

## Peer Review Article

# Dismantling Structural Racism in Organisational Systems

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### Abstract

Globally, our societies are riddled with racism and so are our organisations. While there are many excellent “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI) practitioners tackling racism and promoting racial equity in organisations, we contend that the language of “diversity” and “inclusion” risks diluting the impact of this work. Something stronger may be required to address racism’s tenacious structural character. We propose thinking about this work in organisational systems as more fundamentally “dismantling structural racism.” The dismantling process can be enabled by having a fuller understanding of what structural racism is, and how it affects people working in organisations, as well as by having a deeper appreciation of the history of racism, rooted in colonialism, and serving the ends of economic exploitation. With this greater awareness of how racism is built into, and manifests, in organisational systems, we are better equipped to act in more systemic ways towards dismantling it. In this article, we share some of what we are learning about convening and engaging in organisational systems with the purpose of navigating both structural and cultural change.

## Keywords

colonialism, organisational culture, white supremacy, Black and Indigenous people, people of colour, white people, whiteness

## Introduction

Structural racism is embedded in the fabric of our societies, intertwined with our intergenerational family histories, as well as dominant cultural narratives (Menakem, 2015; Saad, 2020; Andrews, 2021). Organisations—as part of the social fabric—are significant sites of structural racism (Lopes & Thomas, 2007; Daniels, 2022;). In our experience as systems change practitioners who work to support change in a wide range of systems, including organisational systems, we find that structural racism creates stuckness, polarisation, and alienation. This is problematic for any organisation. But for the social purpose and social justice organisations we often work with, these dynamics of stuckness, polarisation, and alienation caused by unaddressed structural racism can put at risk their core vision of creating “good” in the world. The aim of this article is therefore to contribute to a better understanding of structural racism in organisations and share what we are learning about dismantling structural racism.

We are writing as three colleagues within an organisation called Reos Partners. Our colleague Adam Kahane, writing in this same edition of JASC, describes Reos’ work as “facilitat[ing] collaborations among diverse stakeholders who are trying to transform the social systems of which they are part” (2023, p. 2). While we are not organisational development or management specialists, our approach to systems change has meant that we have gained experience working to dismantle structural racism in organisational systems. At the same time, we have been addressing the challenges of structural racism as it manifests in our own organisation.

As authors, we are all currently located in the South African context, where the colonial and apartheid past creates particularly pernicious and pervasive forms of racism. However, we consider structural racism to be a global problem, creating dynamics of stuckness, polarisation, and alienation in a wide range of geographical contexts. To make this personal, we (Mahmood, Akanimo, and Rebecca) open this article with personal introductions to position ourselves and our experiences of growing up in different country contexts.

Mahmood writes: Born in apartheid South Africa, my social consciousness as a young boy and teenager was shaped by palpable uncertainty and political transition. I am the son of an Indian immigrant father and Indian-Malay mother, who had experienced first-hand dispossession, forced removals, and legislated exclusion. I grew up, schooled, and worked with my parents and siblings in community schools and shops, in segregated Indian areas and neighbouring mixed-race and Black communities. My early memories include direct racial insults and exclusion from white spaces, as well as a sense of community and solidarity with people of colour. As a young adult and professional, my exposure

to white dominant spaces grew. While I often felt peripheral, I also began to reckon with my own privilege. My racial identity developed alongside my religious identity, particularly in my later years as a university student. In my affiliation with a West African Sufi path, I was attracted to the Sufi impulse towards resistance of colonial enterprise, alongside the pursuit of spiritual emancipation. I see myself as being a part of a wider African story of struggle and triumph, of brokenness and healing, as well as disappointment and hope.

Akanimo writes: I was born and raised in Nigeria, a predominantly Black country. As a young boy, it was clear to me from the everyday affirmations of names, beauty, and success standards that whiteness had a pervasive character that infused almost all societal norms even though white individuals were not a significant demographic presence. I was praised for being as beautiful as a white boy because of my fair complexion. My upbringing was characterized by the coexistence of two distinct worlds—one defined by my Black identity and the other by the aspirational ideals of whiteness. The “white world” represented an ideal to emulate, encompassing linguistic and educational pursuits, philosophical adherence, and religious adoption. In the last decade, I have undertaken a continuous process of self-unsuturing and self-decolonization.

Rebecca writes: I am a white woman, born in England to British parents. When I was seven, my father’s work in the Anglican church saw us relocating to apartheid South Africa. In that work, he was exposed to racial injustice in a very immediate way. I have a visceral memory of sitting at the supper table as a 10-year-old, hearing him share experiences of witnessing police brutality in a nearby informal settlement. These stories never made the mainstream media and awoke a fierce awareness in me about dual and hidden realities in a deeply polarised society. My teenage years were an immersion in the more hidden realities of South Africa, where I received an education that seemed more significant to me than my school education. It wasn’t until my 30s that I awoke to the extent to which I was part of the problem in a post-apartheid society that remained polarised. My failure to understand and take responsibility for my intact white power and privilege rendered me untrustworthy in co-creating a shared future. The last 15 years have involved a major re-orientation in terms of how I show up as a white person.

