Achieving Health Equity

naming and addressing the impacts of racism on health

Camara Phyllis Jones, MD, MPH, PhD

Keynote Address
All For One Summit
Allegheny County Health Department Division of Maternal and Child Health
Allegheny County Infant Mortality Collaborative

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
December 4, 2018
Dual Reality: A restaurant saga
I looked up and noticed a sign . . .
Racism structures “Open/Closed” signs in our society.
It is difficult to recognize a system of inequity that privileges us.

Those on the outside are very aware of the two-sided nature of the sign.
Is there really a two-sided sign?

Hard to know, when only see “Open”. A privilege not to HAVE to know. Once DO know, can choose to act.
What is racism?

A system

What is racism?

A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value

What is racism?

A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks (which is what we call “race”)

What is racism?

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

What is racism?

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

What is racism?

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
- Saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources

Levels of health intervention

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
Addressing the social determinants of health

Primary prevention

Safety net programs and secondary prevention

Acute medical care and tertiary prevention

But how do disparities arise?

- Differences in the quality of care received within the health care system
- Differences in access to health care, including preventive and curative services
- Differences in life opportunities, exposures, and stresses that result in differences in underlying health status


Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
Differences in access to care

Differences in exposures and opportunities

Differences in quality of care
(ambulance slow or goes the wrong way)

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
Addressing the social determinants of equity:

Why are there differences in resources along the cliff face?

Why are there differences in who is found at different parts of the cliff?

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
3 dimensions of health intervention
3 dimensions of health intervention

Health services
3 dimensions of health intervention

Health services

Addressing social determinants of health

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
3 dimensions of health intervention

*Health services*

*Addressing social determinants of health*

*Addressing social determinants of equity*

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
"Why do we spend so much money on ambulances at the bottom of the cliff?"

“Why are the Greenies launching themselves over the edge of the cliff?”

Jones CP et al. *J Health Care Poor Underserved* 2009.
“This situation looks fine to me. What’s the problem with a three-dimensional cliff?”

Levels of Racism

- Institutionalized
- Personally-mediated
- Internalized

Institutionalized racism

- Differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society, by “race”

- Examples
  - Housing, education, employment, income
  - Medical facilities
  - Clean environment
  - Information, resources, voice

- Explains the association between social class and “race”

Personally-mediated racism

- Differential assumptions about the abilities, motives, and intents of others, by “race”
- Differential actions based on those assumptions

- Prejudice and discrimination

- Examples
  - Police brutality
  - Physician disrespect
  - Shopkeeper vigilance
  - Waiter indifference
  - Teacher devaluation

Internalized racism

- Acceptance by the stigmatized “races” of negative messages about our own abilities and intrinsic worth

- Examples
  - Self-devaluation
  - “White man’s ice is colder” syndrome
  - Resignation, helplessness, hopelessness

- Accepting limitations to our full humanity

Levels of Racism: A Gardener’s Tale

Who is the gardener?

- Power to decide
- Power to act
- Control of resources

- Dangerous when
  - Allied with one group
  - Not concerned with equity

“How is racism operating here?”

- **Identify mechanisms**
  - **Structures:** the *who?, what?, when?, and where?* of decision-making
  - **Policies:** the written *how?*
  - **Practices and norms:** the unwritten *how?*
  - **Values:** the *why?*

“How is racism operating here?”

- **Identify mechanisms**
  - **Structures**: the who?, what?, when?, and where? of decision-making
  - **Policies**: the written how?
  - **Practices and norms**: the unwritten how?
  - **Values**: the why?

“How is racism operating here?”

- **Identify mechanisms**
  - **Structures:** the *who?*, *what?*, *when?*, and *where?* of decision-making
  - **Policies:** the written *how?*
  - **Practices and norms:** the unwritten *how?*
  - **Values:** the *why?*

“How is racism operating here?”

- **Identify mechanisms**
  - **Structures:** the *who?*, *what?*, *when?*, and *where?* of decision-making
  - **Policies:** the written *how?*
  - **Practices and norms:** the unwritten *how?*
  - **Values:** the *why?*

“How is racism operating here?”

- **Identify mechanisms**
  - **Structures:** the who?, what?, when?, and where? of decision-making
  - **Policies:** the written how?
  - **Practices and norms:** the unwritten how?
  - **Values:** the why?

What is health equity?

- “Health equity” is assurance of the conditions for optimal health for all people

- Achieving health equity requires
  - Valuing all individuals and populations equally
  - Recognizing and rectifying historical injustices
  - Providing resources according to need

- Health disparities will be eliminated when health equity is achieved

Barriers to achieving health equity

- **Narrow focus on the individual**
  - Self-interest narrowly defined
  - Limited sense of interdependence
  - Limited sense of collective efficacy
  - Systems and structures as invisible or irrelevant

- **A-historical culture**
  - The present as disconnected from the past
  - Current distribution of advantage/disadvantage as happenstance
  - Systems and structures as givens and immutable

- **Myth of meritocracy**
  - Role of hard work
  - Denial of racism
  - Two babies: Equal potential or equal opportunity?
Japanese Lanterns: Colored perceptions
The colors we think we see are due to the lights by which we look. These colored lights distort and mask our true variability.
What is “race”? A social classification, not a biological descriptor. The social interpretation of how one looks in a “race”-conscious society.
Life on a Conveyor Belt: Moving to action
Racism is most often passive.
1. Name racism
2. Ask “How is racism operating here?”
3. Organize and strategize to act
Camara Phyllis Jones, MD, MPH, PhD

Past President
American Public Health Association

Senior Fellow
Satcher Health Leadership Institute and Cardiovascular Research Institute

Adjunct Associate Professor
Department of Community Health and Preventive Medicine
Morehouse School of Medicine

cpjones@msm.edu
(404) 756-5216
(404) 374-3198 mobile