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Racism as neglect and denial

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ABSTRACT

Has racism become a wicked problem, or it persists because of deficient anti-racism and/or unintentional or wilful neglect? This article examines neglect and denial as cognitive and functional features embedded in structural racial inequities. Denial and neglect, often analysed in socio-political discourse, are related yet distinct concepts, while neglect remains an underexplored feature of racism. I argue that denial and neglect embody key epistemic omissions enabling new racism to thrive unimpeded. Drawing on colourblind, White ignorance, and racial apathy literature, I conceptualize “racism as neglect” to draw attention to persistent yet insidious, often discounted racial inequities permeating the Global North. Understanding neglect and denial, and how they operate through minimization, ignorance, silence, or indifference, is crucial in tackling racism occurring in ideas, behaviours, and policies, and in omissions of anti-racist actions. Combating racism requires producing evidence of racism and pressing society to abandon evasion of responsibility and take effective actions against structural racism.




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“Paradoxically, the recognition of racism can be taken up as a sign of commitment, which in turn blocks the recognition of racism.”

Sara Ahmed (2006, 110)

A wide body of research has documented the continued prevalence of racism in many Western countries (Elias, Mansouri, and Paradies 2021; Keum and Miller 2018; Kwate 2014; Williams, Lawrence, and Davis 2019). Racism manifests both explicitly and implicitly in various forms of prejudice and discrimination at interpersonal and institutional levels (Haeny, Holmes, and Williams 2021; Payne and Hannay 2021). In previous work, we have shown how racism

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persists either through systemic neglect, victim blaming, or attempts to justify the disparities with factors other than racial bias (Elias and Paradies 2021; Elias, Mansouri, and Paradies 2021). Many scholars have suggested different reasons to explain why racism remains such a persistent problem – citing various interpersonal, intergroup, and structural/systemic factors (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Feagin and Bennefield 2014; Loury 2019; Noah 2002; Williams and Wyatt 2015; Yearby 2020). Within this broader context, two possible explanations that are mentioned as contributing factors for persistent racism are the concepts of “neglect” and “denial”. Tied to racism, they represent an evasion and/or deflection of moral responsibility and accountability, where prejudice, discrimination, and racial inequities based on race are dismissed or disregarded as non-existent or receive little or no attention in public discourse or policy and in the allocation of resources (Augoustinos and Every 2010; Cohen 2001; Weiner 2014). Yet, neglect in the context of racism, inequity, and microaggression remains underexplored despite being a significant hurdle in successfully combating racism (Johnson et al. 2021). The purpose of this article is to show how neglect and denial characterise and embody contemporary discourses of racism, and how omission and deniability may perpetuate the production of interpersonal and structural racism.

Denial has been defined as the refusal “to admit the truth or reality of something unpleasant” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary) while neglect is conceived as a failure to provide “needed care or attention to someone or something” (Cambridge English Dictionary). Neglect has been assessed mainly in child welfare research where child neglect involves non-provision and/or delay of care while denial has been assessed in relation to racism (Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Zhou 2013; Norman et al. 2012). Both neglect and denial are implied in conceptualisations of deniability – social (mis)cognition as well as strategic ignorance and avoidance – particularly in the discourse of “White ignorance” (Bonam et al. 2019). In this article, I argue that the two concepts as distinct but related behaviours closely intertwined in the context of racism (see Table 2 below).

Research indicates that denial is one of the main elements of contemporary (new) racism (van Dijk 1992; Nelson 2013). In response to the civil rights struggle of the 1960s and beyond, there has been growing salience of what scholars call “colourblind” racism (Bonilla-Silva 2006). While some scholars have posited a “declining significance of race” thesis (Wilson 2012) to characterise racial inequalities as “non-racist” outcomes, a growing body of research has shown that race and racism continue to play a significant role in Western society (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001; Martin et al. 2011; Museus and Park 2015). It manifests sometimes in old-fashioned forms (e.g. White nationalism, racial profiling, and violence) and insidiously in subtle, structural, and pervasive ways. One aspect in which such subtle racism manifests is through the denial of its existence, where white people as a social group downplay,

minimize, and rationalize interpersonal and institutional racism to protect self-esteem (Bonam et al. 2019; Bonilla-Silva 2006), avoid the need to deal with associated psychosocial costs (Spanierman and Heppner 2004), and maintain a status quo of privilege (Solomona et al. 2005). At an ethical dimension, it is argued that such denial may be a pre-emptive attempt to evade moral responsibility and accountability (Augoustinos and Every 2010) while simultaneously serving the interests of Whites through the continuation of racial hierarchy and domination (Mills 2015; Mueller 2017).

