

More Than a Knapsack: The White Supremacy Flower as a New Model for Teaching Racism

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Hephzibah V. Strmic-Pawl¹

Abstract

This article suggests that White supremacy versus White privilege provides a clearer and more accurate conceptual understanding of how racism operates, evolves, and sustains itself. This article suggests a specific model for teaching White supremacy, the White supremacy flower, and describes the application and benefits of the model.

Keywords

White supremacy, White privilege, racism, pedagogy, race

Teaching race and racism, particularly to undergraduate students who are often learning this type of information for the first time, can be especially trying for professors (Jakubowski 2001; Lucal 1996; Moulder 1997). This difficulty has spawned many teaching articles that address race but relatively few that provide instruction on teaching racism (Khanna and Harris 2009; Kwenda 2012; Sharp and Wade 2011). Furthermore, while the articles that do suggest strategies for teaching racism are insightful, most center on the concepts of “White privilege” or “advantage” as the guides for conversation (Gillespie, Ashbaugh, and Defiore 2010; Pence and Fields 1999; Wooddell and Henry 2005). Thus, some scholarship is attentive to teaching race but neglects racism while others focus on White privilege at the expense of White supremacy. This article addresses both of these concerns by teaching racism using a particular model of White supremacy.

In this article, I first review how and why White privilege and White supremacy should not be conflated. Second, I argue that White supremacy should replace White privilege as the primary concept to teach racism. Third, I propose a specific model for teaching White supremacy, the White supremacy flower model.

THE CAUSE VERSUS CONSEQUENCE: WHITE SUPREMACY AND WHITE PRIVILEGE

White Privilege

The concept of White privilege became widely popular with the release of Peggy McIntosh’s 1988 paper “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.” Her paper recognizes the undue and unearned benefits that White people receive. To elucidate her idea of “privileges,” McIntosh lists 26 benefits that Whites carry in a “knapsack,” such as dolls and greeting cards predominantly representing Whites and the fact that Whites are not required to speak for all Whites. Since her paper, the term *White privilege* has become almost a ubiquitous term among those teaching race and has inspired the name of the *Knapsack Institute*, which helps in

¹Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC, USA

Corresponding Author:

Hephzibah V. Strmic-Pawl, Assistant Professor of
Sociology, Coastal Carolina University, P.O. Box
261954, Conway, SC 29528, USA.
Email: hstrmicp@coastal.edu

hosting the White Privilege Conference. The White Privilege Conference (2014) defines privilege in similar ways to McIntosh's article; the conference webpage notes examples of privilege such as Whites assuming that one's personal failures will not be attributed to the deficiencies of an entire race and that history courses predominantly represent White history.

The widespread use of the concept of White privilege is evident in that it is the focus of many scholars (Halley, Eshleman, and Vijaya 2011; Kendall 2012; Rothenberg 2004) and extends beyond academic circles to sites such as BuzzFeed (Lewis 2014) and to city-sponsored anti-racism campaigns (Un-Fair Campaign n.d.). White privilege, in both academic and colloquial conversations, is sometimes described as individual experiences and other times as more structural and institutional privileges. Yet, what is most detrimental about this attention on White privilege is that it comes at the expense of understanding the power of White supremacy, the hegemonic racial structure and corresponding ideologies that give rise to White privilege. We, as instructors who teach race and ethnicity, need to ensure that we do not fall into this trap.

White Supremacy

The term *White supremacy*, in contrast to the term *White privilege*, is more likely to be shocking or sound exaggerated, unless it is reduced to speaking about White superiority groups. I do not use the term *White supremacy* to reference White power groups. Instead, I use it to describe and explain the systematic and systemic ways that the racial order benefits those deemed White and operates to oppress people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2006; Smith 2005; Takaki 1993; Yancey 2008). Using this concept of White supremacy, I identify White privilege as a subset or particular manifestation of White supremacy. To speak of just White privilege or to see these terms as synonymous does not represent the full complexity of the issue. Leonardo (2004:140–41) criticizes those who focus on White privilege: "The discourse on privilege comes with the psychological effect of personalizing racism rather than understanding its structural origins in interracial relations. . . . Whites today did not participate in slavery, but they surely recreate White supremacy on a daily basis." When Whites confront their privilege, they analyze their lives to see if/how/when one's Whiteness was or is a benefit. And although that analysis is needed, it

does not accurately reflect the structural facets and enduring pain of racism. As Yancey (2008:229) explains:

Doing theory in the service of undoing Whiteness comes with its own snares and seductions. . . . As antiracist Whites continue to make mistakes and continue to falter in the face of institutional interpellation and habituated racist reflexes, tomorrow, a Black body will be murdered as it innocently reaches for its wallet.