Our distinct positionalities afford us unique perspectives on the issue of structural racism, but we find common ground in our shared recognition of the profound injustices that underpin the phenomenon of structural racism. These manifestations have been palpable not only in our personal experiences but also within our organisation, and the broader social systems within which we operate.

Any writing about race and racism must tangle with language. Throughout this article, we talk about Black and Indigenous people, and people of colour, avoiding the acronym BIPOC because it seems to us another way in which being more “efficient” with language can diminish people’s identities and lived experiences (see for example Okun [2001] on white supremacy culture in organisations). We recognise that different people use different terms, and that

certain terms are more appropriate in certain contexts. Also, we use the term “structural racism” instead of “institutional racism” to indicate how racism is built into social, economic, and political systems, including organisational systems. This article examines the ways in which structural racism manifests in organisations and the implications this has for thinking about belonging, relationships, and boundaries as we seek to become more aware of, and to contribute towards dismantling, structural racism.

This article proceeds as follows. In section 2, we identify seven pointers that serve to describe structural racism and illuminate how structural racism works in practice in organisations. In section 3, we offer an analysis of why and how structural racism manifests in organisations. Section 4 focuses on what we are learning about ways of tackling structural racism, primarily based on our own ongoing process of internal change at Reos, before ending with some final words of encouragement for doing this important work in section 5.

## Describing Structural Racism in Organisational Systems

In our work to dismantle structural racism, we are often asked to explain what “structural racism” means. In our experience, standard definitions of structural racism are often difficult for people to hold onto, especially those who benefit from structural racism. It is likely that the idea triggers defence mechanisms, such as denial or avoidance. For white people with power and privilege it can be hard to accept that one’s own positive organisational experiences of belonging, acceptance, and recognition are experienced very differently by colleagues who are Black, Indigenous or people of color, and that one is complicit, whether consciously or unconsciously, in sustaining structural racism (Lopes & Thomas, 2007).

As a result, we realised that we needed to offer a textured and jargon-free description of structural racism that could go beyond technical definitions. Something that could stick and that could address some of the areas of confusion. For example, there is often confusion about the relationship between structural racism and white people’s individual responsibility in relation to unearned white privilege. Among white people, there is often a lack of understanding about how the everyday and implicit aspects of structural racism in an organisation negatively impact their colleagues who are Black, Indigenous or people of colour, while generally benefiting themselves (DiAngelo, 2011). We worked on a description that would also assist people in organisations to think about what needs to change at a more practical level. We hope that this explanation will support you, the reader, as you reflect on structural racism in your own organisation.

In the description of structural racism below, points 1 and 2 serve as a working definition. Points 3 to 7 are intended to help people in organisations understand how structural racism works in practice, so that the aspects that are less visible (especially to white people) can be addressed, with the intention of dismantling structural racism.

1. Structural racism in organisations refers to ways of thinking, feeling, being, and doing that are deeply woven into the fabric of an organisation and that advantage white people and disadvantage Black and Indigenous people and people of colour.
2. Structural racism in organisations can be expressed through policies (e.g., HR policies), practices (e.g., promotion practices or exposure to opportunities), or procedures (e.g., how budgeting or business decisions are made). It might be embedded in the mission and vision of the organisation as well as its strategic plans and resource allocations. Institutional racism tends to refer to more formal and explicit manifestations whereas structural racism can also be informal and implicit, maintained for example in the ways in which people interact socially.
3. Whether implicit or explicit, structural racism routinely creates unearned benefits for white people or provides immunity from undesirable experiences and outcomes. For example, new white members of staff tend to be treated as if they were recruited based on merit, whereas newly hired Black and Indigenous people and people of colour may be subject to assumptions that they were affirmative action candidates, or gained entry because of a quota system, which sets them at an immediate disadvantage of having to prove their skills and value to the organisation.
4. As a result of these structural disadvantages, it is more difficult for Black and Indigenous people and people of colour to enter an organisation, feel that they belong, can advance, and get recognised and rewarded for their work. Structural racism creates myriad exclusions from opportunity, access, and power. The outcome of these exclusions tends to be most visible at the senior levels of organisational hierarchies.
5. The structural nature of racism means that it is often inconvenient or difficult (for white people especially) to see these impacts, and hard (for Black and Indigenous people and people of colour especially) to raise or report experiences for discussion and accountability in a productive and concrete way.
6. The implicit nature of structural racism means it can persist even under Black leadership. Therefore, a change of leadership doesn't imply that structural racism is automatically "fixed."
7. While structural racism needs to be addressed by the organisation, there is also inner work to be done at the individual and sub-group level. For white people this means an

understanding of power and doing inner work around whiteness and white fragility, especially towards creating personal and collective awareness and readiness for conversations about racism. For people on the receiving end of structural racism, there is also work to be done, especially towards personal and collective healing.

In testing this description with organisational groups, we have heard that it resonates and is useful. It helps with recognising the “what” of structural racism. However, it does not explain “why” our organisations are structurally racist. Therefore, in the next section, we provide a more comprehensive analytic lens.

