Exploring Cultural Awareness: Whiteness

Inclusive Science Initiative Program

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that people cannot see race, and thus racism does not exist. Others feel that the concept of white privilege is an attack on white people.

• Often there is a response by white people to shy away from topics of race and whiteness, in part due to guilt and shame. This response has been labelled “white fragility” by Robin DiAngelo, a critical whiteness scholar, who believes that white peoples’ fear of discussing race prevents them from confronting racism.

There is nothing inherently good or bad about being white, but it is important to understand that there is a social and political imbalance that has historically, and continues to, benefit white people. By understanding the social construct of race, the history of whiteness and the impacts of white privilege, we can further educate ourselves and begin to address white supremacy and racism in our laws, policies, institutions and social interactions.

**Suggested Reading**


Exploring Cultural Awareness – Whiteness

What does it mean to be white? Whiteness, as with all other races, is a social construct. There is nothing that inherently identifies a person as white, yet when we use the word, we have a certain collective understanding of what it means. Whiteness has generally been associated with people of European origin but has not always collectively represented all Europeans. There are other ethnic groups with light-colored skin who are labeled white in some context but not others. So, what makes a person white and what does this mean in our society?

A Brief History of Whiteness

• The concept of race has a long and complex history, but the first time that a clear delineation was created was in the late 17th century. Slaveholders in the United States formed a distinction between light-skinned indentured servants and dark-skinned slaves to prevent an uprising, as many landowners were being outnumbered by the people they enslaved. By creating this distinction, light-skinned indentured servants were given more rights, including the right to oversee black slaves. This created a racial hierarchy that associated blackness with slavery.
• The racial category of white has been used interchangeably with “Caucasian,” a term invented by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach based on a study of skulls. He chose the name based on a mountain range bordering Russia and Georgia, a region he believed produced “the most beautiful race of men.”
• Although following colonization the white racial category referred to Europeans, there was considered to be a hierarchy of whiteness that was expressed in different ways throughout history. Anglo-Saxons were at the top of this hierarchy and at certain points, Italian, Irish, Jewish, Slavic and other Europeans were considered to be less-desirable whites. People of these ethnicities were at times turned away during immigration or otherwise discriminated against.

Defining Whiteness

• The U.S. Census first listed “white” as a race in 1790. At this time, the census offered six categories, including free white males over and under the age of 16, free white females, slaves and “all other free persons.”
• Today, the census still uses the category of white, and it is defined as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa.”
• Despite the fact that the U.S. Census defines white as including MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) people, there is racial discrimination against these groups, who often do not identify as white.

Whiteness as a Cultural Concept

In the context of the United States, whiteness has been viewed as the standard for norms and values since colonization. Examples of white norms and values that dominate our society include holidays based on Christian religions, aesthetics related to European culture, strict adherence to time schedules, use of the scientific method, patriarchal values and competition, the nuclear family and independence, to name a few.

Leveraging White Privilege

• The concept of white privilege draws to attention the specific, racial advantages that whites have over other races.
• The term white privilege was popularized in 1988 by Peggy McIntosh, who created a list of 41 examples of white privilege in her paper “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies.”
• In recent years, there has been a significant push to call to attention white privilege and to end the cycle of institutional white supremacy (systems that give whites institutional advantages). While there have been some successes, there has also been significant pushback. Some claim “colorblindness,” a concept used to imply