Whiteness

Since white people in America hold most of the political, institutional, and economic power, they receive advantages that nonwhite groups do not.

Whiteness and white racialized identity refer to the way that white people, their customs, culture, and beliefs operate as the standard by which all other groups of are compared. Whiteness is also at the core of understanding race in America. Whiteness and the normalization of white racial identity throughout America's history have created a culture where nonwhite persons are seen as inferior or abnormal.

This white-dominant culture also operates as a social mechanism that grants advantages to white people, since they can navigate society both by feeling *normal* and being viewed as *normal*. Persons who identify as white rarely have to think about their racial identity because they live within a culture where whiteness has been *normalized*.

Thinking about race is very different for nonwhite persons living in America. People of color must always consider their racial identity, whatever the situation, due to the systemic and interpersonal racism that still exists.

Whiteness (and its accepted normality) also exist as everyday microaggressions toward people of color. Acts of microaggressions include verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs or insults toward nonwhites. Whether intentional or not, these attitudes communicate hostile, derogatory, or harmful messages.

> *"In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate."*
>
> TONI MORRISON

White Privilege
Since white people in America hold most of the political, institutional, and economic power, they receive advantages that nonwhite groups do not. These benefits and advantages, of varying degrees, are known as *white privilege*. For many white people, this can be hard to hear, understand, or accept - but it is true. If you are white in America, you have benefited from the color of your skin.

Stop and Think!

How does being white grant certain privileges? How might white people experience oppression through other social identities, e.g., class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, etc.?

White people can possess other marginalized parts of their identity, but their race is not one of these. To learn more about how race intersects with our other identities, check out the section titled systems of oppression.

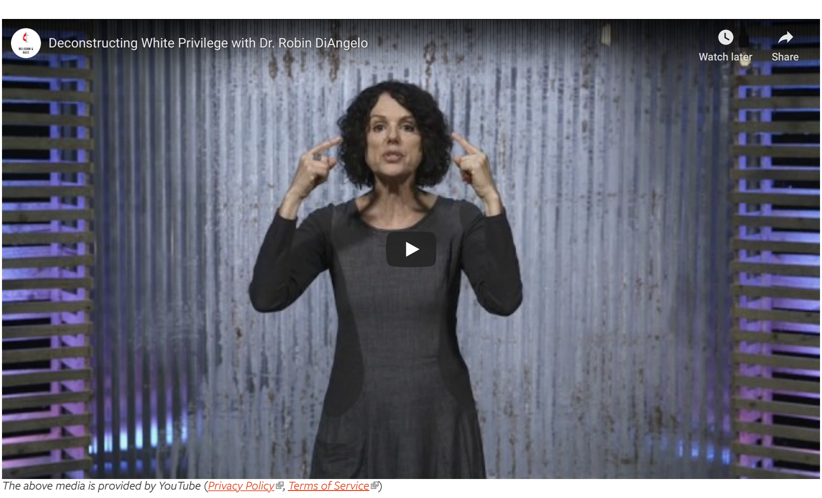
Being white does not mean you haven't experienced hardships or oppression. Being white does mean you have not faced hardships or oppression based on the color of your skin. We need to be honest about the ways white people have benefited from racism so we can work toward an equitable, fair and just society.

In "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," scholar Peggy McIntosh writes, "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks." Here are some examples she gives on what white privilege looks like in day to day living:

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
- 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.
- I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
- I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
- 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

Download *"White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" by Peggy McIntosh*

WATCH: White privilege and constructing white racial identity



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Stop and Think!

What are some misconceptions about whiteness that DiAngelo or McIntosh have helped you unveil?

Why does understanding white privilege matter?

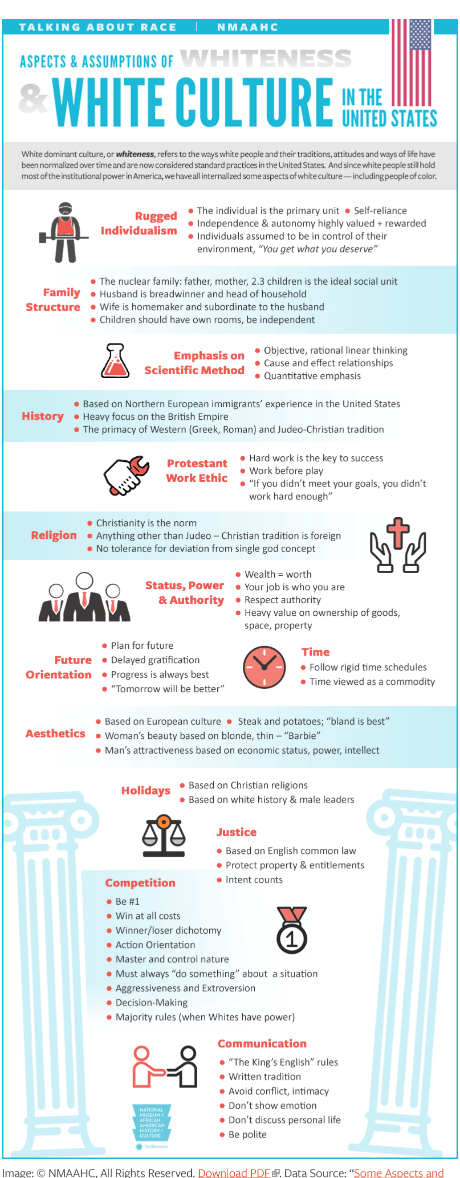
White Dominant Culture

White dominant culture describes how white people and their practices, beliefs, and culture have been normalized over time and are now considered standard in the United States. As a result, all Americans have all adopted various aspects of white culture, including people of color.