## Analytic Lens

The previous section described structural racism. That description indicated that structural racism is often hardwired into an organisation’s DNA in ways that can make it difficult to recognise and address. This section goes further by analysing the genesis and pervasive expression of racism, so that people in organisational systems can better understand its structural character and, hence, work more effectively to interrupt and dismantle it.

In spelling out how structural racism works, we argue that it shows up along three dimensions: namely in the systemic roots, purpose, and culture of an organisation. Reflecting on an organisation’s “systemic roots” calls for us to recognise and situate structural racism within the Western project of slavery, modernity, and colonisation that helped the West accumulate economic, epistemic, and political power. Understanding the systemic roots helps us to more clearly see how organisations have been shaped by these historic legacies. The systemic roots can shape the “purpose” of an organisation—i.e., the fundamental reason for its existence. Organisational purpose is usually expressed in vision and mission statements, which tend to be framed in politically correct language, sometimes obscuring the organisation’s *deep* purpose. We delineate between the “good,” “bad,” and “ugly” expressions of deep purpose. An organisation’s purpose might motivate the culture of that organisation. “Culture” shows the manifestation of power in an organisation by exposing how people are organised and how people experience the organisation. A *prima facie* manifestation of structural racism is often seen in the lack of racial diversity in the organisation, asymmetrical power relations in the structures of the organisation, and the roles people hold. Our concerns about the terminology of DEI pertain here—specifically in relation to the dimensions of diversity and inclusion. For example, an organisation can embrace “diversity” in its widest sense while leaving structurally racist norms and values unchallenged. Moreover, “inclusion” in DEI can be inferred to mean including racial minorities into normative white spaces—that is, inviting them to assimilate. Therefore, the analytic lens we apply is designed to take us beyond the limitations of DEI. The three dimensions, offer outward-gazing and inward-looking perspectives to help cultivate ever-deepening awareness of the systemic nature of structural racism.

## Systemic Roots

The systemic roots of structural racism speak to the *epistemic* dimension of an organisational system. To understand structural racism whether in the world or in organisations is to have an appreciation of the West not merely as a geographical place but as a project. As a project, the West is built on the idea of white supremacy that has been used to exploit brown and Black bodies (Andrews, 2021). Racism is born out of the ideology that legitimates oppression and violence of all kinds. Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) poetically makes this point when he writes that, “Race is the child of racism, not the father.” (p. 7)

The systemic roots of racism lie in the idea of white supremacy that has shaped Western modernity and enabled a new moral order of society. Gurinder Bhambra (2007, p. 1) argues that “modernity is the dominant frame for social and political thought, not just in the West, but across the world.” Charles Taylor makes clear the features of Western modernity by arguing that the West is characterised by the market economy, the public sphere, and by self-governing people. He writes that Western modernity is:

... that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularization, instrumental rationality); and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaninglessness, a sense of impending social dissolution). (Taylor, 2004, p. 1)

Undoubtedly, different cultures had various institutional forms that existed before Western modernity. The problem, however, is that Western culture’s institutional form gained a hegemonic status and was underpinned by the conception of the human person as a machine.<sup>1</sup> Taylor’s analysis illuminates the pervasiveness of Western modernity in our world today and how it continues to shape norms and values governing our social realities.

The systemic roots of structural racism are expressed in the legacies of what norms and values shape the organisation. Part of the Western imperial project was to proliferate its values to all parts of the world and in the process provincialize the parts of the world that are not the West. Western modernity became the standard for modernity in other parts of the world. Dipesh Chakrabarty (2007, p. 27) makes this point when he writes that “Europe’

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<sup>1</sup> Many Western “Enlightenment” thinkers whose thinking shaped Western modernity like René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, and Isaac Newton held a mechanistic view of the world. Descartes, for example, compared the human body to an automaton, a mechanical device that operates on physical laws. Newton, on his part, espoused the idea of a clockwork universe, where celestial bodies are governed by precise mathematical laws. This mechanistic view of the world led to immense innovations in science and medicine but also allowed the human person to be reduced to a cog in the economic wheel whose primary value is to produce or make things.

remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call 'Indian,' 'Chinese,' 'Kenyan,' and so on." In short, Europe/the West has long been the reference point and the centre in discourses on development, democracy, and economy. This centre-place has been almost self-evident given the West's apparent success in these areas even though a lot of what informs these successes, often defined in Western terms, is the continuous accumulation of epistemic, political, and economic power that happens on the backs of non-dominantly situated people.

Dismantling the systemic roots involves advancing three aims. First, to recognise and interrogate the source of our norms, behaviours, and practices in an organisational system. Second, to recognise that European thought, norms, and standards are of a particular geographical location and not an objective view from nowhere, which infers a global status. Third, to "move the centre" (following Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o). The Kenyan writer argues for a dual sense of 'moving the centre' "from its assumed location in the West to a multiplicity of spheres in all cultures of the world" and from the "dominant social stratum" or male bourgeois minority (wa Thiong'o, 1993, pp. xvi–xvii).

