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What are the stages of the Six Stages Framework?

The six stages of the framework operate on a spectrum from +1 to +6 on a positive axis, and the assessments currently focus on supporting people to understand the progression up through these stages. However, the stages also exist on a negative axis, from -1 to -6. If someone progresses down the negative axis, it means their views and attitudes about those who are different are becoming negatively entrenched. The stages are developmental in nature and build on each other, so anyone at stage -5 will also exhibit the views and behaviours of those at the preceding stages.

Stages +1 and +2 on the positive axis mirror stages -2 and -1 on the negative axis. For someone at these stages, it is possible to move up the positive axis, showing increasing awareness of racial equity and justice and a willingness to change, or to move down the negative axis, indicating the deeper entrenchment of negative positions, views and possibly behaviours. There is less detail on the negative axis as it is currently only included to illustrate the dynamic and polar-opposite nature of the conceptual framework.

The Six Stages Framework tool can be used with anyone, regardless of their ethnicity, colour, racial background or other characteristics, to explore their understanding and ability to deal with racism. Even some black, Asian and other ethnic minority people will be at Stage +1 and head upwards on a positive trajectory to stage +6. Equally, there will be some who are on stage -1, who move down on a negative trajectory to stage -6, where their views of those who are a different colour or culturally different from them and their views of racism become entrenched.

The framework can also be used to support those who are experiencing discrimination and/or racism to explore their own understanding of the issues, and to explore their ability and capacity to deal with racism.

On the positive axis, individuals start at stage +1, with little appreciation of how racism operates; they can then move up to stage +6, to obtain a greater understanding of racism and to become more adept at challenging it. When faced with racism, those at this stage will have a greater capacity for dealing with it, by drawing upon their understanding of racism and how it operates.

On the negative axis, individuals start at stage -1, with little appreciation of how racism operates – some may not have even considered that racism exists and are therefore more vulnerable when they experience it. Those on the negative axis can move down to stage -6, and become overwhelmed in the face of their experiences and their views about those who are different. When faced with racism, they may feel totally powerless (more so than those on the positive axis) and their capacity to deal with their experiences is limited. They are likely to be even more traumatised by their experiences than those on the positive axis, with more damaging long-term effects to their self-esteem.

The six stages of the negative axis are shown in Fig. 1 and explained in more detail below.

Stage – 6: Extremists/leadership

People who are at this stage have strong racist views and work to champion them to others and recruit others to join them. They are likely to pose a risk of terrorism, extremism and violence. They create false narratives and world views that they ‘sell’ to others.

Stage – 5: Entrenched views and behaviours

People at this stage exhibit strong racist views and enjoy sharing them with others. They try to persuade others of their point of view. Their views are extreme and can be verbally aggressive and threatening. They demonise people who are different, and may be a danger to the community and anyone who is different.

Stage – 4: Anger and blaming of ethnic minorities

These people are likely to attack and reject the views of those who are different. Their ways of thinking may be, or may become, more extreme, and they may blame those who are different for their plight.

They use gaslighting techniques (a form of psychological manipulation) by attempting to sow seeds of doubt in their victims’ minds, to make them question their own beliefs, and leaving them feeling anxious and overly sensitive about their situation. They can make them so anxious, in fact, that other people may view them as having a ‘chip on their shoulder’ or a victim mentality, or of ‘crying racism’.

People at this stage are likely to believe, for example, that their jobs are being taken away from them or that their country is being taken over (and they want their country back). They tend to believe false narratives, conspiracy theories and world views, and, as they believe that this is ‘where they fit or belong’, it can take hold of their imagination, so they are at risk of being radicalised and groomed by those at stages –5 and –6.