In the related but less researched aspect of “neglect”, racism manifests in terms of intentional or unintentional disregard and omission of the conditions of racial minorities. Racism in this case is ignored regardless of whether it exists or not. This goes beyond the denial of racism; it elevates to the level of bystander apathy and lack of concern toward an issue that adversely impacts racial minorities. Following four decades of theorization of the subtle nature of modern racism, the denial of racism has been measured empirically (e.g. Bonam et al. 2019; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013). However, there is not much that has been done to measure the neglect of racism although there has been a recognition that “indifference towards racial and ethnic inequality, is a relatively new but expanding form of racial prejudice” (Forman and Lewis 2006, 175). Despite this, the neglect – at societal and institutional levels – of racial inequities and systemic discrimination can significantly affect the lives of racial minorities during childhood and over the life course (Brown 2003; Skinner-Dorkenoo et al. 2021). This may build up because of the cumulative effect of societal neglect towards racial disparities across income, education, healthcare, incarceration, and property ownership. So, what makes “neglect” associated with racism, a socially and politically consequential mode of behaviour? Why is a recognition of neglect in the context of racism important?

Understanding the indifference constituting racist neglect and how this systematically reproduces and reinforces racism is crucial to tackling racism. Studies indicate that such apathetic attitudes and behaviours are negatively associated with social justice behaviours, multicultural practice, diversity openness, and ethnocultural empathy (Pedersen, Walker, and Wise 2005; Yi et al. 2022). While overcoming the denial of racism and acknowledging its existence is critical as a first step toward addressing racism (Nelson 2013), this may not be adequate in contemporary climates of ideological and colourblind racism. Many anti-racism efforts assume that producing evidence of pervasive racism and creating awareness in society will motivate individuals and policymakers to take measures to combat racism (Pedersen, Walker, and Wise 2005). What if the evidence doesn't raise enough interest among groups not directly affected by racism? Without commitment, readiness, and willingness to confront racism, a mere acknowledgment will have little value as it leaves racism

unaddressed and sometimes emboldened (Ahmed 2006; Nelson 2013). An equally important feature of modern racism is the indifference with which racism is omitted and dismissed, or the silence and passive relegation it registers both in discourses and policymaking (Lentin 2014). The ignorance, omission, apathy, and indifference that I conceptualize as neglect may therefore have no less an impact than other forms of racism on the continuation of harmful structural racial inequities.

This article, therefore, examines how the notions of neglect and denial are embodied in the cognitive, functional, and structural constitution of racism. It explores the conceptual underpinnings of neglect and denial as they relate to understandings of persistent yet insidious and often discounted racism and its moral implications in contemporary society. Drawing on the colourblind, White ignorance, and racial apathy literature, I conceptualize “racism as neglect” to draw attention to the persistent racial inequities affecting racial minorities across the Global North. This conceptualization also highlights the structural dimension of neglect, as exemplified in the deliberate policy of “benign neglect” associated with 1970s racial policies in the US, and I argue that “neglect” as both strategic and unintentional form of non-knowledge and evasion is an important maltreatment that enables new racism to thrive unimpeded. This is crucial for anti-racism efforts that combating racism will not only require producing evidence that racism exists but also pressing society to abandon its unintentional and strategic moral omission of responsibility to address racism (Ahmed 2006).

Understanding racism

What does racism mean? What moral offense does racism carry? My colleagues and I have dealt with these questions in more detail in previous research (Elias and Paradies 2021; Elias, Mansouri, and Paradies 2021). Here, I summarize what I understand are some of the inherent moral affronts that racism carries regarding the “other”. Prejudice, bigotry, hatred, and hostility are essential elements of racial antipathy, but it is debatable whether they can be considered the fundamental or only grounds of racism (Shelby 2014). Other inferiorising conceptions of the other that also inform racist attitudes and behaviours include contempt, disrespect, derision, derogation, disregard, and demeaning (Blum 2004). These psychological affects underlie and broaden to an overarching ideological manifestation of racism which includes “beliefs, practices, institutions, utterances, propositions, actions, feelings, attitudes, societies, and more” (Blum 2002, 74). Ultimately racism, being a locus of power and prejudice combining attitudes and behaviours, crystalizes as a hierarchical system of oppression, domination, exploitation, and discrimination (Feagin 2013).

Both in historical and contemporary social relations, racism has been one of the dominant embodiments of injustice and inequities. Within this system

of injustice, racism can also be conceived as an institutional neglect, general disregard, or ignorance of the unfair disadvantage of certain groups (e.g. people of colour, Indigenous peoples, migrants) and the unearned advantages of racial majority groups (White privilege) (Nixon 2019). At the interpersonal level, this can be conceptualized as personal disregard or disinterest in the condition of the racial “other” while at an institutional level, neglectful racism would involve a collective failure of duty to the conditions of racial minorities. Both interpersonally and institutionally, racism then becomes an inherently contradictory corollary to fairness and justice and a standard of ethical behaviour and moral law (Elias and Paradies 2021; Miles and Brown 2004).

