

# Summary of Whiteness Theory

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## Whiteness as a Normalized Category

Whiteness theory treats whiteness not as a biological category but as a social construction. Insofar as whiteness is thought of as “natural,” it is understood in essentialized terms — either as a personal attribute or as a scientific category. Yet who counts as white depends on what is at stake. CRT scholar Cheryl Harris suggests that whiteness is best thought of as a form of property. Conceived of as legal or cultural property, whiteness can be seen to provide material and symbolic privilege to whites, those passing as white, and sometimes honorary whites. Examples of material privilege would include better access to higher education or a choice of safe neighborhoods in which to live; symbolic white privilege includes conceptions of beauty or intelligence that not only are tied to whiteness but that implicitly exclude blackness or brownness.

White privilege is different from simple Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism refers to standards and values that start from European-based culture and experience and that either ignore or denigrate other cultural values and experience. The problem with Eurocentrism is a failure of pluralism, a lack of appreciation for other cultures. Insofar as white standards of beauty or intelligence are simply narrow or parochial, they are Eurocentric. By contrast, white privilege *depends on the devaluation* of non-whites. Insofar as white standards of beauty or intelligence rely on an implicit dichotomy or opposition between white purity, say, and black primitivism, they create a hierarchy that cultural pluralism cannot overcome.

Whiteness-privileging mechanisms work in several, sometimes paradoxical ways. For example, on the one hand, whiteness is normalized; it is taken for granted and therefore invisible. On the other hand, it is treated as preferable. If this seems counter-intuitive, think of how maleness in U.S. society is both the “normal” and the preferred condition. People in the U.S. rarely talk about the white-heterosexual-maleness of the U.S. presidency — it is taken for granted as the normal condition — but if someone raises the possibility of a female, gay, and/or non-white president, the widespread preference for a white, heterosexual, male president quickly becomes apparent. Whereas whiteness is not treated as a race, and thus is invisible, blackness and brownness are “marked” racial categories — departures from the racial norm. Sometimes this departure will be marked as exotic; sometimes, as a difference that well-meaning whites politely ignore. More often, it will be marked as a special interest, a problem, or a form of deviance.

Toni Morrison has used the following metaphor to describe the invisibility of whiteness: it is like the fishbowl that contains both fish and water. Whiteness, in other words, provides the very context for meaning-making. It supplies the norms and categories against which all groups are measured. But the categories of whiteness are invisible as *constraint* because we keep focusing on what is inside them — the water and the fish, rather than the fish bowl itself.

All whiteness theories problematize the normalization and naturalization of whiteness. Rejecting the notion of white values as a generic or colourblind norm, they point to how the very status of whiteness as a norm is a privilege. When, for example, whiteness is the norm in the U.S. high school curriculum, the history of whites in America counts as “just plain old American history,” whereas the history of non-white groups (and white women) is a special case of or even a departure from American history. Hence, there is no expectation that all Americans should know that history.

Paradoxically, even while whiteness is invisible as the backdrop of meaning, it may be hypervisible as either a preferred or a threatened status. It is treated as a threatened status when whites feel that we are losing the privileges to which we are entitled, such as control over the history books. It is treated as a preferred status when whiteness is associated with the highest cultural values (such as the so-called Protestant work ethic in contrast to supposed black or brown laziness and lack of ambition).

## **Differences in Theoretical Focus and Approach**

Whiteness theories do not agree on a single methodology or theoretical claim. Like African American Studies or Feminist Theory, Whiteness Theory is interdisciplinary. It seems to me helpful to divide whiteness theories into four major groups.

*Material theories* of whiteness ask how whites as a group come to enjoy privileged access to tangible goods — everyday goods such as well-paying jobs, health protection, environmentally safe neighborhoods, legal and police and fire protection, access to good education, and basic civil liberties (such as freedom from being arrested for DWB, the right to vote in Florida, or the ability to walk in a store and not be kept under surveillance due to one’s colour). Primarily structural in approach, material theories address not only economic but also bodily concerns. (In this respect, they resemble feminist material theories more than they do strictly class-based material theories.) Although they do not ignore individual prejudice, material theories are more concerned with systemic racism — the kind of racism that is revealed in patterns and systems — rather than in personal motives. (CRT and LatCrit often overlap with this type of whiteness theory, as do many analyses grounded in African American and other black and brown epistemologies. See, for example, the work of Carter G. Woodson.)