Stage – 3: Attacking and rejecting

Common features of people at this stage include resenting time spent on issues about racial differences and inequity, with displays of outrage or projection of their own racism onto others. They may believe conspiracy theories about racism, and argue that it does not exist. They may accuse those who complain of racism of having a ‘victim mindset’ and of remembering a time when racism was ‘a lot worse than it is’. They may verbally attack others (including victims) who raise issues about racism, and use racist stereotypes in their conversations. Typical comments and beliefs they might express are:

- Why do black lives matter when all lives matter?’
- Black protesters are violent and therefore they do not get my empathy or compassion.
- We are not racist and we deserve an apology for the criticism that has been levelled at us!

They accuse those who call out racism of ‘race-baiting nonsense’, and may reject the existence of racist intent, arguing that it is racist to accuse someone else (and/or their supporters) of being racist. They may go as far as to demand apologies from others, which can trigger resentment and create further division between different parties, setting up a ‘them versus us’ situation (depending on who agrees with them).

They are likely to be swayed by conspiracy theories about racism and argue that it does not exist; they may reject terms like ‘microaggression’ and ‘unconscious bias’, stating they

are ‘unscientific’.

Stage – 2: Dismissive and avoidant

People who are at this stage are aware of race issues, but they are often dismissive about them and may believe that racial inequity and social injustice are not big issues. They may exhibit denial (and avoidance) of racial injustice, telling themselves and others that there are far more important inequalities and injustices in the world. They are more comfortable discussing other issues, like gender and disability, and point out inequalities other than racism. The denial and discomfort that arises from this leads to avoidance, resistance and anger, and shifts attention away from racism to other issues that they find more manageable and tolerable.

They often believe that racism occurs in other countries from their own, so it really isn’t an issue for them. They respond to others’ claims or concerns about racism by making excuses and being dismissive. They find reasons to explain away racial discrimination, to dismiss it and play it down, perhaps by stating that no harm was intended by someone’s comments, or that their comments were merely dumb, or taken out of context, thus suggesting that the complainants are over-reacting (demonstrating a ‘victim mindset’), of having ‘negative narratives’ and of remembering a time when racism was ‘a lot worse than it is now’.

They avoid facing race issues, which distinguishes them from people at stage –1, who are oblivious and ignorant of the issues. While they have a sense that something is wrong, they push it down because it’s too uncomfortable for them to face.

However, they may also be going through a quiet awakening about racial injustice, feeling uncomfortable about what they see and hear, even though they find ways to justify it to themselves. Conversations on the topic make them feel anxious and they try to avoid them. Their learned responses reflect their attitudes and they say things like:

- I don’t see colour.
- Racism is not an issue.
- Black people and other ethnic minorities do quite well in society.

Stage – 1: Unaware with silence and denial

Anyone at this stage is characterised by a lack of awareness of racial equity or diversity issues, often presenting as ignorant or being oblivious or ethnocentric. Their learned responses often reflect their attitudes, and they say things like:

- I’m not racist; one of my mates is black.
- I love all coloured people.
- I don’t see colour’.

They may be silent or deny race issues, perhaps by keeping their head down and hoping a conversation will end, or by diverting a discussion to another subject that seems safer. Some of them believe that issues of racial injustice are unimportant, displaying an ethnocentric perspective, and exhibiting aversion-type behaviours including avoidance of social integration.

The six stages of the positive axis are shown in Fig. 2 and explained in more detail below.

Stage + 1: Unaware, silence and denial

These people lack awareness of racial equity and diversity issues, often coming across as being ignorant or oblivious. There is silence or denial of the issues, and they keep their heads down, hoping conversations will end, possibly diverting them to some other 'safer' topic. Some may believe that issues of racial and social injustice are unimportant. Their perspective tends to be ethnocentric and they may show aversion-type behaviours and avoid social integration. Often they don't see racial inequity or racism, and have learned responses that are a reflection of their attitudes and ignorance. Typically they may say:

- I don't see colour.
- Racism is not an issue.

They are more likely to share anecdotes about their experiences of people from ethnic minorities that are based on stereotypes, perhaps relating to a recent holiday, the friendliness of such groups, or what lovely smiles they have (e.g. 'smiles that can light up a whole room').