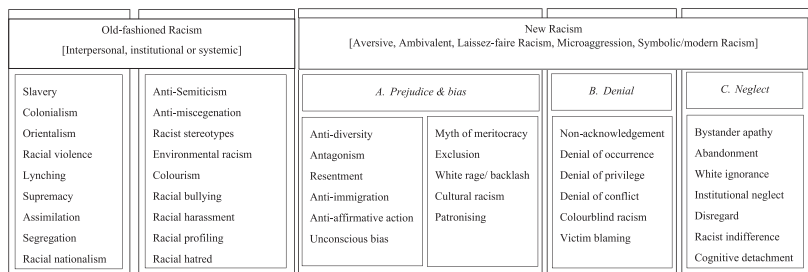
As highlighted in this paper, a conceptualization of racism as neglect, a form of indifference and disregard for racial minorities captures the various ways racism has been theorized and analysed in the literature (such as modern racism, aversive racism, ambivalent racism, and subtle racism). Particularly, the intentional (wilful) aspect of neglect incorporates the notion of “disrespect” that has been theorized in Glasgow (2009). Disrespect is a specific kind of disregard for others (Glasgow 2009), and as such reflects a person’s predisposition to attach less value or importance towards other people, and in the context of racism, towards members of “other” races, ethnicity, colour, or nation. Disregard is broader in that it can exist even under conditions where all members of society maintain some level of respect for racial minorities. A typical example is institutional racism, which thrives even when many members of mainstream society maintain respect for or support black people. The racialised prison system, segregated neighbourhoods, and environmental racism are cases showing that racism can exist “without racists” (Bonilla-Silva 2006, 29). This is akin to my conceptualization of neglect, and the argument that indifference, disregard, and apathy can perpetuate racism amid a general respect for minorities and an acknowledgement of prevalent racism. In this case, my position is that racism can encompass racially harmful outcomes that result due to recklessness, negligence, or carelessness (Glasgow 2009).

Therefore, disrespect as well as the broader lack of regard may better inform our understanding of racism and its effects on justice and equity. Disregard and disrespect as negative dispositions inherent to racism may manifest in many ways, neglect and denial being two behaviours that may relatively be least costly to perpetrators (persons or institutions). This is partly due to the difficulty to ascertain with a degree of confidence that racist neglect or denial has taken place (Bonilla-Silva 2006). As I argue in the next sections, however, racism today often remains intertwined with a great deal of indifference and a regular denialist discourse. Specifically, I conceptualize racism as neglect to draw attention to the persistent occurrence of racism despite various expressions of goodwill and worldwide awareness campaigns and initiatives.

Contrasting neglect and denial

Racism has overt and covert manifestations. Figure 1 summarizes some of the various aspects of racism that have been conceptualized as “old-fashioned” and “new” racism(s). Many of these have been widely researched and measured in diverse multicultural societies, with denial being the most recent form of racism to be conceptually and empirically examined (Bonam et al. 2019; Haeny, Holmes, and Williams 2021; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013; van Dijk 1992). Denial and neglect as manifestations of racism may have related but different moral connotations, yet they reflect the privileges of powerful ethno-racial groups, for example, White majority across western societies. While they are crucial dimensions of contemporary racial inequity, especially the notion of neglect as a form of racism has to-date received little attention in scholarship and remains to be explicitly explored in the context of new racism (Forman and Lewis 2006; Johnson et al. 2021).

It has been long understood that denial remains one of the key characteristics of new racism, yet denial is not necessarily limited to this form of racism (Nelson 2013; van Dijk 1992). People holding blatant racism sometimes deny or attempt to justify their prejudice. For example, contemporary White supremacist groups reject that they are racist, and claim that being proud of their heritage and race does not make them racist. Denial also informs contemporary racial debates. As a form of racism, it has increasingly become salient in public discourse, as a reaction to the rise in popularity of colourblind racial ideology (Neville et al. 2000). Denial has vital cognitive and functional values as far as the racial majority is concerned (Bonam et al. 2019). Thus, it is often used as a strategy in the form of “disclaimers, mitigation, euphemism, excuses, blaming the victim, reversal and other moves of defence, face-keeping and positive self-presentation” against accusations/criticisms of



Note. This figure provides a non-exhaustive mapping of the different manifestations of racism drawing on the previous racism research

Figure 1. Conceptual diagram showing different forms of racism.

Note: This figure provides a non-exhaustive mapping of the different manifestations of racism drawing on the previous racism research.

racial discrimination, injustice, and racist attitudes (van Dijk 1992, 87; see also Bonam et al. 2019; Nelson, Adams, and Salter 2013).

Alongside denial, I propose that neglect embodies a powerful form of racism expressed through disinterest and evasion. In a way, neglect as a characteristic of racism may reflect bystanders' passive complicity in the continuation of racial inequities although such complicity may not necessarily be acknowledged (Passini 2019). In this sense, we see some similarities and connections between denial and neglect where the denial or urge to deny racism makes its ignorance and evasion possible. People, groups, or institutions denying racism or privilege are also likely to show indifference to racial issues, and the mutual reinforcement of these processes would then sustain the persistence of racism at every level. While denial enables the avoidance of culpability and the need for remorse and redress, neglect through silence, strategic ignorance, and indifference provides the veils to conceal responsibility.