*Discursive theories* of whiteness analyze the ways in which language, mass media, discourses, and symbols organize meaning so that whiteness is framed as both the preferred and the normal state of being. Discursive theories often identify binaries that treat blackness or brownness as the foil (or dramatic “other”) for whiteness, allowing whiteness to emerge as special and rare. They also point to the meta-narratives implicit in our mainstream discussions of race. (Just as “boy meets girl” is a staple narrative of movies, the idea that the history of racism in the U.S. is a history of “progress” is a staple of discussions of race in documentaries and news stories). The focus of discursive theories is on the way that taken-for-granted perception is organized and shaped by manipulations of symbols and binaries (e.g., white=light=good vs. black=dark=evil). The dichotomies involved in much of the organization of white-privileging perception insure that such perception is hierarchically organized: not only is one set of characteristics better than but it specifically excludes the other. Just as “reason” gains its superiority in part by excluding “emotion,” images of white innocence gain their power in part from the

contrast with images of black or brown menace. (To some extent, post-structural, post-colonial, and cultural studies analyses that focus on race may overlap with discursive theories of whiteness.)

*Institutional theories* of whiteness in some sense combine material and discursive approaches. On the one hand, they are concerned with systems of privilege that have clear material consequences because they are part of the organization of institutions like banks, schools, universities, and hospitals; on the other hand, the main way in which white privilege is maintained in such cases is through formal or symbolic systems such as etiquette, policy, protocol, or procedure. Examples of practices to which institutional theories of whiteness might be applied would include the scientific method, procedures for tenure and/or promotion, grievance procedures, explicit or implicit codes for professional behavior (such as the prohibition in some jobs against certain kinds of “unprofessional” hairdos — hairdos that include black hair styles but not white styles), protocols for the presentation of scholarly research, and explicit or implicit codifications of merit, authority, legitimacy, and expertise. The consequences of these practices can be material (e.g., one can be fired from a job for not abiding by the approved codes), but the emphasis in institutional analyses is less on material consequences than on the maintenance of a system of symbolic privilege through exclusionary practices. Just as membership in a country club is deemed more desirable if it is an exclusive club, academic knowledge gains part of its prestige from its exclusion of the everyday, drylongso, or traditional knowledge associated with subaltern groups. (Not all forms of institutional exceptionalism or exclusivity have to do with merit of an institutionally rewarded kind. They also may have to do with an institutional culture. Thus, an institution that prides itself on being fair and colourblind, for example, might exclude any discussion of racism that threatened its self-image — and symbolic capital — as a particularly moral organization.) In short, institutional theories of whiteness focus on how regulations or codes privilege a certain discourse, culture, or value system. (To some extent, CRT, LatCrit, and feminist/race analyses may overlap with institutional theories of whiteness.)

*Personal/relational* (or psychological or identity) theories of whiteness address the ways in which white privileging mechanisms find a home in our relationships, our sense of self, and our assumptions about growth, morality, and decency. They name personal privilege, deconstruct the values implicit in white identity, and/or address responsibility in racialized (including white-on-white) relationships. To the extent that our ideas about being a good person, for example, involve comparisons to others (to their disadvantage), our sense of ourselves as good people is predicated on exceptionalism. In such cases, we in effect refuse to address others as equals. Often, such ways of constructing an identity are racialized, drawing on prejudices and stereotypes, implicit or explicit “whitely” value systems (to use Marilyn Frye’s term), and/or racial ignorance (especially willful ignorance). Even the sense of ourselves as “good whites” is likely to turn on our difference from other, lesser whites and on an implicit sense of benevolence and generosity towards non-whites. Although personal/relational theories of whiteness involve moving away from racism and towards either anti- or non-racism (depending on the theory), they are not about assigning guilt but about learning to take responsibility for responding to personal and societal racism. Thus, Minnie Bruce Pratt asks herself not only how she has personally participated in prejudice and systemic racism but also “what had been or was being done in my name.” (Although personal/relational theories of whiteness are fairly

distinctive to whiteness theory, there is overlap with particular strains in feminist theory.)

