

The Importance of Being White

We've seen some of the trajectories of various ethnic and racial groups in America, but what about the largest racial population, whites? Scholars have begun to pay more attention to what it means to be a white person. Every year on the first day of my introduction to sociology class, I ask my 200 or so students to write down the five social categories that best describe who they are. Black students almost always put their race at or near the top of the list. Latino and Asian American students usually list their ethnicity as well. Until recently, I could be fairly confident that whites would not list their race. Some might identify Polish, German, or another ethnic or national origin, but not one white student would write down Caucasian, white, or even Euro-American. And that was the point of my experiment.

We have already seen how the category of whiteness is socially constructed—first inclusively defined as all “free white persons” in 1790, then restrictively defined as only northern and western European whites in the early twentieth century, and reformulated back to an umbrella category by the mid-twentieth century. We know now that this category, which seems so natural and innate, is actually a flexible label that has expanded



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Whiteness, argues Peggy McIntosh (1988), is an “invisible knapsack of privileges” that puts white people at an advantage, just as racism places nonwhites at a disadvantage. In her now classic essay “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1989), McIntosh catalogs more than 50 “Daily Effects of White Privilege,” ranging from the mundane to the major. Here are just a few McIntosh notices:

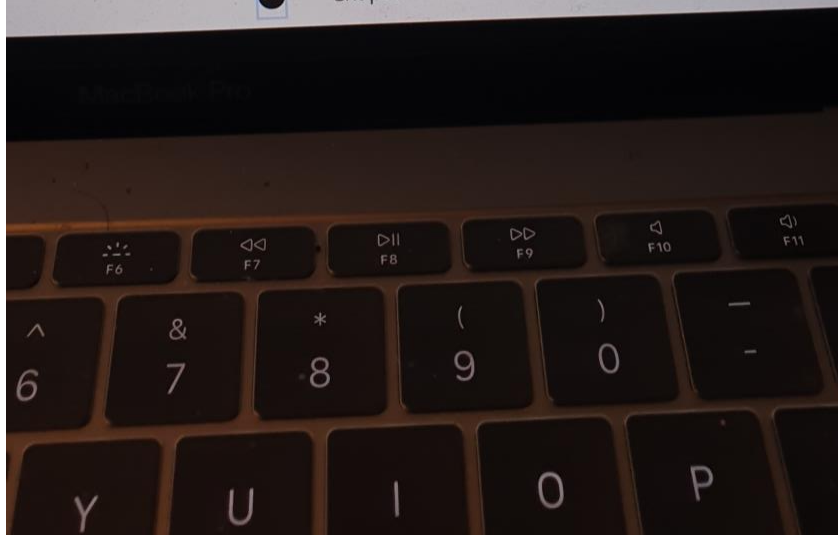
- I can log into Netflix and count on finding movies and TV featuring people of my race represented, go into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, and walk into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.



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- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
- I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin. (pp. 3-5)

Whiteness, then, is about not feeling the weight of representing an entire population with one's successes or failures. It's about not having to think about race much at all.

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In recent years, however, awareness of whiteness has been on the rise, as evidenced by the profusion of scholarship on whiteness, the goal of which is to call attention to the social construction and ensuing privilege of the category. Calling attention to whiteness helps whites understand how slanted the playing field really is. It also helps rectify something wrong with the way we study race in America: By traditionally focusing on minority groups, the implicit message that scholarship projects is that nonwhites are "deviant," to borrow from the Comte de Buffon, and that's why we study them. Even popular culture has caught on with memes like "stuff white people like," "columbusing," and "if black people said the stuff white people say," which offer humorous yet pointed critiques of privileges that affluent white people tend to have in America.

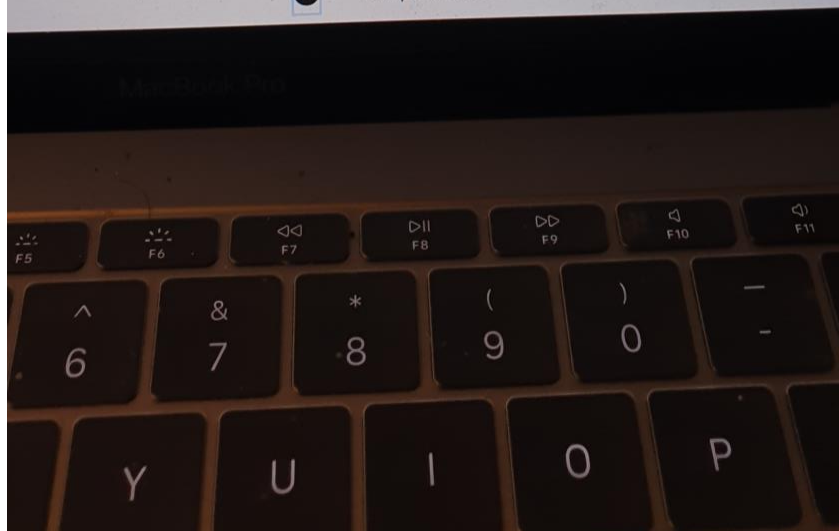
But white consciousness may have another, more troubling side. In 1980, before white studies got under way in universities, the white supremacist David Duke left his position as the grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan and founded the National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), attempting to



Former Klansman David Duke stands under a Confederate battle



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White People (NAAWP), attempting to sugarcoat his racist movement with a seemingly more politically correct approach. In this new framework, Duke presented whites as a besieged minority, writes sociologist Mitch Berbrier (2000), defining the NAAWP's mission as a pro-white heritage movement as opposed to an antiblack one. Sociologist Abby Ferber has analyzed the clever appropriation of civil rights language in Duke's white supremacist discourse. For example, in an article by Duke in the *White Patriot*, Ferber finds the rhetoric of reverse discrimination, victimhood, and the right to cultural difference:

[O]ur race and all others should have the right to determine their own destiny through self-determination and rule....[E]very people on this planet must have the right to life: the continued existence of its unique racial fabric and resulting culture. (*White Patriot*, no. 56, p. 6, quoted in Ferber, 1999)

Sounds reasonable, right? That's because the new language of white supremacy allows racists to move away from explicitly racist language (of biological inferiority, for example). Duke's NAAWP also co-opts civil rights discourse, as in the organization's original mission statement: "The NAAWP is a not for profit, nonviolent, civil rights educational organization

under a Confederate battle flag. How was Duke able to cast the NAAWP as a pro-white movement instead of a racist organization?



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Such examples demonstrate one possible outcome of the emergence of white studies: to politically empower extremists by giving them a legitimate language for their racist ends. Note, however, that this rhetoric does not acknowledge the advantages whites typically enjoy. The power of whiteness studies is that it exposes the social construction of a seemingly natural (and neutral) category, giving a sense of the unequal footing beneath the labels "white" and "black." (That is, whites can embrace ethnic identity, but blacks are stuck in a racial category.) But like any new "technology," such discourse can be used for many ends.



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