Yancey indicates that Whites can critically reflect on their privilege, but that process does not necessarily affect the structure of racism that permits the devaluing of people of color. In other words, we need to articulate White privilege as the benefits given to Whites, but it is White supremacy that makes those benefits possible *while also* providing the infrastructure for the oppression of people of color. It is White supremacy that makes White privilege a reality.

TEACHING WHITE SUPREMACY

I have created a particular model to teach White supremacy (tailored to the United States), the "White supremacy flower," upon which the rest of this article rests. The White supremacy flower model is an amalgamation of the theoretical contributions of many race scholars (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Gallagher 2004; Hill Collins 2000; Marshall 2012; Omi and Winant 1991; Takaki 1993), and its sub-foci on history and race cycles are largely inspired by Feagin's (2006) "systemic racism" and Alexander's (2010) "the rebirth of caste."

The White Supremacy Flower Model

The model takes the shape of a very simple flower with a daisy-like bloom; the flower is drawn step by step with class conversation at each step (see Figure 1). To begin, one draws the roots of the flower. The roots represent the foundation of the United States with events such as Native American genocide, plantation slavery, and the writing of the Constitution. Then one draws the stem, which represents the history of the United States and includes both the events and the processes that move the nation from one point to another. The stem's events include breach of tribal treaties, Jim Crow laws, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and Japanese internment. The bloom, which comes next, represents the contemporary United States. It is up to each instructor

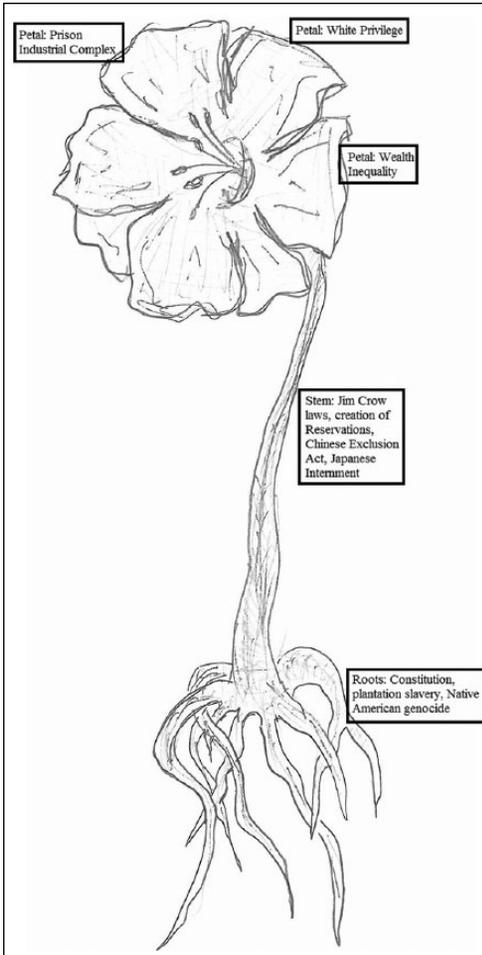


Figure 1. The White supremacy flower model.

how to define the past and the present (stem and petals), but I usually have the modern era beginning with the post–civil rights movement. Each petal of the bloom corresponds to a different inequality such as housing segregation, education gaps, and the prison system. For example, one might label a petal the racialized wealth gap. Current attempts to alleviate that gap include food stamps and Section 8 housing, tactics that are aimed at the specific problem of economic inequality rather than also taking racism into account. When policies treat the problem as a fiscal issue rather than a racialized-fiscal issue, the problem is not comprehensively addressed, and the inequality persists. Moreover, even in a theoretical scenario wherein food stamps

did help to solve the problem of wealth inequality, only that one petal falls off the flower. Thus, continuing with the logic of this model, the loss of one petal does make the flower weaker, but it does not kill the plant. The flower can also renew itself throughout time. In my model, a new petal can grow to replace the lost one. For instance, think of Alexander's (2010) evolution of racism, which explains how Jim Crow laws were replaced by the War on Drugs. The ability of the petals/bloom to regrow and adapt accounts for how racism evolves.

