

Deconstructing Whiteness and White Privilege

'Whiteness,' like 'colour' and 'Blackness,' are essentially social constructs applied to human beings rather than veritable truths that have universal validity. The power of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 46-47).

Ruth Frankenberg describes whiteness as:

“a dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, with the purpose to keep others on the margin. ... [W]hite people are not required to explain to others how 'white' culture works, because 'white' culture is the dominant culture that sets the norms. Everybody else is then compared to that norm. ... In times of perceived threat, the normative group may well attempt to reassert its normativity by asserting elements of its cultural practice more explicitly and exclusively (qtd. in Estable, 1997, 21).”

Key Features of Whiteness

Whiteness is multidimensional, complex, systemic and systematic:

- It is **socially and politically constructed**, and therefore a learned behavior.
- It does not just refer to skin colour but its **ideology** based on beliefs, values behaviors, habits and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin colour (Frye, 1983; Kivel, 1996).
- It represents a **position of power** where the power holder defines the categories, which means that the power holder decides who is white and who is not (Frye, 1983).

- It is **relational**. "White" only exists in relation/opposition to other categories/locations in the racial hierarchy produced by whiteness. In defining "others," whiteness defines itself.
- It is **fluid** - who is considered white changes over time (Kivel, 1996).
- It is a **state of unconsciousness**: whiteness is often invisible to white people, and this perpetuates a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference which is a root cause of oppression (hooks, 1994).
- It shapes how white people view themselves and others, and places white people in a **place of structural advantage** where white cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unquestioned (Frankenberg, 1993). Cultural racism is founded in the belief that "whiteness is considered to be the universal ... and allows one to think and speak as if Whiteness described and defined the world" (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 327).

White versus Whiteness

- Race is **scientifically insignificant**.
- Race is a **socially constructed category** that powerfully attaches meaning to perceptions of skin colour; inequitable social/economic relations are structured and reproduced (including the meanings attached to skin colour) through notions of race, class, gender, and nation.
- Whiteness is a set of **normative privileges** granted to white-skinned individuals and groups; it is normalized in its production/maintenance for those of that group such that its operations are "invisible" to those privileged by it (but not to those oppressed/disadvantaged by it). It has a long history in European imperialism and epistemologies (for those who are of mixed ancestry and "pass" as white, this normativity, I would assume, would not occur).
- Distinct but not separate from ideologies and material manifestations of ideologies of class, nation, gender, sexuality, and ability.
- The meaning of "whiteness" is historical and has shifted over time (i.e. Irish, Italian, Spanish, Greek and southern European peoples have at times been "raced" as non-white).

Click here to see our glossary definitions of *White Fragility*, *Whiteness*, *White Privilege/White-Skin Privilege* & *White Supremacy*

Adapted from Alberta Civil Liberties Research Centre

<http://www.aclrc.com/whiteness>

Reading List on Whiteness and White Privilege

1. Sara Ahmed, Phenomenology of Whiteness Feminist Theory Vol 8, Issue 2, pp. 149 – 168, Sage Journals, August 2007
2. Teju Cole, The Atlantic, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," March 2012
3. Towards the Other America: Anti-Racist Resources for White People Taking Action for Black Lives Matter (Paperback)
4. Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race (Teaching/Learning Social Justice) (Paperback)
5. [The Journal — Me And White Supremacy](#)
6. [#EndWhiteSilence Action Toolkit Final](#) Showing Up For Racial Justice (SURJ)
7. http://www.cwsworkshop.org/pdfs/CARC/White_Identity/4_Life_Long_Journey.PDF

Worksheets for Reflection on White Privilege and Anti-Racism

A step further - **looking inward** Living in a racist society means that we have adopted racist attitudes. No point in denying it, or spending energy minimizing the harms done. Instead, let's understand what form white privilege takes for us, and bring some understanding to our experiences as white people.

1. Do you know what role your family played in exploiting people of colour? How can you find the answers to this question?

2. What did you learn from your family about the differences between white folks and people of colour? Was race discussed? Was white privilege ever identified?

3. Could you start a discussion about racism during a family get-together? With your neighbours? What aspect of racism could you discuss with your friends? What has been stopping you?

4. Looking at yourself, what happens to your body when you believe that people of colour are less important than you are? What might you be afraid to admit? How do you undervalue people of colour? Why?

5. How do you hold onto white privilege? How can you start to let go?

6. What can you do to share power with people of colour?

What can I do ? Strategic Fight Against Racism

1. Assume racism is everywhere, everyday. Just as economics influences everything we do, just as our gender and gender politics influences everything

we do, assume that racism is affecting whatever is going on. We assume this because it's true and because one of the privileges of being white is not having to see or deal with racism all the time. We have to learn to see the effect that racism has. Notice who speaks, what is said, how things are done and described. Notice who isn't present. Notice code words for race, and the implications of the policies, patterns, and comments that are being expressed. You already notice the skin colour of everyone you interact with – now notice what difference it makes.

2. Notice who is the centre of attention and who is the centre of power. Racism works by directing violence and blame toward people of colour and consolidating power and privilege for white people.

3. Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified. Notice it in yourself. Notice it in others.

4. Notice how white privilege is normalized. Over time, we have all internalized messages about the superiority of whites. This started historically but continues today. Whites are seen to be better than others, smarter, more deserving, and presumed to work harder, smarter and more efficiently than others.

5. Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism. Notice how racism has changed over time and how it has subverted or resisted challenges. Study the tactics that have worked effectively against it.

6. Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice.

7. Take a stand against injustice. Take risks. It is scary, difficult, and may bring up feelings of inadequacy, lack of self-confidence, indecision, or fear of making mistakes, but ultimately it is the healthy and right thing to do.

8. Step in purposively. Intervene when you see racism in action. When you step in, you want to do three things: • Educate them about racism and let them know how the action is harmful. Give people the benefit of the doubt by believing that

they want to do the right thing. • Let them know you won't tolerate this behaviour. • Support the person of colour.

9. Be strategic. Decide what is important to challenge and what's not. Think about strategy in particular situations. Attack the source of power, not the people who have little power.

10. Don't confuse the battle with the war. Behind particular incidents and interactions are larger patterns. Racism is flexible and adaptable. There will be gains and losses in the struggle for justice and equality.

11. Support the struggles of people of colour. Join organizing efforts of those in your community who are fighting racism

12. Support the leadership of people of colour. Do this consistently, but not uncritically.

13. Learn something about the history of white people who have worked for racial justice. There is a long history of white people who have fought for racial justice. Their stories can inspire and sustain you

14. Don't do it alone. You will not end racism by yourself. We can do it if we work together. Build support, establish networks, and work with already established groups. Find one person who will support your learning and actions. Have conversations about racism and whiteness. Discuss things that motivate you to take action and those that block your actions.

15. Accept the "onion theory." You will continue to peel away layers of your own racism and white privilege for the rest of your life.

16. Talk with your children and other young people about racism. Racism begins with the young. Break the cycle as soon as you can.

17. Educate others. Let others know about your commitment and why you are taking such actions. You can help others learn about racism.

18. Remember it is in your interests to end racism. Your spirit, your money, your health and your well-being depends on it. It is also the right thing to do