

The White Supremacy Flower: A Model for Understanding Racism

Understanding contemporary racial inequality requires studying the complex relationships among race, racism, and power. Scholars investigate the contours of modern racism, particularly how to recognize it and what constitutes modern racism. A branch of this investigation has led to a focus on White Privilege, the examination of the benefits that Whites receive and the power assigned to Whiteness. Another branch focuses more on the concept of White Supremacy, a critical approach to how race and racism are systemically and systematically embedded in society. The theoretical boundaries between White Privilege and White Supremacy can be confusing and unclear as they often overlap in their analyses of racial inequality. However, in this paper I integrate the two concepts into one model, the White Supremacy Flower, which outlines the foundations of racism, the evolution of racism, and the perpetuation of racism.

I first review the definitions of White Privilege and White Supremacy and draw analytical distinctions between the two concepts. Second, I provide a description and the tenets of the White Supremacy Flower. I close with the conceptual benefits of this model for understanding racism.

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 analyzes the undue and unearned benefits that White people receive. To elucidate her idea of "privileges," McIntosh lists twenty-six benefits that Whites carry in a "knapsack," such as dolls and greeting cards predominantly representing Whites, and the fact that Whites are not regularly asked to speak for the entire White race. She states: "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious."

Since McIntosh's paper, the field of White Privilege scholarship has burgeoned and become a site of critical analysis. It asks scholars and laymen, alike, to question even our day-to-day practices in order to identify where unspoken privileges help Whites succeed. Paula Rothenberg (2004, 1) defines White Privilege as "the other side of racism...It is often easier to deplore racism and its effects than to take responsibility for the privileges some of us receive as a result of it." Opportunities to discuss White Privilege are now widespread. The *Knapsack Institute* hosts *The White Privilege Conference*, a multiple day conference where people gather to "challenge concepts of privilege and oppression" (see www.whiteprivilegeconference.com). People also may be familiar with White Privilege through social networking campaigns, such as BuzzFeed's (Jha and Wesely 2014) 'privilege' quiz or BuzzFeed's (Blackmon 2013) "17 Deplorable Examples of White Privilege." A city in Minnesota even ran a White Privilege campaign where they posted large billboards of faces of White people along with types of White privileges; examples of some of the privileges are: "Is White skin really fair skin" and "lucky to be the majority" (Un-Fair Campaign n.d.). White Privilege initiatives such as these do the necessary job of asking White people to reflect on the ways in which the racial hierarchy benefits them. They also bring much needed attention to seeing White as a race, rather than White fading into the background as the unraced, normal person.

White Supremacy

White Supremacy, in contrast to the term White Privilege, is a term often hard to digest as it conjures up images of White superiority groups. Yet, groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and the Aryan Brotherhood, are only a very small portion of White Supremacy. Instead, White Supremacy is a useful theoretical concept to describe the systemic and systematic ways the racial order benefits those deemed White and operates to oppress people of color (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2006; Marshall 2011; Smith 2005; Takaki 1993; Yancey 2008). White Supremacy is all encompassing of society and is upheld by intertwined systems, institutions, and ideologies. An example of a system is capitalism, which was strengthened with the selling of enslaved Africans and continues today through the maintained lower socioeconomic status of people of color. Examples of institutions are education, criminal justice, and health care, all of which disproportionately operate to benefit Whites. The ideologies change through time, from manifest destiny to Jim Crow to today's color-blind racism, but the central defining characteristic of these ideologies remains the same: the privileging of Whiteness as the norm, standard, and the best for society (Baptist 2014; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2006; hooks 2000). Charles W. Mills, a leading philosopher on race, defines White Supremacy as "a multidimensional system of domination not merely encompassing the 'formally' political that is limited to the juridico-political realm of official governing bodies and laws but...extending to white domination in economic, cultural, cognitive-evaluative, somatic, and in a sense even 'metaphysical' spheres" (2003, 42). White Supremacy is not just "in" society, but it is "of" society. For example, if one were to use the metaphor of society as a box and White Supremacy were *in* the box, then to fix the problem we could take it out. However, if we understand that White Supremacy is *of* society then that means the box is composed of White Supremacy, a much harder problem to solve.