Stage + 2: Dismissive and avoidant

People who are at this stage are aware of race issues, but often dismiss them or deny them, believing that racial inequity and social injustice are not big issues. They tell themselves (and others) there are far more important inequalities and injustices to consider.

They feel discomfort and anxiety which leads to avoidance, resistance and anger, and they try to shift attention away from racism to other issues that they find more manageable, such as gender and disability. This may be because they are experiencing a quiet awakening, and are beginning to feel uneasy about what they see and hear. They may have an inkling something is wrong but push such thoughts away, instead finding ways to justify such things and avoiding uncomfortable conversations. Often their learned responses reflect their attitudes and lack of understanding. Typically they say things like:

- I'm not racist – one of my mates is black.
- I love all coloured people.
- I don't see colour.
- Black people and other ethnic minorities do quite well in society.

This group differs from people at stage +1 because they avoid race issues, rather than being oblivious to or ignorant of them. Often they like to believe that racism occurs in other countries, rather than their own country. Their responses to claims of racism are to make excuses to justify why there cannot be racial discrimination or racism, and may take the stance, for example, that no harm was intended by their comments – that their comments were dumb, unintended, or taken out of context – and may suggest that the complainant over-reacted, to play down the issues. Further, they may accuse complainants of having a 'victim mindset' and referring to a time when racism was 'a lot worse than it is'.

Stage + 3: Becoming aware of issues of race

Here, people are becoming more aware of differences and racism, questioning the stances they held at stages +1 and +2. They may recognise inequity and racism but do not understand why or what they can do about it, feeling uncomfortable talking about them, and possibly overwhelmed. They may also feel helpless or guilty, even shame, perhaps demonstrating a desire to make things okay for everyone. Often they view themselves as advocates, and talk about how hard it must be for those who are different, and report knowing someone who is different, yet remain unaware of their own biases and behaviours. They are awakening to issues of injustice they encounter, for example

in the media, and may discuss with interest current issues about racial injustice they've

heard about, or 'taking the knee', or Marcus Rashford discussing food poverty. Usually this is only done informally, among family, friends and close colleagues.

Stage + 4: Open to learning

These people are genuinely open to learning and having meaningful conversations about race, including challenging perceptions and biases. They listen willingly and re-educate themselves, perhaps seeking out literature on the experiences and testimonials of black people and other ethnic groups, showing willingness to gain more understanding. They are likely to reflect and engage readily in conversations and will explore – and own – any unconscious bias they have. They freely share honest accounts of their own experiences and level of social integration. They are also open to concepts of privilege, including 'white privilege', and other positions of power. They are willing to work on any unintended microaggressions or biases.

Stage + 5: Ability to see the bigger picture

This group of people are able to reflect and genuinely engage in conversations and issues of social and racial injustice and racism because they can see the bigger picture around race. They are capable of exploring and owning their unconscious bias, privilege status, or other positions of power informed by the reading and education they undertook in stage +4. Similarly, they are able to share honest accounts of their experiences and discuss levels of social integration. They may experience a paradigm shift.

Overall, they see a 'greater good' and the need to act for the sake of humanity. They speak up and challenge racism when they see it both within their personal lives and elsewhere, like in the workplace, and are keen to explore their role as an ally and discover more about how they can make a difference.

Stage + 6: Leadership qualities

People at this final stage +6 may take on leadership roles to promote racial equity, inclusion and social justice. They may desire to join with others to challenge social injustice and racism, possibly through community engagement, in a greater cause, with the understanding that there is more that unites us than separates us.

They have genuine compassion and empathy, instead of a focus on the 'self' or on attitudes such as the potential for 'losing something' if and when things change (e.g. lose a position of privilege); they are willing to 'come out' of any cave of privilege with newfound resilience so that they can engage and interact with others in different ways.

They actively support others and appreciate the power of collaboration for the sake of humanity with the understanding that racism is about power and systems. So they focus their energies on supporting change in this area, and speak up to challenge racism or perceptions of racism when others are afraid to. They are clear about allyship and their role.