It is important to state that while we hold an intersectional view of oppression and marginalisation, we however give analytic priority to racism over the harms of sexism, classism, homophobia, and nationalism. Race represents a vital prism to understand the world because it is the "fundamental basis of the political and economic system and therefore infects all interactions, institutions and ideals" (Andrews, 2021, p. xxi). While differentiating factors other than race are also responsible for how benefits and burdens are distributed in various societies, race (advanced through the supremacy of whiteness) continues to shape norms of sociality, knowing, and being even in places where white bodies are absent.

Kehinde Andrews recognises the intersectionality of violence by arguing that the West is built on white supremacy but is practised through patriarchy, classism, and nationalism. Johar Schueller (2005) argues that white feminists tend to conflate oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation despite the fact that certain oppressions are "quantitatively more widespread and, arguably, qualitatively worse than others" (Ali, 2014, p. 31).

We do not have space to spell out this argument in full but suffice to say that while we give primacy to moving the centre from the West, it is important to move other centres if the goal is to achieve a more just world for all people. In our practice, talk of racism is never purely about racism. Other dimensions of oppression and marginalisation often surface that merit attention. In working to transform our organisations, the call is to centre structural racism because racism continues to structure both societal and organisational norms, while being attentive to its manifestations in gender, class, and other organising principles.



## Purpose

The purpose dimension of our analysis of structural racism relates to the *political* dimension of an organisational system. We distinguish between purpose as an organisation's publicly stated vision, mission and goals, and the deep purpose of an organisation. Deep purpose lies in the organisation's origin story, which may be strongly shaped by the "systemic roots" dimension. An organisation's deep purpose may remain unstated, acting as an invisible, and often unconscious, force that drives an organisation in particular directions (Dostal et al., 2005).

An organisation's deep purpose is structurally racist when it aligns with what we have dubbed the "good," "bad," and "ugly" deep purposes. The good is the purpose that drives ideas of white saviourism under the guise of development. The bad is the purpose that feeds into the obsessively extractive, exploitative paradigm that seeks to maximise profit at all costs. The ugly is the purpose that aims to make inferior all that is not white and by extension drives the idea of white superiority. These three dimensions are not mutually exclusive but often function to reinforce one another. Organisations have learned to obscure the good, bad, and ugly deep purposes in their enterprises while at the same time publicly abhorring these drives. We will explore each of these dimensions in more detail below.

The "good" happens under the guise of development, cooperation, and solidarity. One way that the "good" purpose expresses itself is through the white-saviour complex. Coined by Teju Cole, the "White-Saviour Industrial Complex" describes the pattern of privileged white people who seek to liberate, save, or civilise underprivileged people of colour. He writes that white saviourism is a cathartic experience of "having a big emotional experience that validates privilege" (Cole, 2012). At the organisational level, white saviourism is common among many development and religious institutions that further white dominance under the pretext of solidarity. The "good" purpose is not limited to non-profit organisations; big corporations could also advance the aims of white saviourism. For example, Facebook's launch of the Free Basics internet in developing markets allowed users access to data-light websites and services as an "on-ramp" and a taster to the internet. Facebook was accused of harvesting huge amounts of users' data, violating privacy, only delivering mostly Western content to users, and engaging in digital colonialism (Solon, 2017). Facebook responded that they were engaging in the good of "connecting the unconnected" (Gibbs, 2017, para 2). This dimension of purpose is difficult to dismantle given that it often comes with practical benefits—offering connectivity to people who otherwise would not have been connected to the internet while disregarding local norms of sociality in the name of progress.

The "bad" deep purpose expresses itself in racial capitalism whose logic is to extract and exploit as much as possible for maximum profit. This is the continuity of the dehumanising logic of the plantation. Andrews (2021) argues that racism is so intertwined with racial capitalism that it is often difficult to tell

one apart from the other. The manifestations of the bad are myriad. It shows up in cheap and exploitative labour in Africa and Asia that fundamentally benefits big businesses. It shows up where people might be paid fairly for their labour but are nonetheless required to work under conditions that do not care for their overall wellbeing. It also expresses itself in prioritising profit and business interests over the good of the community. For example, "The Genome Revolution" report by Goldman Sachs analysts asks the question: "Is curing patients a sustainable business model?" (Kim, 2018). A company that withholds cures for diseases so that they can keep selling their products maintains the colonial logic of profit over all else.

The "ugly" deep purpose is the demeaning of racially minoritized people. Take for example an INGO set up to "civilise" Indigenous people and bring them to "enlightenment." Institutions like schools and universities which centre Western knowledge and language are implicated in this ugly purpose. The ugly purpose continues the narrative of colonisation as a "civilising mission" which goes hand in hand with the theft of resources, the smothering of the cultures of Indigenous people, the killing of their knowledge system (epistemicide; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018) and the continued inferiorisation of the people. Often, a few local people drawn from the population of the marginalised people are selected and groomed as acolytes in this dehumanising enterprise. The presence of these acolytes can obscure the dangers such entities circulate and maintain.

At the heart of the colonial project—which is the source of structural racism—is the exercise of power over others. This power continues to be exercised in almost all aspects of our lives—in how bodies are constructed and understood, how we do business, how we are with each other, and how we know. In defining and setting the norms around bodies, commerce, and knowledge, Europe claimed the centre-position. The deep purpose of the organisation motivates the culture, demonstrated in how power is distributed and wielded by those who have it.