White supremacy is an ideology where white people are believed to be superior to nonwhite people. This fallacy is rooted in the same scientific racism and pseudo-science used to justify slavery, imperialism, colonialism, and genocide at various times throughout history. White supremacist ideologies and their followers continue to perpetuate the myth of white racial superiority.

The belief of white superiority has been part of the United States since its inception. The white European imperialists who settled here believed they were inherently superior to nonwhite groups. These beliefs justified atrocities like the genocide of Native Americans and nearly 250 years of African slavery. After slavery, white supremacist ideologies manifested into a series of laws that would limit the freedom of African Americans, known as Black Codes and Jim Crow. White supremacy and its legacy can still be found in our legal system and other institutions through coded language and targeted practices.

Direct and violent forms of racism that promote white supremacy have been on the rise in recent years. These acts are more directly linked to **white nationalism**.



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bell hooks explains systems of oppression through the idea "Interlocking systems of domination"
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Internalization of Whiteness and White Dominant Culture

Racism is perpetuated by deeming whiteness as superior and other racial and ethnic groups as inferior. The prevalence of white dominant culture and racism leads to an internalized racial superiority for those who adhere to it. This **internalized dominance** "describes the experience and attitudes of those who are members of the dominant, privileged, or powerful identity groups. Members of the [dominant] group accept their group's socially superior status as normal and deserved." [as defined by CARED: Calgary Anti-Racism Education]

When people of a nondominant group (people of color) are discriminated against, targeted or oppressed over time, they often believe the myths and misinformation about their group. Known as **internalized racism,** it happens when an oppressed group believes the racial views that society communicates are true, and they act as if they were true.

Stop and Think!

How does white dominant culture leave others out?

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Reflect

What are some of the disadvantages of not being sensitive or supportive of cultures and lifestyles of different ethnic and racial groups?

How can we begin to normalize cultural practices that are not related to white-dominant culture?

Confronting Whiteness

If you identify as white, acknowledging your white racial identity and its privileges is a crucial step to help end racism. Facing your whiteness is hard and can result in feelings of guilt, sadness, confusion, defensiveness, or fear. Dr. Robin DiAngelo coined the term **white fragility** to describe these feelings as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves." Since white people "live in a social environment that insulates them from race-based stress," whites are rarely challenged and have less of a tolerance to race-based stress.

"For those of us who work to raise

the racial consciousness of whites, simply getting whites to acknowledge that our race gives us advantages is a major effort. The defensiveness, denial, and resistance are deep."

ROBIN DIANGELO
"White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism"

The feelings associated with white fragility often derail conversations about race and serve to support white supremacy. While these feelings are natural human reactions, staying stuck in any of them hurts the process of creating a more equitable society. The defensiveness, guilt, or denial gets in the way of addressing the racism experienced by people of color.

For white people doing anti-racist and social justice work, the first meaningful step should be to recognize their fragility around racial issues and build their emotional stamina. "White Fragility" author Robin DiAngelo breaks it down.

Besides your own internal reflection, processing, and daily commitment to anti-racist work, try participating in affinity groups, or caucuses. These groups are people sharing common interests, backgrounds, or experiences, coming together to support each other.

Take a moment to reflect

Let's Think

Read

- "White Power Ideology: Why El Paso Is Part of a Growing Global Threat" by Lois Beckett and Jason Wilson, to learn more about the violent and overt ways white supremacy still exists in the U.S.
- "The Sneaky Language Today's Politicians Use to Get Away With Racism" by German Lopez

Reflect

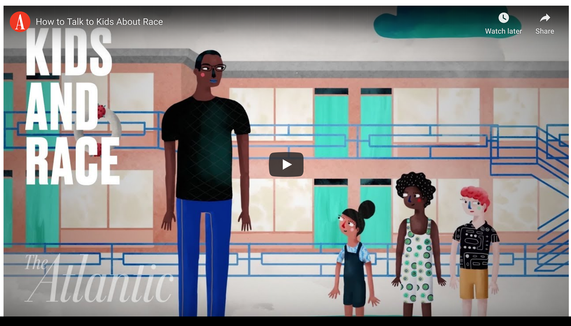
- How does the concept of white supremacy relate to white privilege?
- What are the dangers of politicians' frequent use of racially coded language?
- **For Educators:** An overwhelming majority of the nation's teachers are white. To learn about the impact of whiteness in the classroom and why this is troublesome to black students, read: "Why Diversity Matters: 5 Things We Know About How Black Students Benefit From Having Black Teachers."

Let's Talk

1. **For Concerned Citizens**: Whiteness operates in covert and overt ways that affect all of us. It can appear as practices within an institution or accepted social norms. Since whiteness works almost invisibly, we may not always be aware of how it manifests in our daily lives. Thinking critically about your social conditioning and the values you have adopted as fact, ask yourself:
   - What are some aspects of whiteness you've internalized?
   - How can these be hurtful to you and others?
   - What are some ways you plan on combating them?

Let's Act

- **For Parents**: How often do you talk to your child(ren) about the noticeable racial differences in society as well as your own race? To learn more on how to teach your child about the ways whiteness is prevalent in society, watch this video with concrete examples and suggestions:



Why Us, Why Now?

Since the opening of the museum, the number one question people ask us is how to talk about race. In 2014, we launched our signature program, "Let's Talk! Teaching Race in the Classroom." Every year we've learned, reflected, and refined the program content – always growing and striving to do better.

Information about the Education Platform

Generously supported by
The Atlantic Philanthropies
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