

Study Guide: Seeing White

On one level, it seems Americans talk about race and ethnicity all the time. The news media always seem to be reacting to the latest racial “incident,” while pundits ponder “race relations” year in and year out. And yet. The premise of this series is that the American conversation about race, and the stories we tell ourselves about race and ethnicity, are deeply incomplete and often misleading. We need new stories and new understandings, about our history and our current racial and ethnic reality.

Host and producer John Biewen set out to take a different kind of look at race and ethnicity, by looking directly at the elephant in the room: white people, and whiteness. White supremacy was encoded in the DNA of the United States, and white people dominate American life and its institutions to this day, and yet whiteness too often remains invisible, unmarked, and unnamed.

In embarking on this journey into whiteness, past and present, Biewen sought guidance from an array of leading scholars, and from professor, journalist, artist, and organizer Dr. Chenjerai Kumanyika.

A caution: Race and racism are sensitive subjects, as we all know. It’s important to create an environment of safety in your classroom or discussion group. Our advice is to say something like this:

The subject of whiteness is potentially uncomfortable for people of any race or ethnicity. People of color may react to the topic of whiteness by thinking: Really? We live in a world dominated and controlled by white people. Whiteness is our often-uncomfortable reality. Do we have to have a discussion about whiteness? For folks feeling that way, please understand: This is not about celebrating whiteness. We’re here to take a critical look at whiteness and how it functions in the life of our society, how it affects us all. Because it does, and we usually don’t talk about it directly.

White people, on the other hand, may react with unease: Am I about to be attacked? Is the point of this discussion that all white people are bad? To those people we can say: The point is not to attack every individual of European descent. None of us chose our “race,” nor did we create the society that we were all born into. In this class or discussion group, we’re in this together, trying to understand how we all got here. A conclusion of the Seeing White series is that white people must own and take responsibility for the advantages that come with whiteness, but that is not the same as saying that you as a white person are to blame and need to feel ashamed.

[Additional guidance](#) on leading discussions on race, particularly for young people, from the Anti-Defamation League.

General Questions (for comprehension and discussion)

1. Chenjerai Kumanyika says that he hopes the Seeing White project will focus on systemic, structural racism, not individual bigotry or “race relations.” What does he mean? What’s the difference? Can you give an example of each kind, individual and systemic racism? [Part 1]
2. John Biewen asks, Where did whiteness come from? What’s the answer that he finds? [Part 2]
3. Who invented whiteness, and when? For what purpose? [Part 2]
4. Why would you say that race as we know it – “blackness,” “whiteness,” etc. – was not invented until the 15th century? [Part 2]
5. As American-style chattel slavery evolved into the 1700s, how was it different from the slavery practiced by the early British colonists? [Part 3]
6. When laws were changed in colonial America to give lower-class white people advantages over Africans, how did that make life easier for large landowners and other powerful white people? [Part 3]
7. American leaders assert almost universally that the words of the Declaration of Independence, “all men are created equal,” have been a consistent guiding principal in American life and law. Do you agree? [Part 4]
8. When the United States government acquired the land that became part of the state of Minnesota from the Dakota people, did it do so in an honest and respectful way? [Part 5]
9. What does philosopher Shannon Sullivan mean by “good white people?” [Part 6]
10. People in the American North often believe that the Civil War was a moral crusade in which the Union intervened to end slavery and “save” black people from bondage. Is this an accurate summary of what happened? [Part 6]
11. Scholar Dorothy Roberts says that race scientists of the 17th to 20th centuries used science to “confirm ... their reality.” What was the “reality” they were trying to confirm? [Part 8]
12. What does today’s genomic science say about biological/genetic significance of “race”? [Part 8]
13. If the people of Minnesota, or of Corbin, Kentucky, prefer not to remember violent racial episodes in their region’s past, why might that be? [Parts 5 and 9]

