

WHITENESS - TWO ARTICLES

What Is Whiteness? (Williams)

Should people be proud of membership in a group marked by power and privilege?

Given the many current discussions on race and racism, I have been asked by well-intentioned White Americans if it is appropriate to be proud of having a White identity. This is a good question that deserves a good answer. After all, if one was "Born White," why would that be a bad thing? To understand the meaning behind the concept of "White Pride," it helps to first understand something about the history of Whiteness.

The concept of Whiteness was imported from Spain and Portugal during the slavery era, where Whiteness was defined as a way to contrast one's identity as different from slaves. This was devised to create a deliberate hierarchy, to define who was privileged and who was property or a second-class citizen (Wood, 2015). The concept of race continues to define people in this way, socially though not legally anymore, albeit with stubbornly disparate outcomes (Salter, Adams, & Perez, 2018).

Culture and ethnicity are good

In the course of studying race and culture, I have come to understand that race is a destructive thing, as it categorizes people into castes based on their appearance and presumed ancestry.

Ethnicity and culture are good things as they are built by a group for the well-being of that group, but not race, which is defined by the

dominant culture and imposed upon non-dominant groups. This is why we sometimes refer to certain groups as "racialized." This is akin to words like "marginalized" or "stigmatized" – generally a negative thing.

While one can be proud of one's German heritage, French Canadian culture, American nationality, or African American ethnicity, one should not be proud of one's Whiteness. Whiteness is a forced group membership that originated by oppressing people of color (Williams, 2020). And, it causes psychological and spiritual damage to White people just as it damages non-Whites. White Americans are imbued with Whiteness from infancy, they do not choose it for themselves. People who look White and who have immigrated to America are generally afforded Whiteness upon arrival, whether they want it or not.

You may have heard the term **White guilt**. Many White people are reluctant to define or even discuss Whiteness due to the unpleasant feelings it can evoke of guilt and shame (DiAngelo, 2011). Shame is a particularly toxic emotion due to the lengths at which people will go to avoid this feeling, which typically includes blame-shifting, aggression, and other forms of hostility. It may also lead to self-harm to atone for wrongs done, or other dysfunctional behaviors to distract from the weight of the shame. This is why it feels so uncomfortable when White Nationalists talk about "White Pride."

For most of us, it just doesn't seem right. Continuing to accept unjust benefits that ultimately come at the expense of others is antisocial and unethical. It causes the beneficiaries (e.g., White Americans) to have a stake in not acknowledging, seeing, or changing the problematic status quo. Upton Sinclair famously said, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."

What about Black pride?

People may then ask why is it okay to be proud of being Black but not White. This is because pride in Blackness represents pride in the accomplishments and resilience of a racialized group in the face of continual oppression.

It is healthy for Black people to celebrate these small victories to maintain their self-esteem, despite pervasive social messages of inferiority. Further, most African Americans were forcefully deprived of their original diverse identities and had no choice but to forge a new ethnic identity as a single group. And, according to US Census criteria, one cannot claim an African American ethnic identity without being racially Black, confounding the constructs of race and ethnicity.

Generally, Americans considered Black can be of any skin shade and ethnicity, even if mostly of European ancestry. This is not the case with Whiteness, which is an exclusionary category. The term "White" is a euphemism, as White people have a range of skin shades. White people do not have actually White skin unless they have an extreme medical melanin deficiency (e.g.,

albinism). Likewise, people might call me Black or dark-skinned, but in reality, my skin tone is medium brown. Rejecting the construction of Whiteness has nothing to do with whether or not a person likes their actual skin color. You can like light-colored skin and still dislike Whiteness.

Certainly, there have to be better ways of describing human beings without the use of racialized terms. We could develop a system of referring to people descriptively by skin shade, when salient, and eliminate racial groupings altogether. The problem is that "eliminating racial groupings" is often interpreted to mean we simply don't talk about race, even while we treat others unequally (knowingly or unknowingly), which only worsens the problem. For example, many countries that eschew formal American notions of race actually have very racialized societies and biases (e.g., Canada, Germany, France, etc.), with little to no data on the scope of the problem (Faber, Williams, & Terwilliger, 2019; Quillian et al., 2019). It's not just a minority issue.

Because Whiteness is a third-rail, people of color have had to do much of the work in describing and defining the concept of Whiteness (e.g., Helms, 1990). Since White-dominated societies created this system and continue to use it, it is important that all members of our society share in the responsibility of understanding and fixing it. There may be no quick and easy solution, but as a first step, White people are encouraged to break the silence and start talking about it, simply because you can't fix what you can't openly discuss. It is

hoped that those who are able to see the tragedy of Whiteness will reject it. This means not only personal work to reduce individual bias, but becoming a true White ally. This means speaking out against racism, dismantling structures that reward Whiteness, and working to build systems that promote equity for everyone.

