individual pieces of the construction exist, but they are *also* connected to their same color components and the larger constructed framework.

Scaffolding Poles and Rungs The authors define five "upright poles" of the scaffolding based on Young's (p. 10) five concepts of how oppression is developed and sustained: *exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.* They also provide examples of "…how the interconnectedness of these five areas of oppression help to solidify racial scaffolding." Emphasizing frameworks of theorists who highlight issues of economic stratification and power, six component dimensions in the development of racial oppression are then presented (pp. 10–12):

- Initiation of oppression
- Mechanisms of oppression
- Privileges of oppression
- Elite maintenance of oppression
- Rationalization of oppression
- Resistance to oppression

These six dimensions in the development of racial oppression inform the conceptualization of the supporting "rungs" that are structured around the scaffolding's "upright poles." The supporting rungs are *colonialism, capitalism, class structure, legal structures, the distribution of privileges and benefits, and prevailing intellectual thought and scientific theories* (p.12).

Systemic Institutional Racism (a form of oppression) is defined early in the book and types of racism are also described including *aversive* racism, *dominative* racism, *normative/symbolic,* and *cultural* racism (p. 6). The authors agree with proponents of Critical Race Theory "…that racism as a social construction eclipses other forms of oppression and should be viewed structurally" (p. 6).

Scaffolding and People of Color The refinement and reinforcement of this scaffolding over time has led to the institutionalized ways in which all groups of color have been constrained historically and continue to be constrained today (p. 6). To illustrate the structural stability of racial scaffolding based on interchangeable parts and cross-bracing, the authors apply the framework to experiences of four core groups: First Nation Peoples, African Americans, Mexicans, and Chinese (Chap. 3, pp. 25–38). Based on the authors' premise, these are the first groups to experience continual racial bias, and the groups upon which inbred contemporary systemic institutional racist infrastructure is grounded. Scaffolding can also be applied to other components in the Interconnected Institutional Web including *health, social services, finances, government, industry, the military, religion, the legal system, housing, and education* (p. 12).

Scaffolding and Education Public education in the United States is a component of the Institutional Web, so I applied the authors' framework to sample educational experiences of African Americans and children of First Nations in the United States. When the concept of "scaffolding" is applied to public education for African Americans, a history of oppression and resistance emerges. A primary pole of the scaffold is *exploitation* in enslavement, and the pole of *violence* has been used to maintain the pole of *exploitation*. The rungs of *capitalism* and *class structure* buttress the scaffold. Significant contradictions arise between two other buttressing rungs of the scaffold—prominent in African American history—the *legal structure* and *scientific theories*. While racist "scientific" theories were used to try to prove black intellectual inferiority (Jackson & Weidman, 2006, pp. 29–61), laws were also passed to prevent black people from learning to read and write. The ironic contradiction is clear; if black people's intellectual inferiority can be shown scientifically, why was it necessary to pass laws to *prevent* them from learning to read and write? That obvious contradiction did not prevent passage of laws in eight states making literacy illegal for black people. The strong pole of **violence** was firmly planted in the scaffold and used to enforce the contradictory anti-literacy laws (Williams, 2005, pp. 203–208).

Another historical contradiction is revealed in reinforced joining of two poles on the scaffold representing *cultural imperialism* and *exploitation* related to educational treatment of First Nation Peoples. Many children from First Nations on this continent were forced to attend government or church-related schools beginning in the late nineteenth century. Only English was spoken in school, and children were forbidden to and punished for using their native languages. Many years later during World War II, the languages of some First Nation people were used as Codes by the U.S. military to safely send military messages. People who were forbidden to speak their languages in schools were asked to use them in military service. The First Nations Code Talkers were very successful, but were not honored for their World War II military service until 2001—56 years after the war ended (National Museum of the American Indian Education Office, 2006).

Within the Institutional Web the authors present, education is related to all other components. Of particular note is the relationship between education and housing. Recent scholarship by Richard Rothstein (2017) in *The Color of Law* details how, in the 1940s and 1950s, government policy at the federal, state, and local level racially segregated housing and frequently demolished integrated neighborhoods in cities. The Federal Government also subsidized the development of suburbs with policies that excluded black people. The result is that for many years housing patterns have been a major reason that schools are becoming more segregated than they were in 1954, when Brown v Board of Education outlawed segregation in public schools (Rothstein, 2017).