Outlining the Difference between White Privilege and White Supremacy

Both White Privilege and White Supremacy need to be a part of a racial analysis, but people often focus only on White Privilege. Leonardo (2004, 140-141) helps clarify the danger of focusing on just the White Privilege side: "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. Whites can and should critically reflect on their privilege, but that process does not necessarily affect the *structure* of racism, which 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 oppression of people of color. White Privilege is a subset or particular manifestation of White Supremacy. It is White Supremacy that makes the racial hierarchy a reality in the first place.

THE WHITE SUPREMACY FLOWER

The White Supremacy Flower model is an amalgamation of the theoretical contributions of many race scholars (Alexander 2010; Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hill Collins 2000; Feagin 2006; Gallagher 2003; Marshall 2012; Omi and Winant 1994; Takaki 1993); it provides a model for understanding the roots of racism, the evolution of racism, and the maintenance of racism in the U.S.

The model takes the shape of a very simple flower with a daisy like bloom and has three main components: the roots, the stem, and the bloom (see Figure 1). The flower begins with the roots. The roots represent the foundation of the U.S. with events such as Native American genocide, plantation slavery, and the creation of the Constitution. In the 1400s it is estimated there were 10 million Native Americans in what is now the U.S., but by 1900, through disease and violence, the number who survived was 300,000. Plantation slavery began in the mid 1600s by trafficking people from areas including Congo, Angola, Nigeria, Senegal, and Gambia; by 1662 life-long slavehood was formally instituted and was inherited through one's mother. During the Civil War there were approximately 4 million enslaved or 7 free people for every enslaved person. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, founding fathers of the U.S. and Constitution, all had slaves. The Constitution guaranteed rights only to White male property owners (Baptist 2014; Davis 2006). The foundation, that is the roots of the U.S., is genocide and slavery of people of color coexisting alongside the rights and opportunities given to Whites.

The next part of the flower is the stem, which represents the history of the U.S. from its foundations to today. The stem includes both the events and the processes that move the nation from one point to another. Events along the stem include anti-immigrant laws, government policies, and Jim Crow laws. The Chinese Exclusion Act, instituted in 1882, put a moratorium on Chinese immigration and prevented Chinese in the U.S. from attaining citizenship. The Dawes Act of 1887 took 90 million acres from Native Americans and parceled the land out to White settlers. In 1896 *Plessy v Ferguson* instituted legal segregation between Blacks and Whites. Later policies upheld the organization of institutions, policies, and ideologies for the benefit of Whites. The GI Bill of 1944 helped many soldiers attain an education after the war, but Blacks were not permitted to attend most schools. The Federal Housing Authority program after WWII helped to finance over half of suburban housing, but 98 percent of recipients were White. Meanwhile, from 1941-1946, over 100,000 Japanese in the U.S., including citizens, were taken from their homes and put in internment camps for the nativist fear that all Japanese were war traitors (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Katznelson 2005; Takaki 1993). Institutional racial discrimination continued to be a hallmark during the 1900s. In the 1950s and 1960s some critical inroads were made towards eradicating racial inequality including *Brown v. Board of Education*, which in 1954 outlawed public school segregation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which declared racial equality, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which set measures to ensure equal and fair access to voting. It is largely believed that since these landmark legislations there has been consistent movement and progress towards racial equality; this point then leads to the bloom of the flower.

