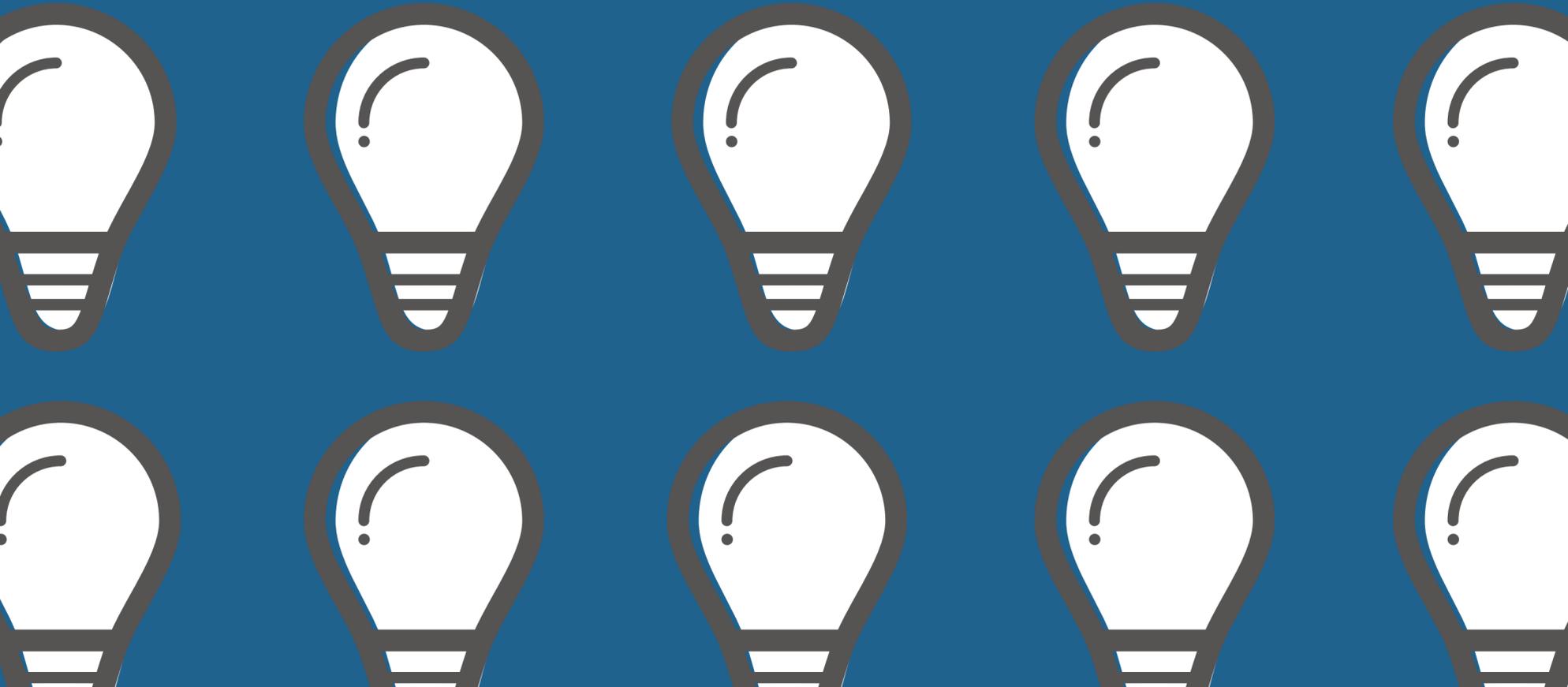


CONCEPTS FOR DISCUSSING

WHITENESS

The Racial State Week 3



The Racial State Week 3: Whiteness, white possession, white supremacy

Tutorial Activity: Concepts for Discussing Whiteness exercise

Instructions:

Using the 4 excerpts below from Helen Ngo's essay, 'On white privilege, white priority and white supremacy' we will discuss the pros and cons of using the concept of 'white privilege' as a way of explaining how racism works in white-dominant societies like Australia.

[full reading can be found under 'Extra Resources on vUWS]

1. Divide the class into 4 groups.
2. Each group reads 1 excerpt and collectively decides on the important concepts to highlight.
3. Bring all 3 groups back together. A representative from each group summarises their excerpt
4. Using the table attached, write one advantage and one disadvantage of using the concepts Ngo introduces.

Excerpt 1:

Although the broader concept of white advantage harks back much further, at least since WEB Du Bois' work on the wages of whiteness, the contemporary phrase originates from a famous 1989 essay by white feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh, entitled, 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack'. In it, McIntosh enumerates 50 'daily effects of white privilege' in her life, including among them:

3. 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.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

The stated purpose of McIntosh's essay was to render visible the gamut of largely invisible – that is, to herself and fellow whites – benefits and advantages that flowed to McIntosh by virtue of her status as a white person. Some thirty years later, the language of white privilege still animates popular anti-racist discourse. Used by activists and allies, whites and BIPOC, it is a phrase that has survived the rise of other more recent additions to our anti-racist vernacular, such as 'white fragility' and 'white entitlement'. In addition to the imperative to 'check your privilege', we see periodic 'updates' of McIntosh's invisible backpack in social media movements such as #crimingwhilewhite, or the more recent update in the wake of Floyd's death, which collates the deaths of other African Americans in the form (if not exactly the tenor) of McIntosh's original list:

I have privilege as a White person because I can do all of these things without thinking twice about it...