## Culture

The culture dimension in our analysis is about the *social* dimension of the organisational system. Organisational culture reveals how an entity is organised and how people experience the organisation. We use culture in a broader sense, not just to signify the "collection of values, expectations, and practices that guide and inform the actions of all team members" (Wong, 2020, para. 3) but to include issues of diversity, representation, and equity. This relates primarily to people internal to the organisation but can also include other parties like clients and service providers.

Organisational culture is visible in how power is distributed, wielded, and experienced. For example, the culture of the International NGO (INGO) sector shows that the West almost exclusively holds the power to define standards and norms around risk, monitoring and evaluation, and resource flows. An inquiry process conducted by participants in the Re-Imagining INGOs (RINGO) project

found that, “White people and white ways of doing things are considered more professional, more expert, more reliable/valid” (Rights CoLab, 2021, p. 7).<sup>2</sup>

Doug Reeler (2022) argues that the culture of an organisation is apparent in the subconscious messages conveyed among individuals about what is deemed acceptable or not. These messages are frequently transformed into habits that are replicated through either action or inaction, often unknowingly. Several people have likened modern institutions and organisations to following the logic of a slave plantation (Andrews, 2021; Johnson, 2020; Wilder, 2013). The plantation, among other things, sends a subconscious message that human beings are machines whose use is to drive profitability for shareholders.

The plantation is geared towards maximum efficiency and productivity, fuelled by certain norms and ways of being. We find Tema Okun’s characteristics of white supremacy culture helpful in this regard. These characteristics are a set of values that shape the norms of an organisation and perpetuate structural racism. The list includes perfectionism, a sense of urgency, defensiveness, quantity over quality, worship of the written word, paternalism, either/or thinking, power hoarding, fear of open conflict, individualism, progress defined as more, objectivity, and the right to comfort (Okun, 2001). Other characteristics to add might include control and surveillance of bodies, adversarial competition, and the lack of value that organisations give to rest, connection, and individual self-expression. Okun cautions against weaponizing these characteristics or using them in a check-list fashion. Instead, the invitation is to listen to their deep encultured patterns in our organisation and find healthy alternatives to our ways of being together.

“Culture” as a dimension of structural racism in an organisation also shows up in the diversity among organisational staff and leadership; how tasks are allocated, on whose back profit is made, and how people are compensated for their work. In organisations that are racially mixed, we see that the top positions are disproportionately occupied by white people and low-paying jobs are filled by Black and Indigenous people, and people of colour. Sometimes the standards of recruitment for these jobs vary—people who are Black, Indigenous or people of colour generally face stricter scrutiny than white people.

The consequence of a racist organisational culture is that people of colour and Black and Indigenous people do not feel at ease and lack a proper sense of belonging in the organisation. Such culture does not give room for people to express what matters to them. This makes the workplace psychologically unsafe and has material consequences in remuneration, roles, promotions and cultural expressions in language, food, music. The effect is the pain of exclusion and

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the RINGO project, please see <https://rightscolab.org/ringo/> and <https://reospartners.com/blog/ringo>.

alienation among marginalised groups. Talking about diversity and inclusion may not get to the root of that pain.

Within this logic, particularly in racially mixed organisations, there is a risk of pursuing diversity and inclusion in instrumental ways to drive the standing of the organisation whether in terms of reputation or to drive profit. Consider an organisation that has a Black CEO who has all the powers and privileges that her white counterpart might have but is working within a white supremacy culture of perfectionism, control, and the hegemony of a singular perspective. Here again, diversity and inclusion can be achieved without dismantling structural racism.

To sum up this section, an advantage of looking at the manifestations of structural racism along these three dimensions—source, culture, and purpose—is that it centres whiteness and white supremacy without the need for white people. For example, a data mining company in Nigeria whose core function is the “extraction” of data from the populace might be structurally racist given its business function and operation—even though the company is run by Black women, the culture in the workplace is representative of the Nigerian culture, and employees are paid well for their work. The work of dismantling structural racism calls on us to not only address issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion embedded in the organisational culture, but also norms and values (epistemic) and the deep purpose that form the structural foundations of the organisation (political). In dismantling structural racism in organisational systems, the epistemic, political, and social dimensions all deserve keen attention. The following section considers what this means in practice.

## What We Are Learning: Implications for the Work of Dismantling Structural Racism

In this section, we present what we are learning about the difficult work of trying to dismantle structural racism. Much of our experiential learning has been from trial and error, but we are fortunate to be learning alongside other practitioners and thought leaders in this field of systems change (e.g., Lopes & Thomas, 2007; Magee, 2019; DiAngelo & Burtaine, 2022). There is no fixed recipe; each context requires different approaches. This is messy work. There will be failures. These call for humility and a commitment to ongoing learning. Sometimes failure is exactly what is needed to crack things open, including ourselves.

Following from our analysis in section 3, we know that the work of dismantling structural racism involves courageously uncovering the systemic roots and origin stories of an organisation, towards co-creating a healthy deep purpose, using power with growing awareness, working to redistribute power in meaningful ways, and unleashing creative expressions of an organisational culture where everyone finds belonging.

