

DEFINITIONS: RACE, RACISM, WHITENESS, WHITE SUPREMACY

<https://morningsdecenter.org>

RACE

Race is an ideology of difference that assigns value to human beings by categorizing them into groups according to certain physical characteristics such as skin color and hair color and texture. Race in the United States is an ideology created to justify the enslavement of people of African descent and the removal of Indigenous nations from their land. Race is a myth biologically, but a reality politically. (Reggie Williams Seeing Whiteness.)

“Race” is the child of racism, not the parent. (Coates) It has been used historically to justify the oppression of groups of people by members of other groups who deem their group superior.

The notion that hue and hair point to deeper attributes that are indelible and provide a legitimate principle for organizing society is a lie. But by creating real hierarchies that for hundreds of years have bestowed privileges on some groups while exploiting others, the concept of race, though false, is all too real in its impact on people's lives. We are all racial beings. All of us have been shaped by the racial group we're part of.

RACISM

Racism is a system of advantage for white people and a system of oppression of people of color. It is the project of creating and sustaining systems, institutions, and ideas that benefit whites at the expense of other racial groups. Like other forms of oppression, racism operates on four levels: internal, interpersonal, institutional, and ideological: “The 4 Is of Oppression.” It is based on the belief in the supremacy/superiority of white people and the institutional power to back up that belief.

WHITENESS

Whiteness is the racial category associated with power and privilege in the United States. The foundation for the creation of all racial categories is the creation of whiteness. Examples are “Jim Crow” (the formal practice of segregating black people in the U.S.), the Nazis, and apartheid in South Africa. Whiteness functions as the social-political organizing norm against which all other categories of race are seen and measured. The ideology of whiteness arranges all human beings according to their proximity to “white” as the ideal way of being human.

Whiteness has three dimensions: color, culture, and consciousness. “White” skin color confers advantages on white people, albeit advantages that many white people are completely unaware of. The experience of being white and having one’s race valued over other racial groups in our society has shaped the values, norms, and traditions of white people over generations. It has led them

to assume, often quite unconsciously, that their culture is “the norm,” and it has distorted their perceptions and understandings of people of other racial groups.

Perhaps the most devastating manifestation of whiteness is on the level of consciousness. This is the assumption, held unconsciously by many well-meaning white people, that race is not important— that to speak of race is divisive and we should aspire to be colorblind. This level of consciousness enables white people to ignore their relative privilege, to deny the experience of people of color,

and to ignore the systemic oppression that Black people experience and the benefits that accrue to white people as a result. Being white shapes every aspect of the lives of white people, as being Black shapes every aspect of the lives of Black people.

-Glenn Singleton: Courageous Conversations About Race.

WHITE SUPREMACY

White supremacy is a descriptive and useful term to capture the all-encompassing centrality and assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as white and the practices based on this assumption. White supremacy in this context does not refer to individual white people and their individual intentions or actions but to an overarching political, economic, and social system of domination. Again, racism is a structure, not an event. While hate groups that openly proclaim white superiority do exist and this term refers to them also, the popular consciousness solely associates white supremacy with these radical groups. This reductive definition obscures the reality of a larger system at work and prevents us from addressing this system.

-Robin DiAngelo