14. When it comes to defining whiteness, for determining American citizenship or other legal or social purposes, have the standards been consistent over the years? [Part 10]
15. When the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in the citizenship cases of Ozawa and Thind in 1922 and 1923, what was the one thing that remained consistent in the justices' rulings? [Part 10]
16. In telling the story of his encounter with "Michael" in Philadelphia, John Biewen says that, looking back, he was "pretty white" in some of this thinking at the time. What does he mean? [Part 11]
17. During the 400-year history in which people of European and African descent have lived in what is now the United States, which of those groups has committed more violence against the other? [Part 11]
18. Myra Greene talks about the "social context" of the history of photography, and "who controls what parts of the image." What do you think she means by that? [Part 12]
19. Considering all racial and ethnic groups – white, black, Latino, Native American, Asian – which group has benefitted the most from government programs and largesse throughout American history? [Part 13]
20. In doing antiracist work, what is the difference between actions taken by individuals and those made by the society as a whole, through the federal government – and why might the latter be appropriate and necessary? [Part 14]

Additional discussion questions for each episode:

[Episode 31: Turning the Lens \(Seeing White, Part 1\)](#)

Events of the past few years have turned a challenging spotlight on White people, and Whiteness, in the United States. An introduction to our series exploring what it means to be White.

How does whiteness fly beneath the radar? Think of the institutions that you are part of or belong to. In what ways does the idea of whiteness act as the norm within institutions?

[Episode 32: How Race Was Made \(Seeing White, Part 2\)](#)

For much of human history, people viewed themselves as members of tribes or nations but had no notion of "race." Today, science deems race biologically meaningless. Who invented race as we know it, and why?

Before hearing this episode, how would you have imagined that the notions of “black” people and “white” people came into being? How does it change the way you think of your racial/ethnic identity to know that race was invented to justify the exploitation of other human beings?

[Episode 33: Made in America \(Seeing White, Part 3\)](#)

Chattel slavery in the United States, with its distinctive – and strikingly cruel – laws and structures, took shape over many decades in colonial America. The innovations that built American slavery are inseparable from the construction of Whiteness as we know it today.

What are some of the ways that American culture minimizes the legacy and impact of 250 years of chattel slavery, or reinforces the impression that it all happened in the ancient past? How could our schools, media, and popular culture tell a truer story about slavery and its effects on people alive today?

[Episode 34: On Crazy We Built a Nation \(Seeing White, Part 4\)](#)

“All men are created equal.” Those words, from the Declaration of Independence, are central to the story that Americans tell about ourselves and our history. But what did those words mean to the man who actually wrote them?

Do you think that historic figures should be forgiven for beliefs and actions that you consider repugnant on the grounds that those people were “of their time”? How does that apply to us? Are we doing things, individually or as a society, that we should be forgiven for by future generations because we are people “of our time”?

[Episode 35: Little War on the Prairie \(Seeing White, Part 5\)](#)

Growing up in Mankato, Minnesota, John Biewen heard next to nothing about the town’s most important historical event. In 1862, Mankato was the site of the largest mass execution in U.S. history – the hanging of 38 Dakota warriors – following one of the major wars between Plains Indians and settlers. Biewen explores what happened in 1862, and why people in Minnesota stopped talking about it afterwards.

Do you think that most parts of the United States have events in their history that have been suppressed because they don’t reflect well on the dominant group in that place? What can we gain, as communities and as a larger society, from talking more honestly about the past?

[Episode 36: That’s Not Us, So We’re Clean \(Seeing White, Part 6\)](#)

When it comes to America's racial sins, past and present, a lot of us see people in one region of the country as guiltier than the rest. Host John Biewen spoke with some white Southern friends about that tendency.

What is the meaning of aversive racism? Often people think of racism as a problem of bigoted individuals, or organizations like the KKK. What are some of the ways that racism takes on more-subtle but perhaps more-pervasive forms?

[Episode 37: Chenjerai's Challenge \(Seeing White, Part 7\)](#)

"How attached are you to the idea of being white?" Chenjerai Kumanyika puts that question to host John Biewen, as they revisit an unfinished conversation from a previous episode.

