

**GUIDE**

# **Racial literacy in the workplace**

**Developing the knowledge  
and skills to recognise racism**

Racial literacy is the knowledge and skills to recognise and understand racism in society. This includes knowing where and how racism occurs and being able to identify it, respond to it and prevent it from occurring.

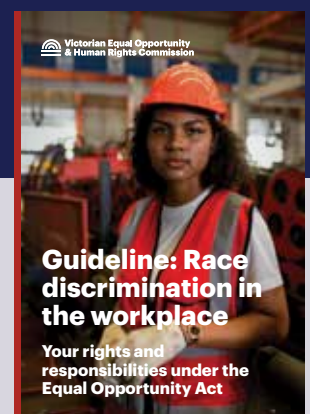
Racial literacy helps people to recognise that racism is everywhere in society, encompassing systems, structures of power, individual attitudes and behaviours. It also helps people to create change and reduce the harm of racism.

This guide is an introduction to racial literacy and contains information on:

- what racism is
- what racism can look like
- the law on racism in Victoria
- other key concepts.

For more information on anti-racism policies, take a look at the Commission's *Guideline: Race discrimination in the workplace* (Guideline).

Download the Guideline at [humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources](https://humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources).



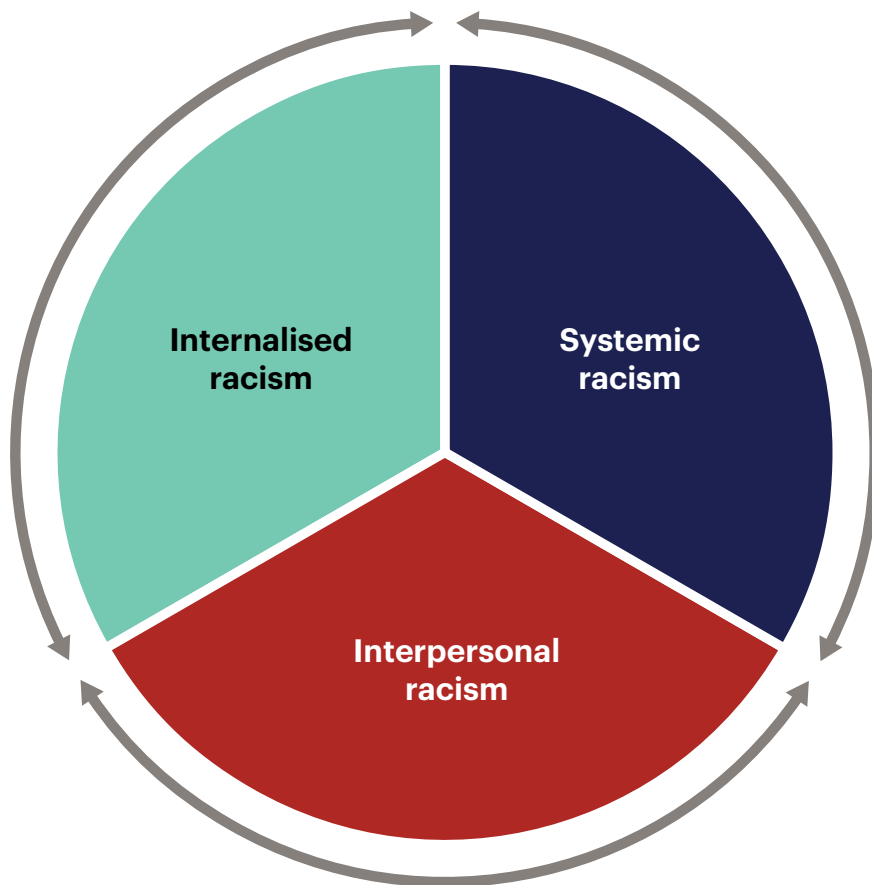
# What is racism?

Racism is the idea that a particular race is inferior or superior to others. Racism appears in social systems, beliefs and attitudes that reinforce superiority and difference.

Racism has different influences: individual attitudes, social values and institutional practices. These influences can come from policies, laws, practices, media, stereotypes, attitudes and prejudice (unfair assumptions or beliefs about someone's character).

Racism has detrimental health, social and economic impacts for individuals, communities and workplaces.

There are three main types of racism that overlap and influence one another.



## Systemic racism

Systemic racism refers to the structures, rules and norms that directly or indirectly discriminate, exclude or disadvantage people from racially marginalised (or racialised) groups.

Systemic racism includes things like cultural norms, laws and belief systems, as well as policies, procedures and practices in the workplace.

**For example:** a workplace overlooks all applicants for jobs with 'non-Australian' sounding names.

## Interpersonal racism

Interpersonal racism is when someone discriminates against, excludes or marginalises someone (or a group of people) from a racialised community.

Anyone can perpetrate interpersonal racism, including people who may themselves be the targets of racism. Interpersonal racism can be conscious and unconscious – the perpetrator isn't always aware that their behaviour is racist.

Interpersonal racism can be **subtle** or **overt**.

**Subtle interpersonal racism** includes microaggressions, comments, questions, assumptions or actions that reinforce racist ideas or stereotypes about people and communities.