While drawing the flower, one can also discuss how certain ideologies are carried throughout the growth and life of the flower. For example, early measurement of skull sizes among races (flower roots) is connected to eugenics (stem), which evolved into ideas about racial IQ differences and racialized drugs (bloom). Thus, when one describes the flower, particular ideological strands can be explained, or the intertwining of several ideologies and histories that form the totality of White supremacy can be addressed.

Teaching Benefits of the Model

The White supremacy flower model provides four particular benefits: (1) it shows how racism evolves and revamps itself, (2) it shows how everyone can participate in upholding the structure, (3) it is inclusive of White privilege, and (4) it engages both White students and students of color in classroom discussion.

The first benefit is that it explains how racism evolves and grows. An emphasis on the history of the United States and progression of laws and customs enables students to see connections across time. For example, they understand that the Constitution was written to benefit White male property owners—benefits that laid the foundation for later racialized policies. In addition, students come to understand that policies that do not take race into account as part of the problem are bound to be only partially successful, and therefore racism continues. Furthermore, the petals of the flower can morph so that though it appears that a racial problem has disappeared, in reality it has been replaced by a new petal.

Second, the model shows how everyone, regardless of race, participates—willingly or unknowingly—in upholding the structure. White privilege conversations tend to focus on the benefits Whites have and the benefits on which Whites capitalize, but in actuality not only Whites participate in perpetuating White supremacy. For example, skin-bleaching products support the notion that White is beautiful,

and allegiance to meritocracy rationalizes racial wealth inequality. Similar to Carmichael's ([1970] 2007) argument that there are "Black lackeys of capitalism," people of color too can be lackeys of White supremacy. Supporting the structure of White supremacy does not require one to be White. Moreover, unless one is resisting the system, my flower model demonstrates that it is likely that one is actually aiding in perpetuating it.

The third benefit is the model's ability to illustrate that White privilege is different from White supremacy but still nonetheless intrinsically related. Often, people use the concepts of White supremacy and White privilege interchangeably—having "flesh-toned" bandages that reflect White skin tone is deemed White privilege, yet so is having a prison industrial complex. In the model, White privilege is restricted to benefits given to Whites so that White privilege is a particular petal, an example of which is the "flesh-toned" bandage. As a different manifestation of White supremacy, the prison system is a *separate petal*, an example of which is the statistic that one in three Black males can expect to spend time in prison (NAACP 2014). As White privilege and White supremacy are often conflated and intimately intertwined, the specific line that separates the two is difficult to pinpoint, but the significant point is that White supremacy *gives rise* to White privilege. In the flower model, White privilege is a petal that belongs to the White supremacy flower—White privilege is related to the structure, it is of the structure, and it is a manifestation of the structure, but it is not the structure.

In relationship to all of the aforementioned, the fourth benefit is inclusiveness. Teaching about race often lends itself to attending to either White students or students of color. Concentrating on benefits given to Whites can make White students uneasy and less receptive while also excluding the students of color. On the other hand, when a race and ethnicity class becomes a class on people of color, then we risk invisibilizing Whiteness (Lucal 1996). The White supremacy flower model, however, integrates conversations of privilege and racism and speaks to all students. Moreover, when one speaks to the larger structure of White supremacy, it becomes clear how any of us, regardless of our race, can participate in the logic and hierarchy that maintain the power of White supremacy.