It should be noted that the patterns of whiteness uncovered by whiteness theories may in some cases include individuals who identify as (and are identified by others as) brown or black. This is because whiteness does not refer to a biological but to a socially constructed category. For example, black or brown academics who internalize white-privileging institutional norms may be said to benefit from and participate in the promotion of institutional whiteness. Insofar as African Americans, Latina/os, and other non-whites aspire to material privileges that are coded as white *and* insofar as they see that material well-being as earned through individual merit (rather than through a system that excludes all but a few people of colour), they may be said to participate in material whiteness.

It is partly because whiteness can be extended to a few, “deserving” people of colour, that it remains invisible: it looks like a generic system that only *happens* to serve whites better, rather than one that systematically serves whites better. However, non-whites who benefit from white-privileging mechanisms are likely to do so more or less on probation: they may be constantly expected to demonstrate their worthiness, may be tokenized (not taken especially seriously but placed in visible positions to “prove” that an organization is colourblind), and may be disenfranchised if they jeopardize their honorary whiteness (by, for example, demonstrating significant interest in or solidarity with other people of colour).

## **Discussion or Small Group Questions on Whiteness**

1. Material theories of whiteness focus on access to tangible goods (economic and bodily), such as well-paying jobs or safety from environmental hazards. Identify a material question about race that you have encountered in the media or (preferably) in your own major field of study; then reframe it so that it does not assume whiteness as the invisible norm. For example, a mainstream question asked in the field of health is, “How can we get young black mothers-to-be to take advantage of the pre-natal care services that are available to them?” To change the question so that it does not assume white norms as the point of reference, you might include some way of asking what young black mothers-to-be (or their communities) saw *themselves* as needing or you could ask how the services available to mothers-to-be perhaps have been organized with the needs and values of white mothers in mind.

2. Discursive theories of whiteness focus on the ways in which language, popular media, and prestigious discourses (like science) foster perceptions of race superiority, inferiority, and “otherness.” Identify a discursive statement about or representation of race that you have encountered in the media (or in your major field of study); then reframe it so that it does not assume whiteness as the invisible norm. For example, perfume ads for women often use Asian or Asian-American models in leopard or other animal skins to signify an “exotic,” “sultry” mood and a “wild” appeal to the senses. (Perfume ads featuring white women for some reason seem to include puppies.) Reframing such ads would require problematizing the notion that white women are sexually pure (often, heterosexual white women are represented as not *having* desires but merely *being* desirable), in contrast to (young) women of colour, who supposedly

are primitive, sensual, appetite-driven, promiscuous, wanton, and abandoned in their sexuality.

3. Institutional theories of whiteness in effect combine material and discursive approaches to focus on formal codes and procedures that shape the culture of institutions. Although such codes can have material consequences, the focus of institutional theories is less on the material costs and consequences of a policy and more on how the exclusion of non-white interests and values fosters institutional prestige (or promotes a particular, exclusionary institutional identity). Identify an institutional position or code of conduct that offers itself as colourblind (preferably in your own major field of study); then reframe it so that it does not assume whiteness as the invisible norm. For example, classroom etiquette sometimes requires (at least implicitly) that no one sound angry or emotional. Sometimes whites will say, "I cannot hear you if you sound angry." Such practices reference acceptable and appropriate speech to what whites feel comfortable hearing. Reframing such expectations would require recognizing that it is perfectly reasonable not only for people of colour but for anti-racist whites to be angry about racism and other injustices.

4. Personal/relational whiteness theories focus on questions of growth, personal morality, and responsibility. Identify a personal/relational or identity question about race that you have encountered in the media or (preferably) in your own major field of study; then reframe it so that it does not assume whiteness as the invisible norm. For example, scholars in education sometimes ask questions like, "How can we encourage teacher candidates to develop into the kinds of teachers who reach out to students of colour?" Reframing such a question might involve calling into question the meta-narrative of professional and personal "growth" assumed here and/or might require reframing the question so that it does not position teachers as implicitly white and students of colour as implicitly "at-risk" and in need of the benevolence of white teachers.

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