The bloom represents the contemporary U.S. It is often presumed that the U.S. has 'bloomed' into a nation based on equity and inclusion, yet reality does not reflect this idea. Each petal of the bloom is a different racial inequality such as residential segregation, education gaps, and the prison system. A persistent racial problem is residential segregation; sociologists use the index of dissimilarity to measure racial residential segregation where 0 represents perfect integration and 100 perfect segregation. The index of dissimilarity for Blacks and Whites reaches near perfect segregation at an index of above 80 for 8 metro areas, including the large cities of Detroit, Milwaukee, New York and Chicago. For Asian-Whites it's above 60 for 11 metro areas, and the smallest index is 26.8 (Frey and Myers 2005). The education gap also persists with a 21 point gap between Whites and Hispanics in 4th grade math and 26 points for Black and Whites in 4th grade math. The high school dropout rate of Blacks and Hispanics is

twice that of Whites (Chapman et al. 2011). The criminal justice system reflects racial inequality as well with 1 in 3 Black men and 1 in 6 Latino men compared to 1 in 17 White men who face a likelihood of imprisonment. The criminal justice system has proved to be harsher towards people of color at every step of the process including surveillance, arrests, and sentencing (Alexander 2010; Bonczar 2003). The petals of this flower represent the many institutional inequalities that plague the U.S., but another important petal is White Privilege. White Privilege, as the benefits accorded to Whites, is a contemporary manifestation of White Supremacy and a strong petal of this blooming flower.

The petals of the bloom reflect the many contemporary racial inequalities across institutions. In this metaphor, petals that represent particular problems are often targeted by government policies. For example, one petal can be the racialized wealth gap where Whites have a median net worth of \$141,000 while Blacks are at \$11,000 and Hispanics at \$13,700 (Kochhar and Fry 2014). Current attempts to alleviate that gap include food stamps and Section 8 housing, but the problem with such tactics is that they target the economic issue rather than also taking race(ism) into account. When policies fail to see how White Supremacy supports and intertwines with economic issues, then they treat the problem as just a fiscal issue rather than a racialized-fiscal issue; thus, the problem is not comprehensively addressed. Moreover, even in a theoretical scenario where 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 not kill the plant.

The bloom or particular petals can also revamp or renew throughout time. For instance, Michelle Alexander (2010), in her analysis of the prison system, outlines a race relations cycle of four steps: collapse, transition, backlash, and new social control. Alexander explains that when Jim Crow segregation ended there was a transition period when society was unsure of the racial order and expectations, followed by a backlash against Blacks and their progress so that a new form of social control was instituted – the War on Drugs and the resulting prison industrial complex. In other words, according to White Supremacy Flower model, the petal of Jim Crow segregation fell off but since the White Supremacy flower was still alive, a new petal of the War on Drugs grew in its place. The ability of the petals/bloom to re-grow and adapt accounts for how racism changes and evolves.

What does the White Supremacy Flower Teach Us?

The White Supremacy Flower model provides three particular lessons about racism: 1) how the country has a foundation in White Supremacy, 2) how racism evolves and revamps itself, and 3) how everyone, Whites and people of color alike, can participate in upholding the system.