At the interpersonal level, neglect or apathy may serve as a powerful defence against the discomfort arising from witnessing racial inequity (Gaertner and Dovidio 2005). It can be an active coping strategy employed by privileged racial majorities (e.g. White people) to avoid negative affect that may often accompany racial violence and harm. And, at the institutional level, the neglect of racism may involve intentional/unintentional disregard or non-consideration of racial/ethnic minorities' conditions in policies and practices (see Section 5 for more detail). For example, in several settler colonial societies, the state of racial minority and Indigenous communities can be described as a historical and contemporary example of institutional neglect (Feagin and Bennefield 2014; Myrdal 1996).

However, the challenges brought by recent racial justice and political mobilisations have contested the sustainability of denial and neglect as wilful strategies. It can be argued that both strategic denial and neglect can be sustained only up to a certain point, until a critical mass of individuals and groups support racial equity and protest institutional racism. In US police profiling and violence, the denial of systemic racism has been a source of contestation until the killing of George Floyd. The subsequent global outrage against police racial violence forced the acknowledgment of racism and thwarted the sustainability of strategic neglect. Worldwide, hundreds of organizations indicated support for the Black Lives Matter movement in an emphatic vindication of the struggle against racial injustice (Orsini et al. 2022).

Distinctions between neglect and denial

While neglect and denial are interrelated, they also differ theoretically. Psychologically, they may emanate from the same need to avoid moral

responsibility, but they greatly differ in how they manifest in social cognition, discourse, and practice (Lentin 2014). Etymologically, the notion of denial pertains to a refusal to acknowledge or to a disavowal. Cohen (2001, 1) conceives different forms of denial where unpleasant information is “repressed, disavowed, pushed aside or reinterpreted”. Alternatively, the same “information ‘registers’ well enough, but its implications – cognitive, emotional or moral – are evaded, neutralized or rationalized away”. Denial of racism may also take the form of a non-acknowledgment of its prevalence in settings such as schools, media, and workplaces or it can occur as a denial that certain attitudes and behaviours are racist (Dunn and Nelson 2011; Habtegiorgis, Paradies, and Dunn 2014).

As such, denial implies that racism as an issue is afforded consideration as a social/moral problem, but its prevalence is rejected in a situation, setting, or geographic area (see Table 1). The denial of racism manifests in ways that undermine or dismiss it as an ongoing social problem occurring in bias, prejudice, discrimination, and violence against racial minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Wise 2008). Scholars have identified diverse strategies that are used to justify or deny racial inequities: minimization, rationalization, abstract liberalism, naturalization, deflection, and competing victimization (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, and Organista 2014). These strategies allow racial inequities to persist by explicitly rejecting the need for potential anti-racism policies and measures.

In contrast, the notion of neglect carries the meaning that someone or something is treated carelessly, without proper attention, or with disrespect, disregard, or indifference (cf. Glasgow 2009). In the context of racial (in)equity and (in)justice, neglect does not necessarily imply a direct denial or rejection. Rather, neglect implies disinterest irrespective of whether racism exists in a given situation, setting, or geographic area. Indeed, because of its pursuit to dodge culpability, neglect has a negative moral dimension relating to the omission of responsibility. It connotes a failure to extend the duty of care to racial/ethnic minorities by people in power (e.g. privileged groups, the police, policymakers, and employers). This can manifest in terms of individuals’ bystander apathy (Forman 2004) or at a societal level in the form of institutional neglect. The US government’s inadequate and delayed response during the Hurricane Katrina disaster may be considered an example of institutional neglect (Buras 2020). Similarly, neglect at the institutional level also occurs in the form of environmental racism. The dumping of hazardous chemicals in African countries, the exposure of the Flint (Michigan) water source to lead, dumping of toxic wastes in Indigenous lands (in Australia and Canada) represent cases of institutional neglect in contemporary societies.

Table 1 lists some key characteristics of how denial and neglect relate and differ in their conception and practical manifestations of racism. While both

Table 1. How denial and neglect embody racism.

Racism Description	Denial	Neglect
Meaning	Refusal “to admit the truth or reality of something unpleasant” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)	Failure “to give needed care or attention to someone or something” (Cambridge English Dictionary)
As an issue	Considered, registered	Ignored for lack of interest
Mode of expression	Active (rationalization)	Passive (invisibility)
Response to prevalence	“I care but I don’t see it”	“I couldn’t care less” (wilful neglect) “I care but I didn’t do anything” (unintentional neglect)
The evidence	Reinterpreted, rationalized away	Rejected by avoidance, omission
Moral responsibility	Heeded but conflicted, neutralized	Averted, evaded, disavowed
Policy implication	Not prevalent thus warranting no action	Not considered thus no further action
Anti-racism efforts	Undermined, trivialized, devalued	Ignored, deflected, dismissed

Note: Manifestations of denial and neglect.

are cognitively framed negative responses to claims, attributions, and criticisms of racism, their modes of expression, and the way they are asserted differ. The phrases “I care but I don’t see it” and “I couldn’t care less” may respectively capture the mental attitudes underlying denial and neglect as the cognitive reactions to such claims.¹ The former shows a potential interest to consider racism despite a rejection of the evidence, while the latter shows an underlying lack of interest towards the issue irrespective of the evidence. Unlike denial, neglect does not require outright rejection that racism occurred, or racial inequity exists. For example, business organizations often condemn incidents of racism, but may fail to undergo systemic changes in policy/practice to prevent future occurrences of racism (Elias, Ben, and Hiruy 2023). This is a typical case of neglect without denial. Both aspects of racism may invariably lead to a thwarting of anti-racism efforts, but in completely different ways, one through a contradiction and the other through avoidance of the evidence of racism.

