

What is racial literacy?

Racial literacy is a term coined by the sociologist France Winddance Twine. She was studying biracial families in the United Kingdom. She first used “racial literacy” to describe the ways that a White parent of a biracial child would choose to learn more about the experiences of the other race, so that they could raise their biracial child with an appreciation for both sides of their heritage. Simply put, your experience as a White person in America will not be the same as the experience your biracial child will have. Racial literacy is the choice to understand that difference and address it. The term is now used broadly (outside of the parenting realm) to mean **the ability to recognize, respond to, and counter the role of racism in society**. Racially literate people understand the reality of how race impacts relationships, education, wealth, social status, cultural development, and personal identity. Racial literacy requires work in unpacking topics, engaging in difficult conversations, and examining policies. Racial literacy allows us to recognize racist policy or attitudes, respond to them, and eradicate them from our communities even when we are not the group being discriminated against.

Racial literacy should not be viewed as a binary: either you are literate, or you are not. Instead, it is like a spectrum with no end. As Lani Guinier puts it, racial literacy, “is about learning rather than knowing.” Some people may be extremely uneducated about the role of race while others may know more. Since I grew up in the diverse city of Atlanta and took classes that explained many topics/aspects of race, I felt like I was fairly racially literate. But, there were many topics I didn’t understand until recently including redlining, xenophobia, and gaslighting. As a white person in America, I’m not forced to deal with racism in the way a non-white American is. Because of that, I need to intentionally learn about the reality of racism so that I’m not ignorant. Regardless of where you fall on the spectrum, we *all* can improve our racial literacy.

Why Does it Matter?

When I started this newsletter, I could not have defined racial literacy. The past few months of racial tension punctuated by shootings, riots, and protests, particularly in my hometown of Atlanta, made me feel helpless. I love Atlanta, my neighborhood, and the people that make the city beautiful. I didn’t know what to do. As a white person, I felt shame and embarrassment. Those feelings didn’t seem healthy, so I tried to understand where they were coming from. In the past, I felt that simply not being racist was enough. As long as I didn’t promote racism, wasn’t I doing my part? After all, it’s not my fault that I was born white. What I realized, through personal reflection and discussions with friends, is that I was part of the problem because my inaction supported the status quo. If I’m not doing anything to deconstruct racism, I’m confirming that things are okay as they are. It is *not* enough to be not-racist. In the words of Ibram X. Kendi: “One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an anti-racist. There is no in-between safe space of 'not racist.’” I’m not the person responsible for deaths and racial unrest, but I’m an individual who has done nothing to fix the society that allows for that reality. I don’t feel ashamed to be white, but I do feel ashamed that I didn’t choose to be a part of the solution sooner.

Need to Know

Racial Literacy

A Cadet-Led Newsletter Focused on Creating a More Conscientious Corps

Racial literacy is important because it is a personal choice you can make to open the door to action. If you don't have the vocabulary to discuss systemic racism or the eyes to recognize discriminatory policy, you will not make a difference. Finally, the tragedies of racism have become too loud for the comfortable majority- including me- to ignore. It should not take deaths to commit us to making change, but that is what drove me to investigate ways that I'm racially illiterate. Now, working on my racial literacy is very important to me. It's a never-ending mission that I'm committed to working on. If you feel helpless, this is something you can choose to do. It's the first step to creating change. We don't know what we don't know. There are so many well-intentioned people, who don't want to support discrimination, but are unconsciously supporting racism because they do not see how they are complicit in systems that do just that. One simple choice you can make is to continue to read *Need to Know*, because the goal of this newsletter is to enhance our racial literacy. We should recognize what we don't know and choose to learn more. Choosing to remain ignorant is a choice to remain complicit in systems that may promote discrimination. As a Corps, it's time we choose education over ignorance. Start by improving your racial literacy. Read *Need to Know* so that you can start to identify the changes you need to make in yourself and the changes we need to make in our Coast Guard.

Continuation Questions

Reflect on or discuss these questions:

1. What could happen to the Division/Company/platform you lead if you aren't aware of how race impacts your members?
2. Do you have the vocabulary and knowledge to have intelligent conversations about race?

If you want to learn more about racial literacy, watch this TED talk:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bs2Fv3YiSFM>