Reality and Acknowledgments For people seeking to understand racism within an institutional network, this book stands out in its presentation of a framework in which to understand not only what racism *is,* but also how racism *works*! In the discussion of examples of the cross-bracing of interchangeable parts, readers gain greater clarity about the interconnectedness of components of racism in the daily lives of people of color. Chapter 7 (pp. 101–114) on "Intersectionality" illustrates

the "cross-bracing" by using Critical Race Theory to capture the complexity of the scaffolding of racism within the concept of intersectionality. Defining racial oppression as more than a single ideology or occurrence, "counter stories" by people of color are used to examine both personal experience and history. Complex contradictions often emerge. The authors note for example that African Americans can be both very invisible and very visible at the same time. They are often invisible in written history at the same time that they are highly visible in racial profiling. "Everything done by people of color is infiltrated by these conflicting forms of discrimination which are structured on power and privilege" (p. 103).

In addition to describing what racism is and how it works, in Chap. 9, the authors also indicate models of resistance that illustrate the strength of the interlocking system supporting racism. Additionally, these models also indicate what is required to deconstruct racism and continue and improve the age-old struggle for social justice. The models are defined as diverse forms of formal and informal opposition to social institutions, policies, and practices that are experienced as oppressive. Antiracism is defined as "…the practice of identifying, challenging and changing the values, structures and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism" (p. 137). Antiracism movements and models presented include the Civil Rights Movement, Liberation Health, Liberation Theology, Undoing Racism, Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock, and Critical Race Theory. "All models emphasize some form of resistance directed at deconstructing the rungs and poles of systemic racial scaffolding with the ultimate goal of eliminating oppression" (p. 139). For social models designed to combat racism to be successful, there must first be acknowledgement of the problem. As James Baldwin said prophetically:

"Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced" (Kenan, 2010).

School of Education, Boston University   Vivian R. Johnson
Boston, MA, USA

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Preface

The purpose of this book is to articulate the essence of racism in the United States. Racism is embodied in the oppressive scaffolding that historically assisted in the development of the United States and is still embedded and continues to evolve in this country's ongoing construction. For example, it is present in economic, political, and social structures and systems that govern this country. Additionally, this book revisits historically what keeps this scaffolding in position currently, and how it intersects with other areas of discrimination. We identify basic concepts that are important for a full understanding of racism in America: oppression, social construction of race, the institutional web, privilege, intersectionality, and scaffolding. Finally, the book examines the relationship between racism and justice and discusses activism directed at deconstructing institutionalized racism.

One would think that by this point in American history racism would have been eliminated; however, it has dynamic sociological and psychological scaffolding that anchors and shapes the societal infrastructures (e.g., education, the penal system, the economy) that support ongoing racism in this country. Treaties, laws, codes, and policies that oppress, discriminate, and denigrate and that evolved over hundreds of years in this country have reinforced and sustained the inequitable outcomes for its peoples of color. The societal and social dimensions of racism are entrenched in the Nation's psyche, supported by an internalized psychological need for power and control by whites that continues to exist, even today. Both the societal and the social dimensions are an integral part of the scaffolding that maintains racism in the United States.

Racism is *imbedded* in every facet of American life and saturates individual sense of being through inequities and biases such as marginalization and distancing. Its existence at multiple hierarchical levels—individual, organizational, and societal—makes it a very strong and entrenched force that is virtually invisible to many in the society because it appears to be the norm. Racism also intersects with and is entrenched in social subsets such as gender, class, sexual orientation, and functional ability. When one becomes aware of all the elements that comprise the scaffolding for maintaining racism and that help to keep the scaffolding in place, racism appears so overwhelming and pervasive that it can seem impossible to eradicate. Deconstructing this scaffolding helps us to understand how racism might be changed.

The nine chapters of this book provide a deeper understanding of the scaffolding and other psychological, social, and structural mechanisms that maintain racism in the United States. Scenarios are provided that bring to life the racial inequities and perspectives that exist in this country. These scenarios illuminate some of the documented historical and contemporary experiences, as well as the collective lived experiences and observations of the authors, beginning during the segregation era.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of racism in the United States, giving a brief perspective of the forefathers' engagement in the established order of that time that supported racial discrimination; it defines racism for the purposes of this book; and it discusses some theoretical concepts that are important for understanding racism. Most importantly, this chapter introduces and describes the concept of *scaffolding* as the means of perpetuating racism from its historical formation in this country to the present. The concept of scaffolding is used throughout the book to provide an understanding of the various components of racism as it permeates American society.