Williams, M.T., & Faber, S.C. (2020). What is Whiteness? *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from psychologytoday.com/us/blog/culturally-speaking/202006/what-is-whiteness

WHY DON'T WE STUDY WHITENESS?

(SCHAFER)

Race is socially constructed. Sometimes we come to define race in a clear-cut manner. A descendant of a Pilgrim is White, for example. But sometimes race is more ambiguous: People who are the children of an African American and Vietnamese-American union are biracial or "mixed," or whatever they come to be seen as by others.

Our recognition that race is socially constructed has sparked a renewed interest in what it means to be White in the U.S. Two aspects of White as a race are useful to consider: the historical creation of whiteness and how contemporary White people reflect on their identity.

When the English immigrants established themselves as the political founders of the U.S., they also came to define what it meant to be White. Other groups that today are regarded as White, such as Irish, Germans, Norwegians, or Swedes, were not always considered White in the eyes of the English. Differences in language and religious

worship, as well as past allegiance to a king in Europe different from the English monarch, all caused these groups to be seen not so much as Whites in the Western Hemisphere but more as nationals of their home country who happened to be residing in America.

The old distrust in Europe, where, for example, the Irish were viewed by the English as socially and culturally inferior, continued on this side of the Atlantic. Karl Marx, writing from England, reported that the average English worker looked down on the Irish the way poor Whites in the U.S. South looked down on Black people.

Whiteness

As European immigrants and their descendants assimilated to the English and distanced themselves from other oppressed groups such as

American Indians and African Americans, they came to be viewed as "White" rather than as part of a particular culture. Ignatiev (1994, 84) contrasted being White with being Polish, argues that "Whiteness is nothing but an expression of race privilege." This strong statement argues that being White, as opposed to being Black or Asian, is characterized by being a member of the **dominant group**.

Whites as people do not think of themselves as a race or have a conscious racial identity. The only occasion when a White racial identity emerges is momentarily when Whites fill out a form asking for self-designation of race or one of those occasions when they are culturally or socially surrounded by people who are *not* White.

Many immigrants who were not "White on arrival" had to "become White" in a process long forgotten by today's White Americans. The long documented transparent racial divide that engulfed the South during slavery allowed us to ignore how Whiteness was constructed. [There are articles titled "How Asians became White," "How the Jews became White," etc.]

Therefore, contemporary White Americans generally give little thought to "being White." Consequently, there is little interest in studying "Whiteness" or considered "being White" except that it is "not being Black." Unlike non-Whites, who are much more likely to interact with Whites, take orders from Whites, and see Whites as the leading figures in the mass media, Whites enjoy the privilege of not being reminded of their Whiteness.

Unlike racial minorities, Whites downplay the importance of their racial identity although they are willing to receive the advantages that come from being White. This means that advocacy of a "color-blind" or "race-neutral" outlook permits the privilege of Whiteness to prevail.

The new interest seeks to look at Whiteness but not from the vantage point of a White Supremacist. Rather, focusing on White people as a race or on what it means today to be White goes beyond any definition that implies superiority over non-Whites.

It is also recognized that "being White" is not the same experience for all Whites any more than "being Asian" or "being Black" is the same for all of those people. Ignatiev observes that studying

Whiteness is a necessary stage to the "abolition of Whiteness"—just as, in Marxist analysis, class consciousness is a necessary stage to the abolition of class. By confronting Whiteness, society grasps the all-encompassing power that accompanies socially constructed race.

White Privilege

Whiteness carries with it a sense of identity of being White as opposed to being for example, Asian or African. For many people it many not be easy to establish a social identity of Whiteness, as in the case of biracial children. However one can argue that the social identity of Whiteness exists if one enjoys the privilege of being White.

White privilege refers to the rights or immunities granted as a particular benefit or favor for being White. This advantage exists *unconsciously* and is often invisible to the very White people who enjoy it (Ferber, 2008).

McIntosh looked at the privilege that comes from being White and the added privilege of being male. The other side of racial oppression is the privilege enjoyed by dominant groups. Being White or being successful in establishing a White identity carries with it distinct advantages. Among those that McIntosh identified were:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

*Personal Account of Coming To See
Correspondences through Work in Women's
Studies.*

Whiteness does carry privileges, but most
White people do not consciously think of them
except on the rare occasions when they are
questioned.

Schaffer, R.T. (2009). *Sociology, A Brief
Introduction*, 8e. McGraw-Hill.

McIntosh, P. (1990). Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack. *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A*