**For example:** making assumptions about a colleague's capability and skills based on their race or skin colour.

**Overt interpersonal racism** describes purposeful and/or obvious harmful attitudes or behaviours towards another person or group because of their race.

**For example:** staff members who refuse to interact or talk with colleagues from racially marginalised backgrounds because they don't consider them their equals.

## Internalised racism

Internalised racism is when someone believes or even supports racist ideas or attitudes about their own race or cultural group. This can lead people to hide or present themselves and their culture differently, think badly of themselves, distance themselves from or even attack their own community and culture.

**For example:** a young Pacific Islander Australian wants to be a researcher but believes there's no place for them because of stereotypes of Pacific Islanders as 'unreliable', so they decide not to enrol for study.

# What is the law on racism in Victoria?

VICTORIA	COMMONWEALTH
<i>Equal Opportunity Act 2010</i> <i>Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001</i>	<i>Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i>

Some experiences of racism may not be covered under these laws. However, racism is the cause of race discrimination and racial vilification, and so any meaningful attempt to prevent and respond to racism will also address these behaviours.

## **Equal Opportunity Act 2010 (Vic)**

The Equal Opportunity Act (EOA) prohibits discrimination in Victoria on the basis of race in certain areas of public life, including employment. Under the EOA, race means someone's colour, descent or ancestry, nationality, ethnic background or any characteristics associated with a particular race.

This discrimination can be **direct** or **indirect**.

**Direct discrimination** happens when someone is treated unfavourably or unfairly because of their race.

**For example:** a manager promotes a white employee instead of an employee with Vietnamese heritage who is more qualified, better suited to the role and has worked at the organisation longer.

**Indirect discrimination** is when a rule, condition or practice is put in place that applies to everyone but will affect some people unfairly because of their race.

**For example:** requiring all staff to remove headdresses and jewellery for ID photos. This may be indirect discrimination if the rule disadvantages people who wear headdresses and other accessories for cultural reasons (and not those who do not) and it isn't reasonable.

**Positive duty** is a legal obligation under the EOA for employers to take proactive, reasonable and proportionate steps to prevent discrimination, sexual harassment and victimisation as far as possible.

**For example:** see [Chapter 4. Understanding the positive duty](#) in the Commission's Guideline: Race discrimination in the workplace.

## Racial and Religious Tolerance Act 2001 (Vic)

The Racial and Religious Tolerance Act prohibits racial and religious **vilification**. Vilification is public behaviour that encourages others to hate or ridicule a person or group of people based on their race or religion.

**For example:** *someone falsely accuses a staff member from a different racial background when a theft occurs in the office, claiming it's typical behaviour for their race and that 'people like them make the country unsafe'.*

## Racial Discrimination Act 1975 (Cth)

The Racial Discrimination Act is Australia's federal anti-racial discrimination law which prohibits discrimination based on race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin in Australia. This also includes discrimination occurring in employment.

# Key concepts

The language we use to talk about racism is important and complex, and it evolves over time. The language used may not meet everybody's needs. However, this is a basic overview of key concepts relevant to racial literacy.

## Cultural safety

Cultural safety is a concept created by Māori practitioners, which has been adapted to the Australian context predominantly by First Peoples. It refers to a workplace environment that acknowledges and values a person's cultural identity and experiences, rather than threatening or undermining them.

**For example:** *staff receive training about embracing diversity in the workplace and how to respectfully interact with colleagues from different racial or religious backgrounds.*

## Intersectionality

Intersectionality describes how a person's life can have different intersecting identities (e.g., gender, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic background, disability) and how a person can experience different or unique forms of discrimination or 'intersectional discrimination' as a result.

**For example:** *a woman of colour who expresses frustration in the office is called 'angry, scary and unfit for leadership' whereas a white man expressing the same emotion is described as 'a passionate go-getter'.*

# Privilege

Privilege is an advantage or protection that some people or groups receive in society. Privilege is commonly used in the context of white privilege, where white people receive advantages and protections in Australia that are not equally given to all. This is due to colonialism and other historical and ongoing practices that intentionally or unintentionally favour white people.

**For example:** *a white employee who requests leave to attend a family funeral gets approval without follow-up. A First Peoples colleague who requests cultural leave to return to Country for a ceremony is required to provide a certificate and give specific details before getting it approved.*

# Racialisation

Racialisation is a political and social process of defining groups by their race. It uses race to explain differences or different expectations between groups. Racialisation is often used to marginalise groups or determine their place in society, so some groups become 'negatively racialised'.

**For example:** *'African men are aggressive, violent and undisciplined'. This is (negative) racialisation because it suggests that this is how all African men can be expected to behave and marginalises them because of it.*

See [Annex A: Key terms](#) in the Commission's *Guideline: Race discrimination in the workplace* for a brief introduction to some other terms essential to building racial literacy and [Chapter 2: Understanding racism](#) for further detail on these topics.



**This guide briefly introduces racial literacy concepts. It is just a first step for those looking to become anti-racist. We encourage further training and other education measures.**

For more information, download the Commission's *Guideline: Race discrimination in the workplace* available at [humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources](https://humanrights.vic.gov.au/resources) or via the QR code.



*This information is intended as a guide only. It is not a substitute for legal advice.*



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