Chapter 2 looks closely at discrimination as it is exemplified in the myriad acts that malign, denigrate, physically harm, and globally oppress individuals and groups. This chapter succinctly explicates the multifaceted and complex ways in which discrimination becomes an intrinsic aspect of one's life and particularly, how it is used by some towards others. It ends with definitions of some concepts that manifest acts of discrimination.

Chapter 3 examines the four major racial groups of color that historically were the targets of legalized racial discrimination during the formation and expansion of the United States. It also briefly explains the historical context that supported this discrimination. Each of the four groups—Africans, First Nation People, Mexicans, and Chinese—is discussed within the context of historical institutionalized racial discrimination. They are also discussed in terms of how the components of the scaffolding established and maintained their subordinate position in American society relative to the dominant position of whites.

Chapter 4 focuses on how racism is manifest in the phenomenon of immigration. It defines the concept of immigration, examines the history of immigration in the United States, and presents some of the theories that explain the movement of people. This chapter also analyzes in greater detail the relationship between systemic racism and immigration within the identified core groups, using examples of how the core groups, as well as other more recent arrivals, are treated.

Chapter 5 examines racism as an intricate part of who we are. Internalized racism comes from centuries of acceptance and reinforcement of societal norms that reflect an unequal society. This chapter examines how racism influences the physic infrastructure of the individual by discussing racial identity, discussing the difference between race and ethnicity, and noting two racial identity models that can identify where people are in their racial development.

Chapter 6 examines entrenched racism that operates to create and maintain racial inequalities at the broad societal level. Racial disparities in poverty and accumulated wealth are examined to illuminate the operation of this structural form of racism. Using a systems theory framework, we also describe and discuss the operation of

structural racism on three levels—individual, organizational, and societal—and then use employment as an example to examine its impacts.

Chapter 7 looks at the intersection of racism with other subsets of discrimination such as gender, class, and ethnicity. This chapter also discusses oppression and elements that influence dominance—power and cultural sway. In addition, the chapter examines colonization, immigration, and their intersections with race. Finally, the chapter emphasizes how the overlay of racial discrimination influences and complicates further life locations.

Chapter 8 examines the connection between racism and social justice. Social justice is defined and the processes by which it is achieved are considered through the examination of inequality and types of justice such as distributive, procedural, and interactional justice. We explore the social construction of justice for the core groups and recent immigrants through examples. An intersectional analysis is applied to further understand the ways in which gender, sexual orientation, immigration status, and ethnicity intersect with racial scaffolding.

Chapter 9 discusses in depth the deconstruction of racism through activism. It addresses models and liberation theories and past movements that coalesce into today's activism. Two different movement styles relevant for contemporary activism are presented.

Chestnut Hill, MA   Robbie W. C. Tourse
Boston, MA   Johnnie Hamilton-Mason
Bedford, MA   Nancy J. Wewiorski

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About the Authors

Robbie W.C. Tourse retired in 2008 from Boston College Graduate School of Social Work after a 29-year career at that institution. During her tenure there she was Director of Field Education, Coordinator of the Worcester/Paxton Off-Site Program, and taught in the clinical sequence. She received her B.A. from Spelman College, her M.S. from Simmons College School of Social Work, and her Ph.D. from the Lynch School of Education at Boston College in Administration in Higher Education. Her clinical interests involve cultural/racial issues; transdisciplinary practice, particularly between public schools and mental health facilities in urban areas; and field education. Dr. Tourse also developed and directed a social service department in a community development corporation before joining Boston College. In addition, throughout her years of clinical practice and public service, she consulted with and/or co-led social work and medical groups as well as other entities on racial and cultural understanding and their integration in the work place. She has co-edited a book and has numerous publications in journals and chapters in books. Dr. Tourse has also presented papers in her areas of interests nationally and internationally. She received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Massachusetts Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers in 2010. Since retirement, Dr. Tourse has been an adjunct professor at Simmons College School of Social Work teaching courses in human behavior, racism, and group work.

Johnnie Hamilton-Mason is a Professor at Simmons College School of Social Work. She received her B.S. from the State College of Boston, her M.S.W. from Simmons College, and her Ph.D. from Smith College School for Social Work. From 2004 to 2007, Dr. Hamilton-Mason served as Director of the Doctoral Program at Simmons College School of Social Work (SSW). She co-founded the SSW's Pharnal Longus Academy for Undoing Racism. From 2001 through 2008, she served as a Harvard University W.E.B. DuBois Institute nonresident fellow in African American research. Her scholarship and research interests are primarily on African American women and families, the intersection of cross-cultural theory and practice, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. In 2013 Dr. Hamilton-Mason received the Greatest