We consider four elements as necessary to set organisational systems on this path towards dismantling structural racism. This section is structured according

to these four elements: 1. Convening and enrolling members of an organisation into active commitment to change; 2. Engaging people in compelling processes to build awareness; 3. Institutionalising structural change; and 4. Navigating cultural change. There is a certain logic to presenting them in this sequence. However, in practice all four aspects are interconnected and woven into the overall experience in a non-linear fashion that welcomes emergence and adaptation. These four elements are based primarily on our own experiences, but also broadly align with emerging evidence about what works in organisational systems (e.g., Daniels, 2022). We include vignettes, largely from experiences within our own organisational system, to address issues of structural racism, and what we are learning from that ongoing work. Our intention in doing so is to be transparent and accountable as we learn.

## Convening and Enrolling

Convening involves setting an ambition for change, bringing people together around that ambition, and starting to create the conditions to realise that ambition. In our work to dismantle structural racism in client organisations, we find it valuable to establish an internal convening group that can start to lay the ground before enrolling the rest of the organisation. Organisational leaders and decision makers are often obvious conveners, well-placed to articulate a commitment to change and create an agenda for change, but it can be useful for others to join them in the convening team. If the convening team is seen to be a diverse and credible group of people, from across different parts of the organisational system, this is likely to increase the legitimacy of the overall endeavour to address structural racism. When they are ready to put out a collective convening invitation to the rest of the organisation, this can be more effective than if it had come from the top leadership structures only.

Convening team members need to have the agency, capacity, and support to speak candidly, name difficult issues, challenge each other, and be willing to listen. This helps to set the terms for the ensuing process, into which they are enrolling the wider organisation. The convenors remain directly engaged and visible throughout the process and can often help to model interpersonal risk-taking and vulnerability. We sometimes find it valuable to provide coaching that supports convening team members to play this modelling role.

One of the sticky issues a convening team is likely to encounter early on is whether participation should be voluntary or mandatory. Given the unintended consequences of requiring staff to attend workshops on structural racism, convening teams tend to opt for voluntary engagement of all current staff. One organisation we worked with made it mandatory for all new staff to engage with issues of structural racism during their onboarding process (see section 4.3 below for more).

Looking back at our experiences of internal convening and enrolling within Reos Partners, we see that isolated conversations about race and racism since the organisation's inception in 2007 coalesced in 2020 into powerful momentum

for change in the raw aftermath of George Floyd's murder. Two directors—a man of colour and a white woman— led convening efforts over the subsequent three years to enrol staff and associates from across the organisation into four structures to drive awareness-based systems change. Each of these structures established their own internal convening teams.

The first structure was a racial equity group comprising one representative from each Reos office. This group produced a racial equity commitment statement to galvanise organisational culture change, and a series of recommendations to promote structural change. In their report, the racial equity group recognised the limitations of the language of “diversity, equity and inclusion” (DEI) and instead proposed a commitment to “dignity, justice and belonging” (DJB). This influenced the creation of a DJB structure to guide internal learning and build our capacity for also doing this work with client systems. The DJB structure produced, for example, a model called “decolonising our Reos practice.” A third structure, namely race-based affinity groups, met in parallel to the Reos-wide conversations convened by the DJB coordinator. The purpose of affinity groups was to create separate spaces for Black and Indigenous people and people of colour to have the conversations they needed to have, and for white people to have the conversations they needed to have, including about conscious use of power. A fourth internal structure, the Sounding Board, was formed in 2021 to provide formalised, measurable feedback, assessment, and recommendations to each of the four Reos offices and the global leadership on progress and thus promote accountability for change.

## Engaging

It is vital to take the time to create safe-enough conditions for uncomfortable conversations, bearing in mind that safety is not the same as comfort. Similarly, discomfort does not equate to danger. We have learned the value of offering some language and frameworks to understand these differences. For example, we introduce groups to concepts and practices that help with individually and collectively tracking discomfort levels and building tolerance for staying with discomfort long enough to learn something new, but not so long to trigger underlying trauma (Freeth & Caniglia, 2019). We work to strengthen individual and collective skills in inquiry and dialogue, encouraging curiosity and openness over defensive or attacking ways of engaging. We offer ways of thinking about power and privilege, recognising the impact of differential access to power and privilege on processes of engagement.

Another important part of creating safe-enough conditions for engagement is to establish group agreements. There are existing resources for creating agreements to draw on. For example, Singleton and Linton (2006) propose four basic agreements for having courageous conversations on race: 1. Stay engaged; 2. Expect to experience discomfort; 3. Speak your truth; and 4. Expect and accept a lack of closure. We find it useful to start with these, unpack what they mean for the specific group we are working with, and invite discussion about any other

agreements the group wants to add. It can be helpful to create nuance that is meaningful to the group. For example, if the group wishes to add “respect” to the list of agreements, find out what respect looks and feels like for this group and add some of these words to the crafting of the agreement. It is worth capping the agreements at a manageable number that are potent and alive for the organisation, and to which they can collectively agree before continuing.

