

Structural racism and institutional power: how neutral rules produce unequal results

Structural racism is the way policies, practices, and norms across institutions produce and maintain racial inequity without requiring anyone's intent. Recognizing it means examining rules, defaults, and histories, not searching for villains.

Why it matters

A program rule can be written without bias and still produce disparities because of the history and conditions it lands on. Equity work that stops at intent cannot change that.

Content

History matters. Housing, employment, education, disability services, and public benefits carry histories of exclusion that shape who arrives at your program, with what resources, and with what trust.

Neutral rules are not neutral results. A documentation requirement, a daytime appointment, an English-only phone line, or a degree requirement each lands differently depending on that history.

Institutions reproduce what they do not examine. Defaults persist because they work for the people who set them. Examination is a practice: who benefits, who is burdened, what would change if we chose differently.

Whiteness as a default. Norms about professionalism, communication, time, and expertise often reflect one culture's habits presented as standards. Naming that is not an accusation; it is a design observation.

What to do. Connect the analysis to a decision with an owner. Use the equity review canvas, the data owner, and the community's own account. Change the rule, the default, or the resource, and look again.

This module is an orientation. Deeper research and frameworks are in the Library's external references, each labeled as a public source to check before use.

Next steps

- **Intersectionality foundations** — program page </library/lm-intersectionality-foundations>
- **Operational equity review canvas** — program page </library/ja-operational-equity-canvas>
- **GARE Racial Equity Toolkit reference** — program page </library/tool-gare-racial-equity-toolkit>