Indeed, neglect can either be intentional (wilful neglect) or unintentional (unconscious neglect) (Glasgow 2009). Potentially, the outcomes of both aspects of neglect may have similar effects despite being qualitatively different behaviours. Racism expressed as wilful neglect, as described above, carries the force of apathy, indifference, and ignorance of race. However, racism can also manifest in the form of unintentional neglect, where failure to care becomes an omission rather than deliberate evasion. At an interpersonal level, a person showing unintentional neglect would be acting without second-guessing or reflecting on their actions, and the effects of these actions on disadvantaged racial groups. Their behaviour would imply that: “I care but I didn’t do anything about it”. This may apply in institutions such as police, schools, or workplaces. At a structural level, unintentional neglect occurs in omissions of actions, policies, and practices,

leading to adverse racial outcomes that inadvertently produce racial disparities. This is reinforced by colourblind policy approaches that neglect and fail to address structural racism. Henricks and Harvey (2017), for example, show how communities and bureaucrats in Ferguson (Missouri) – who may hold no racist views – regularly engage in routine practices which reinforce the racist outcomes of incarceration. They do this by responding to fiscal pressure and spending deficits through monetary punishments such as fines and fees. In such cases, a failure, in social policy, to consider “race” as a factor has led in many instances to the widening of racial inequities in health, education, and incarceration (Geronimus and Thompson 2004).

Another typical example of neglect and its role in exacerbating racial inequities is what happened during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the disproportionate infection and deaths among African Americans in the US (Buras 2020). Institutional racism was widely seen as a factor for the disproportionate effect of the pandemic on racial/ethnic minorities (Adebowale and Rao 2020; Gaynor and Wilson 2020; Yaya et al. 2020). Poor economic and social conditions of ethnic/racial minorities along with poor healthcare experiences and access exacerbated the disparity in Covid-19-related deaths. As Yaya et al. (2020) have argued, the prevalence of “persistent ethnic health disparities have been well known for many decades, but often systematically ignored”. It has become evident that policies and practices that reinforce colourblind attitudes towards the role of race and racism in society inadvertently perpetuate racial inequity while undermining anti-racism efforts. A recent meta-analysis has found that power evading colourblind racial ideology is associated with a high level of anti-Black prejudice, legitimizing ideologies, and negatively associated with antiracism attitudes/behaviours such as social justice behaviours, multicultural competencies, openness to diversity, and racial empathy (Yi et al. 2022).

Conceptualisations of neglect in the literature

Research on the notion of neglect is often examined in the context of child welfare research, where child neglect involves a failure to provide care and/or a delay of care (Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Zhou 2013; Norman et al. 2012; Stoltenborgh, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and van Ijzendoorn 2013). Unlike other forms of abusive behaviours, neglect, which is conceived as an omission of behaviour, is difficult to attribute and measure (Connell-Carrick 2003). However, researchers have used different strategies to empirically demonstrate how racial minority children are disproportionately exposed to neglect and maltreatment compared to white children, a disparity that can be linked to intersections of race and poverty (Connell-Carrick 2003; Jonson-Reid, Drake, and Zhou 2013). In a broader social context, neglect also remains a key issue associated with multiple aspects of racial inequities

including the way minorities are treated in law enforcement, healthcare service, and education (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Forman and Lewis 2006; Johnstone and Kanitsaki 2010).

Like denial, neglect is a behaviour tied to an epistemic (mis)cognition of racial minorities sustained through an ideology of perceived colour-blindness (Mueller 2017). Using colour-blindness as a lens, neglect can be understood as some form of moral valuation, where issues of racial inequities that are important for minorities are treated carelessly, without proper attention, or with disrespect, disregard, or indifference. Scholars have used different concepts to describe how indifference and disregard embody Whites' attitudes towards racism and persistent racial inequities (Bonilla-Silva 2006; Johnson et al. 2021; Mills 2007). Table 2 lists five different conceptualisations that highlight the disregard, indifference, and apathy that embody neglect in the context of racism. Collectively, they show how racism has been depicted as a neglect of racial inequity, racial violence, or historical racial injustice.

Malign neglect

A notable example of the application of neglect as a racial policy is the notion of "benign neglect" first coined by President Nixon's advisor Daniel Moynihan in the context of social pathology related to fire alarms within black neighbourhoods. Moynihan's identification of a connection between fire, social pathology, and anti-social behaviour led him to propose the neglect of the issues of "Negros" as a benign policy. For him, African Americans were experiencing significant socioeconomic progress that "the time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect'".² The Nixon Administration's vacillation edged to anti-black ambivalence, and by late 1970 became anti-civil rights combining his so-called "southern strategy" and Moynihan's "benign neglect" (Genovese 1990; Kotlowski 2001). The curtailing of civil rights progress and accompanying neglect has persisted across social policy, and more visibly so in the case of racialised "law and order" policies.