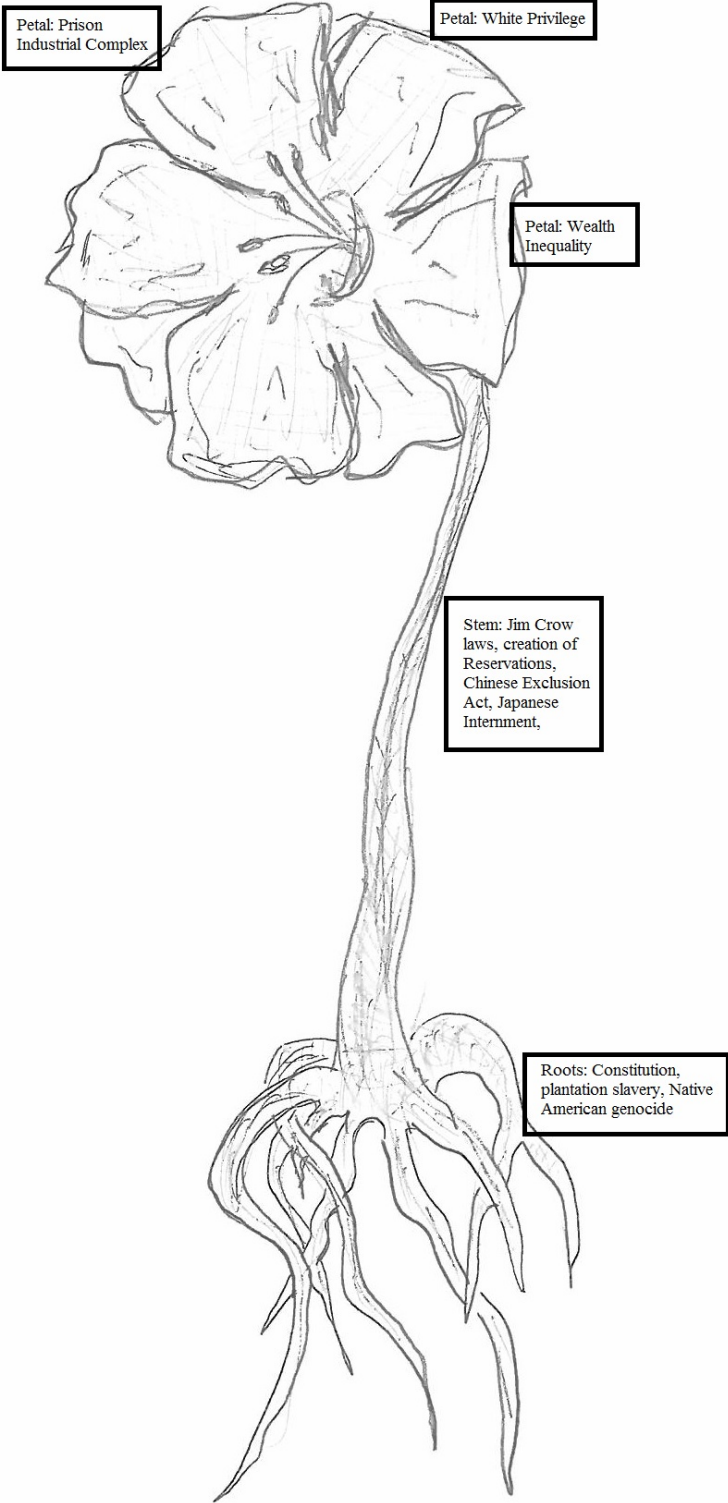
The first lesson is that White Supremacy is the foundation, the very roots, of the United States. A main reason that people use to proclaim the end or decline of racism is that slavery, and similar horrific racist events, occurred so long ago that it appears impossible, and at least highly unlikely, that there could be contemporary racial inequalities. However, when we understand this history as the foundation of this nation, the connections between yesterday and today are clear. The nation was founded in White Supremacy and has grown from this base.

The second lesson the Flower provides is that racism continues to evolve, not dissolve. Because race in the 1800s looks very different from race in the 1900s, which then looks very different from race in the 2000s, it appears that racism has been consistently on the decline and, with a Black president, maybe even dissipating. The Flower shows how racism changes but isn't

going away. As the flower matures and gets more complex so do the manifestations of racism; the bloom may look different and petals may change, but racism continues unless there is attention to the plant that feeds it.

The third and very critical lesson that the White Supremacy Flower teaches is that everyone, regardless of racial identity, can participate in White Supremacy. It is clearer how Whites participate or benefit, particularly since White Privilege is a part of White Supremacy. Yet, it is also clear that combating White Privilege alone does not accomplish much in reducing racism. Moreover, all races can uphold White Supremacy if they participate in the system. For example, skin-bleaching products support the notion that White is beautiful, and allegiance to meritocracy rationalizes racial wealth inequality. Supporting the structure of White Supremacy does not require one to be White, and being White does not mean one supports the system. To create change, people of all races must actively resist the system.

Figure 1: The White Supremacy Flower Model



Artist Credit: Ali Cohen

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