Engagement involves a combination of inner work, identity work in racial identity-based “affinity groups,”<sup>3</sup> and gatherings in larger, diverse groups. The exact sequencing depends on the organisational context and degree of readiness of participants. A single workshop could include all three ways of engaging, or there may need to be considerable investment in inner work and affinity group work before convening larger conversations in the organisation.

All three ways of engaging are strongly supported by awareness-based practices. Inner work can be conducted at the individual level even while gathered as a group and allows for personal processing and settling in the body (e.g., breathwork while sitting in a group circle). Inner work ranges from personal reflection and journaling (e.g., the “Me and White Supremacy” [Saad, 2020] workbook offers a series of journaling prompts in each section) to mindfulness and body work (e.g., exercises in “The Inner Work of Racial Justice” [Magee, 2019] or “My Grandmother’s Hands” [Menakem, 2015]) and can also include creative work with the hands (e.g. clay modelling). Affinity groups create a place for people who share a particular racial identity to do collective inner work. Awareness-based practices in affinity groups can be supported by providing a series of provocations for reflection and prompts for conversation (e.g., Lopes & Thomas, 2007; DiAngelo & Burtaine, 2022). Larger organisational gatherings bring together people of different racial identities. Awareness-based practices in such gatherings can include dialogue and storytelling (e.g., Mindell, 1995, 2008). Throughout all these practices, the intention is for awareness to deepen into understanding as a basis for navigating structural and cultural change.

Awareness-based practices extend beyond self-awareness to system-awareness. Among white people, racism, and the fear of being exposed as racist, can produce many blind spots and areas of self-delusion. Black and Indigenous people and people of colour may have developed self-protective mechanisms that hinder self-awareness, such as assimilating strategies. Together, members of an organisational system can avoid acknowledging racism and its true impact.

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<sup>3</sup> According to the Justice Unbound website (2020, para 2), the rationale for convening race-based affinity groups includes the following: “People of colour need to drive, lament, mourn, and share their emotions in community away from white people”; the work of dismantling white supremacy is primarily white people’s work to do; and affinity groups create opportunities to learn how to stay in uncomfortable conversations.

Effective engagement with self, racial identity groups, and racially diverse groups can peel away layers of denial towards healthy awareness. Inner work can help to connect with one's own experiences, and with information lodged in the body. Affinity groups can be spaces for truth-telling, risk-taking and vulnerability—expressing feelings or ideas that are not yet ready to be aired elsewhere. They offer opportunities for building solidarity, as well as accountability. Racially diverse groups can unlock understanding and insight through listening to the stories of people whose life experiences are different to one's own. They can also be places of great heat, “sitting in the fire” (Mindell, 1995, p. 99) of anger, charged interactions, and racial conflict.

In Reos, we are learning about the structure and pacing of engagement. We are a relatively small organisation of about 70 people distributed across diverse geographic and cultural contexts, each with locally based regional leaders who have high levels of autonomy. This organising structure necessitates pacing the work to cater to the needs, contexts, and nuances of various “parts” of the organisational system, while also recognising the existence of the whole. The work needs to ebb and flow between the global whole and the local parts. We learned, viscerally, that the moments when larger “wholes” gather can be powerful for “sitting in the fire,” to reckon, bear witness, and hold each other to account while strengthening a sense of shared organisational culture. These moments of strong shared engagement can then be taken into smaller office-based or affinity-based groups for further meaning-making and integration.

To sum up this section on engagement, all three ways of engaging are relational and involve bridging divides. Inner work supports a healthy relationship with oneself, working with internal dynamics such as shame and internalised oppression. Furthermore, inner work helps to reintegrate the body, which is the wellspring of information and wisdom, and where trauma resides. According to Micky ScottBey Jones (2021), “One of the ways we confront oppression is to do the concentrated work of bravely facing what needs healing on the inside ... as we are doing the work of dismantling the larger systems of oppression. It is a both-and proposition” (p. 81). This takes us to the question of structural change.

## Institutionalising Structural Change

Structural change means making material changes to organisational practices, policies, and procedures, alongside changing who occupies positions of power. This work of transforming organisations cannot be left for Black people to do; white people have even greater responsibility to lead material change efforts: “White supremacy won't die until White people see it as a White issue they need to solve rather than a Black issue they need to empathize with” (Reed, 2020).

In Reos, a powerful driver towards institutional change was when younger members of the team who are Black, Indigenous, or people of colour spoke about their experiences of Reos as being a “white organisation.” This meant revisiting our origin story and galvanised white people in the organisation into a new level



of commitment to institutionalise structural change. In the process, the organisation learned the importance of following three key principles: adequate resourcing, transparency, and accountability. It was necessary to resource each established structure with people and funds to fulfil its purpose. Recognising that transparency would help to keep driving the agenda for change, reports such as the Sounding Board report, were made visible to everyone in Reos. Members of the global leadership team led Reos-wide online calls to engage with the Sounding Board's findings and recommendations, and to use the report to catalyse the next cycle of conversations about structural and cultural change. Accountability mechanisms were woven into the process—for example, in the original racial equity commitment statement and the terms of reference for the Sounding Board.