Scholars associate the differential racial outcomes of punishment and incarceration with the policy of "benign neglect" as applied in law enforcement. A study by Tonry (1995) argued that the crime control policies in the US that led to heightened over-incarceration of African Americans were examples of institutional discrimination that ignored and failed to consider the foreseeable unequal racial outcomes. Prior race and crime research – the benign neglect hypothesis – theorized that segregation enabled law enforcement authorities to neglect intra-racial crimes and arrests (Liska and Chamlin 1984).³ Either way, the neglect of disparate impact and the neglect of intra-racial crime contribute to disproportionate incarceration rates among people of colour, indicating the racial significance of neglect

Table 2. Conceptualization of “racism as neglect” in the literature.

Study	Concept	Definition	Study type	Variations	Examples
Tonry (1995)	Malign neglect	The racially discriminatory outcomes of US crime policies	Theoretical/ Empirical	Benign neglect	Non-violent drug related arrests, racial profiling
Forman (2004, 44), Forman and Lewis (2006)	Racial apathy	“Indifference toward societal racial and ethnic inequality and lack of engagement with race-related social issues”	Theoretical/ Empirical		Indifference to minority disadvantage, bias in interventions during emergencies (e.g. Hurricane Katrina)
Johnson et al. (2021, 1032)	Abandonment	“Bystander failure to act on behalf of a target of microaggressions despite having noticed the transgression”	Theoretical		Racist episodes reported by minorities in healthcare settings
Johnson et al. (2021, 1032)	Micro-aggressive neglect	“Failure to act on behalf of a target because of a failure to recognize that a microaggression took place”	Theoretical		Overlooking prejudiced behaviours by colleagues in workplace
Mills (2007, 13; 2015)	White ignorance	A particular kind of “structural group-based miscognition”; the presence of false and absence of true beliefs associated with white racial domination.	Theoretical	Racial ignorance, culpable ignorance, racial indifference	Centrality of whiteness and normalization of racial hegemony across institutions

Note: The concepts listed in this table have close similarity to how neglect is conceived in the present article.

(Russell-Brown 2022). The previous discussion on the role of punishment in racial disparities in Ferguson is a case in point. In the UK, Canada, and Australia, the arrests associated with non-violent offenses that lead to ethnic minority and Indigenous over-incarceration and deaths in custody are also close examples of this kind of neglect.

Racial apathy

“Racial apathy” is another cognitive attitude conceptualizing neglect both at interpersonal and societal levels. Racial apathy has been defined as “indifference toward societal racial and ethnic inequality and lack of engagement with race-related social issues” (Forman 2004, 44). Such apathetic neglect can reinforce the minimization bias that perpetuates injustice and disadvantage (Bonilla-Silva 2006). Based on an empirical study of White racial apathy in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Forman and Lewis (2006, 175) argued that racial apathy constituted:

Not only lack of care about racial inequality and unwillingness to address it, but also the strategic avoidance of contact with ethnoracial minority groups (e.g. Blacks and Latinos) and knowledge about racial and ethnic disparities and the racialized realities that go along with them.

According to their study, the inadequate and slow response during the crisis was a manifestation of “racial apathy and White ignorance” where the epistemic disinterest embodied in the absence of care and knowledge constituted the logical outcomes of “hegemonic colour-blind discourses” (Forman and Lewis 2006, 175). In this framing, apathy reinforces and accentuates the deleterious and disproportionate effects of racism among racial minorities.

Abandonment and micro-aggressive neglect

Research indicates that new racism manifests in daily reactions to micro-aggressive behaviours in the form of abandonment, victim-blaming, gaslighting, splaining, and neglect (Campbell and Manning 2014; Johnson et al. 2021). Two of these i.e. “abandonment” and “neglect”, are particularly relevant to my conceptualization of racism as neglect. Johnson et al. (2021, 1032) define abandonment as a “bystander failure to act on behalf of a target of microaggressions despite having noticed the transgression”. By abandoning a critical reaction towards the perpetration of racial offense, bystanders evade moral responsibility as indicated in Table 1. Here, the bystander is aware of the transgression. Micro-aggressive neglect on the other hand refers to the “failure to act on behalf of a target because of a failure to recognize that a microaggression took place” (Johnson et al. 2021, 1032). In this case, there is (mis)cognition on the part of the bystander. Research into the notions of abandonment and neglect is in its early stage

and has not yet been widely explored in the context of microaggressions (Johnson et al. 2021).