I can go jogging (#AmaudArbery).

I can relax in the comfort of my own home (BothemSean and AtatianaJefferson).

I can ask for help after being in a car crash (Jonathan Ferrell and RenishaMcBride).

I can have a cellphone (StephonClark).

I can leave a party to get to safety (#JordanEdwards).

I can play loud music (#JordanDavis).

I can sell CD's (#AltonSterling).

I can sleep (#AiyanaJones)

I can walk from the corner store (#MikeBrown).

I can play cops and robbers (#TamirRice).

I can go to church (#Charleston9).

I can walk home with Skittles (#TrayvonMartin).

I can hold a hair brush while leaving my own bachelor party (#SeanBell).

I can party on New Years (#OscarGrant).

I can get a normal traffic ticket (#SandraBland).
I can lawfully carry a weapon (#PhilandoCastile).
I can break down on a public road with car problems
(#CoreyJones).
I can shop at Walmart (#JohnCrawford) .
I can have a disabled vehicle (#TerrenceCrutcher).
I can read a book in my own car (#KeithScott).
I can be a 10yr old walking with my grandfather
(#CliffordGlover).
I can decorate for a party (#ClaudeReese).
I can ask a cop a question (#RandyEvans).
I can cash a check in peace (#YvonneSmallwood).
I can take out my wallet (#AmadouDiallo).
I can run (#WalterScott).
I can breathe (#EricGarner).
I can live (#FreddieGray).
I can ask someone to put a leash on their dog when it
is required in the public park we are in
(#ChristianCooper).
I CAN BE ARRESTED WITHOUT THE FEAR OF BEING
MURDERED. #GeorgeFloyd
White privilege is real. Take a minute to consider a
Black person's experience today. #BlackLivesMatter

Excerpt 2:

As a concept, however, white privilege is limited in various ways. In her 2015 book, *White Privilege and Black Rights: The Injustice of U.S. Police Racial Profiling and Homicide*, philosopher Naomi Zack has argued that what are most commonly referred to as 'white privileges' often turn out not to be privileges at all – but rather, deprivations of

rights to Blacks and other non-white groups. The distinction is an important one, since it helps us to be clearer about the nature of racist disadvantage really at stake. The BLM update of McIntosh's list drives this point home compellingly, since it is manifestly absurd to describe the ability to go jogging, attend church, to walk from the corner store, or to be arrested – all without being killed – as 'advantages' or 'privileges'.

In Australia we could say the same of riding a motorbike, insulting a police officer, or having unpaid fines without being killed or left to die. None of these are privileges. Rather, they are the stunning deprivation and non-protection of rights. To frame them as privileges therefore minimises the gravity of what is being denied to Blacks and First Nations peoples.

This point is further underscored by Lewis Gordon's 2004 observation that the term privilege derives from the Latin *privus* ('one's own') and *lex* ('law'). Privilege in its original sense refers therefore to 'exempt[ing] oneself from laws applied to others.' But 'white privilege' in its contemporary usage rather inverts that relationship, since it is not white exemption from the laws that bind racialised others as much as racialised deprivation of laws that protect whites. Elaborating Gordon's line of thought, Michael Monahan writes:

Nonwhites, for example, should have the privileges of whiteness, but of course, if they did, then they wouldn't be privileges anymore, because they would no longer be exclusive to whites.

As both Monahan and Zack point out, then, whereas privileges properly conceived are 'perks', such as – in Zack's words – 'privileges to use the sauna and tennis courts', what is usually mobilised under the banner of white privilege is really a different species altogether. (I note that McIntosh herself, like Monahan, expresses reservations about the word privilege in the very piece that popularises it.)

Others, such as Shannon Sullivan, have argued that the concept of white privilege does not sufficiently delineate between whites. Viewed through the prism of class, while the advantages of whiteness surely still exist for poor and working-class whites, 'the term

‘privilege’ does not accurately capture them’. In other words, the language of privilege fails to resonate with working class and poor whites who have struggled to furnish for themselves the basic material goods in life, and who may not feel or see their advantage.

In its place, Sullivan provisionally proposes a concept of ‘white priority’, which names the ‘felt sense of coming before someone else’, while avoiding the associations of perks and affluence that usually attach to the term ‘privilege’. Thus, one can be a poor, struggling white person but know that they come before, for example, a poor person of colour. What is useful about the phrase white priority is the way it hints at a deeper sense of value, by shifting emphasis away from the advantages or rewards one might receive in life, to the valuation of one’s ontological worth. Whereas white privilege speaks to the advantages you as a white person might receive or accrue, white priority names the value you as a white person hold.