TEACHING EFFECTIVENESS

I have been using the White supremacy flower model since 2010 in the courses Race and Ethnic

Relations and African American Communities; I have taught these courses at three universities (total of nine classes, ~180 students). All three universities are predominantly White institutions, but the class racial demographics are largely a mixture of Black and White students (usually near half and half or slightly more White students and largely women). Thus, I am fairly certain that using this model in a range of schools and class demographics would work well. Students' use of and explanation of White supremacy in their papers and final exams reflect their learning. I include here a few quotes from students:

White privilege is unearned power because someone is perceived as being White. White Supremacy is not the KKK group but systemic and structural racism. (Sophomore, Black woman)

The most important thing that I have learned in this class is that race is a social construction and that its effects are not NATURAL, but can be changed if the system of White Supremacy is abolished. . . . I previously had the conception of Blacks in poverty as "lazy" and not applying themselves as they should. But now I realize that the system is not set up for all of us to make it. (Junior, Black woman)

White privilege is something only Whites take part in, you can neither gain or lose it, you automatically are rewarded for being White. . . . White privilege though is just a small part of White Supremacy. (Senior, White woman)

The access to a better life, inheritance of money, better education, etc., are social advantages that grow from the roots of White Supremacy. (Senior, Black woman)

White privilege is the unearned power given to Whites. . . . White Supremacy is participated in by everyone and includes educational, judicial, and residential systems. White privilege is just a small petal in the idea of White Supremacy. (Senior, White woman)

These excerpts indicate an understanding that White supremacy informs society's views and institutions, that White privilege is unearned benefits given to Whites, and that White privilege is related to but not synonymous with White supremacy. Teaching the concept of White supremacy,

rather than White privilege, provides the students with a broader conceptual understanding of how racism operates, and the flower model gives them a clear way to picture how history, institutions, power, and ideologies are connected to one another.

CONCLUSION

In this article, I argue two main points in relationship to teaching students about racism: (1) that a distinct conceptual line should be made between White supremacy and White privilege and (2) that White supremacy is a more effective concept to teach racism than White privilege. Specifically, I suggest that the model of the White supremacy flower helps students understand the systemic and systematic characteristics of racism.

I have experienced two primary limitations with this model. First, using the term *White supremacy* can be jarring for some students and inhibit their willingness to engage, but ongoing discussions often alleviate this issue. Second, using this White supremacy flower model leads students to ask: How can we create change if we are tied to these roots? If one continues with the model's logic, the class might discuss the possibility of hybrids or offshoots that would lead to a healthy plant. While these solutions might not rest easily with students, for either ideological and/or practical reasons, it does encourage students to examine current policies.

The White supremacy flower model provides a solid foundation for understanding racism and is a model that students are easily able to grasp. More important, it is also inclusive of all students' experiences and allows them to relate to how race and racism operate in their lives. The White supremacy flower model can be used throughout the semester as well as carried through to other sequential courses.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Hephzibah V. Strmic-Pawl is an assistant professor of sociology at Coastal Carolina University and the Pedagogy Section Editor of *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity*. Strmic-Pawl's research focuses on multiracialism, racial identity, African American communities, racism, and inequality. She is also actively involved in the scholarship of teaching and learning, particularly as it relates to teaching inequalities and social problems. Strmic-Pawl has two forthcoming books: one that examines how racism shapes the multiracial experience for Asian-White and Black-White biracials; and the other, co-edited with Milton Vickerman, is an accessible book designed for use in undergraduate race and ethnicity courses.

PEDAGOGY SECTION VISION

Teaching race is a critical part of an undergraduate and graduate sociology program; the Pedagogy Section of *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* recognizes this importance by providing a unique forum for addressing the scholarship on teaching race and ethnicity. The topics within this scholarship are wide and various, including teaching racial formation, racial hierarchies, racial identities, ethnicity, nativism, immigration, globalization, forms of racism, and history as well as specific ethnic studies such as African and African American, Asian and Asian American, and Latino/a studies. This section also welcomes discussions on teaching race and ethnicity from a particular standpoint or to particular class demographics. Articles may be theory based or class exercises (e.g., interactive exercises, media tools, or experiential learning), in which case there should be evidence of teaching effectiveness. The Pedagogy Section seeks to be a place for sharing innovative methods and strategies for teaching the range of complex issues that emerge when one is teaching race.