White ignorance

Mills (2007) conceptualized the concept of “white ignorance” to depict the strategic (mis)cognition of White people to the historical and ongoing racial inequities. White ignorance comprises the capacity to ignore White people’s complicity in oppression and domination expressed through “refusal to recognize how the legacy of the past” and “ongoing practices in the present, continues to handicap people of color” (Mills 2015, 219). While a distinction is often made between innocent and wilful ignorance, both aspects invariably reproduce and reinforce racial hierarchies imbued with white privilege and domination. Taylor and Habibis (2020) who examined white ignorance in an Australian context, argue that “white ignorance” obstructs White Australians’ constructive engagement with Indigenous people. Among the main reasons they mention are White Australians’ “ignorance of Australia’s race relations history; of Aboriginal law, cultures and languages; of the complexity of contemporary Aboriginal lives; and of the extent of their own ignorance” (Taylor and Habibis 2020, 6). While the notion of white ignorance has received wide attention in racism scholarship, some critics have questioned whether it has empirical support (e.g. Moon 2016).

In addition to the above-mentioned concepts, scholars have used different terminologies to explain racism as a form of epistemic ignorance.⁴ For example, Bartky (2002) uses the phrase “culpable ignorance” to describe the strategy White people employ to evade responsibility for maintaining or perpetuating racial hierarchy. The phrase “racial ignorance” has also been used to explain the epistemic process that “reinforces white domination, attending to mechanisms of white knowledge evasion and resistance that facilitate racial reproduction – in everyday life, through institutions, and across societies more broadly” (Mueller 2020, 142). As I have discussed throughout this paper, an inherent element of strategic ignorance is indifference or utter disregard to the conditions of the “racial other”. Passini (2019, 264) has argued that indifference which manifests in “being uncaring in regard to arbitrary policies affecting other social groups” is often the collective behaviour that enables injustice. By creating psychological distance, intergroup indifference both explicitly and implicitly enables groups and individuals to diffuse and displace moral responsibility toward the injustices visited upon racial minorities (Passini 2017). Such indifference is active and hence implicates culpability, whereby ignorance tends to be “a cognitive accomplishment grounded in explicit and tacit practices of knowing and non-knowing” (Mueller 2020, 146).

Indeed, many other concepts discussed in racism research may have similarities with the notion of neglect. But those listed in [Table 2](#) clearly articulate behaviours and attitudes that capture the way neglect is deployed in the reproduction and entrenchment of racism at interpersonal and institutional levels. Each concept highlights a particular historical and contemporary manifestation of racism that in one way or another embodies colourblind racism.

Neglect and institutional racism

So far, I have discussed the conceptual basis of denial and neglect, focusing on how they relate to contemporary manifestations of racism. Yet both may also be observed at the institutional and systemic levels, particularly in the continuation of historical colonial oppression and persistent intergenerational trauma (Feagin and Bennefield 2014). Specifically, I argue that the persistent institutional racism in some societies can be explained by the interplay between denial and strategic neglect. In the US for example, neglect (apathy or indifference) at a structural level was part of what constituted an “American Dilemma” – a moral contradiction of racial inequity in a modern democracy (Myrdal 1996). As in the past, it is difficult to make sense of the persistence of racial inequities and environmental racism in the US without considering institutional neglect and strategic indifference while not minimizing its structural complexity. Similarly, either through indifference, strategic ignorance, or systematic obfuscation, racism across many settler-colonial societies persists at an institutional level, while its reality is relegated as an unfortunate “thing of the past” (Elias and Paradies 2021; Noah 2002). Such discursive instances of neglect can be seen across many institutional settings and across settler-colonial societies.

In Australia, the gross inequities, poverty, and over-incarceration among Indigenous peoples that remain morally confronting are often described as an embodiment of racism manifesting in the form of institutional neglect (Cunneen 2006). The exploitative and extractive colonial practices and the consequent conditions of Indigenous Australians have been encapsulated in the phrase “third world in the first” (Young 2013). These conditions which occurred throughout Australia’s history (see Elias, Mansouri, and Paradies 2021; McGregor 2011) are ongoing and reflect the implicit neglect, ignorance, and societal apathy towards the persistent injustice of Indigenous experiences and disadvantage. While the role of institutional neglect, in this case, is undeniable, to what extent strategic neglect contribute to it is an empirical question. Yet, the gross disparities in poverty, health conditions, and education, or in over-incarceration, mortality, and unemployment, of Indigenous conditions arguably constitute an enduring Australian Dilemma.

Other instances of institutional racism and neglect are also observed in the US, UK, Australian and European contexts, particularly in relation to

immigration policies that securitize the situations of migrants and refugees (Orsini et al. 2022; Provine 2013; Solomos 2020). Immigration laws that authorize different agencies to detain asylum seekers and refugees perpetuate racism through “profiling, hyper-surveillance, abusive stops, problematic searches, and unwarranted detention of suspected unauthorized immigrants” (Provine 2013, 33). Immigrants and asylum seekers often become dehumanized, scapegoated, and blamed for social and economic problems, while they are subjected to institutional neglect for political expediency (Orsini et al. 2022). The maltreatment and detention of asylum seekers as criminals, often beyond public scrutiny, exacerbates the racist neglect in immigration policy.