Another example of moving beyond convening, enrolling, and engaging into institutionalising change is to be found in a client organisation that has committed to five areas of structural change, called “game changers.” Each of these game changers is led by a senior person in the organisation, who is accountable for ensuring progress:

1. developing an Anti-Racism policy and reviewing all existing policies to ensure that they are anti-racist;
2. defusing white fragility so that white people in the organisation are more likely to engage constructively and robustly in the work of dismantling structural racism. This included a series of “courageous conversations” in a white affinity group as well as the compilation of multimedia resources to support ongoing awareness;
3. ensuring mandatory participation so that all staff engage with the work of dismantling structural racism at key points (e.g., during onboarding);
4. establishing a leadership accelerator programme for staff members who are Black, Indigenous or people of colour to prepare them for senior leadership roles; and
5. demanding accountability for progress from senior leaders, which means that leaders report regularly to the organisation on the ongoing process of dismantling structural racism.

Structural change was further enhanced when this organisation created, resourced, and staffed a three-person unit to support the implementation of the game changers, and to track the ongoing work of dismantling structural racism.

In some instances, the work of dismantling structural racism might be to help an organisation to close well. A recent example of an organisation choosing to give away its endowment and close as the only way to escape its racist colonial legacy is Lankelly Chase, a charitable foundation in the UK (Butler, 2023). Some INGOs have recognized the limits of transformation. For example, EveryChild, a

midsized INGO has closed its doors upon realising that “[r]ather than inventing initiatives to tinker, tailor, or transform themselves, INGOs can relinquish power, resources, and space and enable communities and local organisations to realise their own power, on their own terms, to their own agenda” (Griffith, 2023, para. 15).

The process of driving structural change can help to shift culture. For example, the organisation that devised the game changers convened regular organisation-wide gatherings to keep the conversation alive, while also tracking progress on each game changer. This process enabled a culture of openness and ease in talking about racism. It has now become commonplace for people, at various levels of the organisation, to inquire if new processes and rules are anti-racist. This has been an early indicator of success.

### Navigating Cultural Change

Structural and cultural change are both necessary and complement each other. Our approach to cultural change is about staying in conversation, focusing on awareness, relationships, and trust in ways that address experiences of exclusion while the structural work continues.

We are learning that taking responsibility for mistakes, demonstrating the capacity to accept feedback and staying in difficult conversations does enable shifts to occur. It helps others feel that they too can make mistakes (an antidote to the White supremacy principle of *perfectionism*) when they are part of enabling and bringing about structural and cultural transformation.

Transforming organisational culture cannot be done in a rush; it takes time, resources, and genuine commitment from everyone, not just from senior leaders. Within an organisational context, where there is hierarchy and executive decision-making authority, there are skills to learn about doing this work with integrity and holding clean lines. On the one hand, people must feel heard. On the other hand, they must recognise that their truths would not always be “the truth.” Holding this tension, and working with power asymmetries inherent in organisational structures, requires a high level of awareness and integrity by process designers, facilitators, and leaders.

While the goal of structural change is to enable equity and justice, the goal of cultural change is to enable a sense of belonging, dignity, and ease in the organisation. Cultural changes ensure that people express themselves in ways that matter to them in the values, norms, expectations, and practices that shape dignified experiences.

Culture change is hard to measure and different people in an organisation are likely to have different assessments of the change process. It can be useful to ask questions in organisational gatherings such as: Is what we are doing satisfactory? Are you experiencing change? Invite stories and suggestions. Unless the process can hold these different experiences and assessments in a coherent

way, where meaning can be made together, there is a risk of fragmented narratives about what is being achieved.

In our own internal organisational change process in Reos, we are learning about the importance of language. We started by talking about *racial equity* which we came to recognise as too limiting. Luckily, language, as a powerful carrier of culture, can evolve. Through structured convening and enrolling, and as the engagement work and awareness deepened, our initial framing evolved from racial equity to *dignity, justice and belonging* to naming the need to *decolonise and dismantle white supremacy culture*. Ultimately, the precipitating conditions and the extent of senior leadership's recognition of the need to transform will shape the framing of the issues.

## Concluding Remarks

The work of dismantling structural racism is not new and will not end with our generation. This is both inspiring and daunting—inspiring because we can take heart from the tremendous shifts demonstrated by the abolition of slavery, the African struggle against imperial hegemony, the civil rights movement in the US, and the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Daunting because we are coming to understand just how difficult it is to bring about fundamental and lasting change due to the structural nature of racism.

Although mainstream organisational norms are shaped by white supremacy culture, the radical call is to imagine new practices, institutional forms and new ways of living that are wholesome and just for all people and the planet we live on. While we cannot do much to change the systemic roots of structural racism, we can indeed change the purpose and culture that drive and guide our organisations. This is possible. In the process, there is much potential to kindle meaning, joy, and connection, re-membering those parts of ourselves (individually and collectively) that have been made to feel unwelcome. We warmly encourage your work towards greater wholeness and justice in your organisations.

With much appreciation to Bangani Ngeleza and Nonzwakazi Adonisi for their comments and to anonymous reviewers for helping us improve and finalise this article.

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