Excerpt 3:

The objections to the language of white privilege are not only conceptual – they are political, too. Zack in particular, is deeply critical of the kind of politics it tends to generate. Namely, a self-absorbed, self-indulgent, introspection that has more to do with airing and owning white guilt and white shame than motivating political action. Zack writes that ‘[t]he discourse of white privilege succeeds when white people recognize this fact [of their relative advantage]’; it need go no further. Moreover, the confessional model that the discourse of white privilege seems to elicit reproduces the structure of racial inequality by once again focusing on white revelation and white absolution. (It also suggests that privilege is something that can be disavowed, which, like Ignatiev and Garvey’s proposed ‘race traitor’ movement of the 1990s, has drawn criticism.)

Put differently, the discourse of white privilege risks recentring white people and white problems. However, if the likes of bell hooks have taught us anything, it is that this centre cannot – and should not – hold. Compounding this, Zack argues that white privilege ‘is often discussed as though it is an impersonal, thoroughly institutional system of direct rewards for white people’, with the result that the role and complicity of white people within this

system gets obfuscated. But as Zack argues, this fails to acknowledge that ‘white people distribute and dispense privileges to other white people that they do not distribute and dispense to nonwhite people’. ‘White privilege’, then, makes it too easy to focus on the privileges that whites receive, without asking too many questions about from whence and from whom they receive them.

These are serious concerns that warrant our deep scepticism and suspicion. I don’t know, however, whether they undermine the white privilege discourse wholesale, or whether they simply demand that it go further, and do better. On Zack’s last point, for example, I think it is not incompatible for an admission of white privilege – particularly its foregrounding of what is usually invisible or taken for granted – to be accompanied by a discourse of white complicity and collusion in the production of this privilege. Perhaps the foregrounding of privilege is the first – necessary, but not sufficient – step in asking why these privileges exist at all.

Excerpt 4:

I endorse critical legal scholar Frances Lee Ansley’s 1989 broadening of the definitional scope of white supremacy:

By ‘white supremacy’ I do not mean to allude only to the self-conscious racism of white supremacist hate groups. I refer instead to a political, economic, and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, [where] conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.

Importantly, Ansley includes the ‘unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement’ – which I refigure in my work as habitual rather than unconscious, and which I think the ‘white privilege’ discourse tries to voice. Recall that, although the BLM list of things whites can do without getting killed more clearly bears out Zack’s contention that so-called white privileges are really the deprivation of Black rights, McIntosh’s original list also includes things such as ‘I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see

people of my race widely represented’ – a point made newly relevant following Netflix’s shelving of Chris Lilley’s series featuring black and brown-face (he has performed yellow-face too, for the record). Because what comes under the banner of ‘white privilege’ in public discourse is so broad and varied, I think Sullivan is correct to argue that a rights-based approach alone is not enough; there are still many ‘extralegal advantages that white middle-and-upper class people often enjoy’. Interestingly, however, both Zack and Sullivan agree that calling out contemporary racism as indebted to white supremacy is a poor political choice, due to its thick association with the most extreme expressions of racial violence.

Nonetheless, I think that naming our current moment, and that which has led us here, ‘white supremacy’, is a prospect we need to sit with for longer – and I note that, while philosophers ponder its existence, cultural critics, activists, and writers are already imagining its end. In addition to Mills’ exploration of the many spheres (economic, cultural, cognitive evaluative, somatic, metaphysical) in which white supremacy continues to exist de facto, we might further question what it is that white supremacy names. ‘Supremacy’ names the condition of being superior, of dominating, but supreme (from the Latin *Supremus*, ‘highest’) also points us to a notion of the ideal. Approached this way, white supremacy would not only refer to the domination (legal, political, or otherwise) over others, but also to the idealisation of whiteness, and its installation as our point of moral, aesthetic, metaphysical, and cultural reference. What marks the continued reign of white supremacy is not pointy white hats (lately morphed into red baseball caps) but the persistent normalisation of whiteness in almost all frames of life – all while vigorously denying that this is the case.

I agree with Zack’s criticism of the politics that white privilege discourse can and does often generate. The performative confessional of whites in the name of solidarity can be hollow, self-serving and frankly, painful to watch. I also agree that the language of white privilege alone does not carry the political gravitas and moral urgency to spark and guide meaningful action to end racial injustice. However, I think moving to an open acknowledgment of white supremacy in our society can do this. And maybe it is this broadened understanding of the meaning and forms of white supremacy, and the depth of its toxicity, that might finally spur us into producing strategies to dismantle it.

CONCEPTS FOR DISCUSSING WHITENESS

The Racial State Week 3: Whiteness, White Possession and White Supremacy

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Adapted from 'On white privilege, white priority and white supremacy' by Helen Ngo, *Overland*, 24 June 2020

CONCEPT

PRO

CON

- White privilege
- White fragility
- White entitlement
- Check your privilege
- Deprivation of rights
- White perks
- White priority
- Race traitor
- White complicity
- White supremacy
- Idealisation of whiteness