I have argued that criminal justice represents an area where “wilful” neglect as a manifestation of institutional racism has been highlighted in racism scholarship (Davis 1996; Phillips et al. 2020; Tonry 1995). As discussed in Section 3, Tonry (1995) first identified malign neglect in connection with racial indifference towards crime policies in the US. In response to Tonry’s analysis, Davis (1996) argued that not just crime policies but a deliberate “benign neglect” of racism has also been a key factor behind the racially disproportionate incarceration rate. Scholars have recently documented evidence of such racist institutional practices in policing and sentencing across many US cities (Henricks and Harvey 2017; Henricks 2021). Similar practices and harmful outcomes can also be seen in instances of “deaths in custody, use of force, [etc]” where accusations of “malign neglect, racism, and discrimination” have been made (Phillips et al. 2017, 208). Australia has a similar issue of institutional neglect that is reflected in custodial deaths affecting Indigenous people, an unresolved problem even after a Royal Commission (Anthony and Blagg 2021; Anthony et al. 2021).

Healthcare is another setting where institutional racism is known to be ingrained yet only occasionally reported (Feagin and Bennefield 2014). Research indicates that minorities experience racial discrimination, lack of empathy, and stereotyping, and receive inadequate medical treatment compared to members of the racial majority (Hamed et al. 2022; Sim et al. 2021). Despite this, racism remains a neglected issue across healthcare services (Elias and Paradies 2021; Johnstone and Kanitsaki 2010). This may be partly attributed to the difficulty surrounding racism as a subject, and hence the human tendency to discard controversy. This has been evidenced in studies that showed that “healthcare staff tend to construct themselves as neutral and impartial and have difficulty in accepting that prejudice is part of healthcare interactions” (Hamed et al. 2022, 11). Johnstone and Kanitsaki (2010, 489) have also noted that it is “difficult to identify, anticipate, prevent, manage, and remedy” institutional racism unless it “is reframed and redressed as a pre-eminent ethical issue by health service providers”.

In general, the intentional or unwitting neglect of the existence of systemic/structural racism, particularly in contemporary racial discourse highlights a dangerous trend that inures societies to its harmful effects (Johnstone and Kanitsaki 2010; Noah 2002). It has been suggested that treating neglect of racism as a significant moral issue may potentially be normatively crucial in tackling structural racism and addressing racial inequities (Johnstone and Kanitsaki 2010). As I have argued throughout this article, the sustainability of neglect and racism centres around the subtle and insidious nature of new racism which may occur under broader support for egalitarian values (for example, in organizations). Thus, an ethical discourse on neglect, especially institutional neglect as a form of new racism needs more attention in racism scholarship to devise ways to combat persistent racism and racial inequities that thrive because of indifference, apathy, and strategic ignorance.

Conclusion

This article critically examined the conceptualization and manifestations of racism in the form of neglect and denial. It argued that denial embodies a unique aspect of new racism where the existence of racism is disavowed to evade moral accountability. Racism as a denial has been well researched, but the other equally important aspect i.e. the neglect of racism has received little empirical attention. In this article, I argued that neglect is an important cognitive behaviour that enables racism to thrive unimpeded. It sustains racial injustice and inequity even under conditions that members of the racial majority indicate support for racial equity. In conceptualizing racism as neglect, I argued that racism can thrive even under conditions where a significant majority of members of society acknowledge its existence but fail to act to address it. This is crucial for anti-racism efforts that combating racism will not only require producing evidence that racism exists but pressing society to abandon moral omission of responsibility towards racism and act towards addressing it. While evidence of persistent racism, discrimination, and racial inequities abound worldwide, contemporary societies find themselves ill-equipped and ill-prepared to combat racism. Part of these persistent social problems can be blamed on neglect at interpersonal and institutional levels. I have argued that neglect depicts a predisposition of apathy and disinterest in the conditions of the racial "other". The ongoing racial disparities occurring in many societal settings can be explained by institutional neglect, as do the disparities observed in Covid-19-related deaths. Tackling neglect should therefore become an indispensable part of critical anti-racism, given the inadequacy and ineffectiveness of anti-racism that lacks action.

Notes

1. I would like to emphasise that the two phrases are approximations of what I understand to be the mental states of the denier and the neglecter. The person may not be stating them explicitly, yet their behaviours betray such hidden predispositions.
2. Based on a memorandum to President Nixon reported in Kihss, P. (1970). 'Benign Neglect' on Race Is Proposed by Moynihan. *New York Times*, March 1, 1970.
3. According to Liska and Chamlin (1984, 386), the benign-neglect hypothesis argued that "by increasing the ratio of intra- to inter-racial crime for nonwhite offenders, the segregation of nonwhites decreases the pressure on police to control crime, thereby decreasing the arrest rate, especially that of nonwhites."
4. See for example the spectrum of scales identified in the link below rank-listing attitudes and behaviours towards people of colour from violent anti-black racism to abolitionism. https://racismscale.weebly.com/uploads/1/0/8/9/108961603/racism_scale_v4.1.pdf

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