What is the cost of racism to white people? Can you add to this list?
<http://paulkivel.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/thecostsofracism.pdf>

When are the times that you feel able to see the benefits of being white?

[Episode 38: Skulls and Skin \(Seeing White, Part 8\)](#)

Scientists weren't the first to divide humanity along racial – and racist – lines. But for hundreds of years, racial scientists claimed to provide proof for those racist hierarchies – and some still do.

What are some of the benefits for white people in creating scientific reasons for white superiority? How do beliefs about the genetic superiority or inferiority of racial/ethnic groups manifest in the everyday life of our culture?

[Episode 39: A Racial Cleansing in America \(Seeing White Part 9\)](#)

In 1919, a white mob forced the entire black population of Corbin, Kentucky, to leave, at gunpoint. It was one of many racial expulsions in the United States. What happened, and how such racial cleansings became "America's family secret."

An expert on "sundown towns" has identified hundreds of communities across the United States in which black people, and sometimes Jews or other groups, were or still are not welcome. Read this article and discuss.

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2008/does-my-town-have-a-racist-past>

[Episode 40: Citizen Thind \(Seeing White, Part 10\)](#)

The story of Bhagat Singh Thind, and also of Takao Ozawa – Asian immigrants who, in the 1920s, sought to convince the U.S. Supreme Court that they were white in order to gain American citizenship. Thind’s “bargain with white supremacy,” and the deeply revealing results.

If you are white, or partly white, how do you identify ethnically? (Irish, Italian, English, etc.) Research when those ethnicities became fully “white” in America. What laws were changed to allow for that ethnic identity to become legally white?

[Episode 41: Danger \(Seeing White, Part 11\)](#)

For hundreds of years, the white-dominated American culture has raised the specter of the dangerous, violent black man. Host John Biewen tells the story of a confrontation with an African American teenager. Then he and recurring guest Chenjerai Kumanyika discuss that longstanding image, and its neglected flipside: white-on-black violence.

Unlike explicit bias, which reflects the attitudes and actions that someone has at a conscious level, implicit bias is judgment and behavior that often operate unconsciously, and without intentional control. How does someone’s unconscious reaction to people of a different race influence their judgment and behavior? What are some examples?

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/education.html>

[Episode 42: My White Friends \(Seeing White, Part 12\)](#)

For years, Myra Greene had explored blackness through her photography, often in self-portraits. She wondered, what would it mean to take pictures of whiteness? For her friends, what was it like to be photographed because you’re white?

What are some “white” characteristics that can be seen? Are there characteristics of whiteness that cannot be seen? What are they?

[Episode 44: White Affirmative Action \(Seeing White, Part 13\)](#)

When it comes to U.S. government programs and support earmarked for the benefit of particular racial groups, history is clear. White folks have received most of the benefits.

How do politicians and the media talk about government programs in a way that obscures benefits that have gone to white people in the past and present, while emphasizing the “handouts” given to people of color?

<http://newsreel.org/guides/race/whiteadv.htm>

[Episode 45: Transformation \(Seeing White, Part 14\)](#)

The concluding episode in our series, Seeing White. An exploration of solutions and responses to America's deep history of white supremacy: addressing white fragility, and some possible responses by government, including reparations for descendants of enslaved people.

Consider your sphere of influence - that is, people and organizations that you have some influence on. What could bring about change?

Activity

Choose two or more of the above questions and talk as a class or in small groups.

In particular, choose themes likely to lead students to challenge mainstream thinking about race. For example, the slavery-based origins of "black" and "white," or the prevalence of racism across the country and not just in the South, or the history of white-on-black violence. Ask students to compare those insights from Seeing White to the messages they've received from the mainstream culture about these issues.

Study guide created by John Biewen with assistance from Jenna Chandler-Ward, Co-Founder of Teaching While White and Co-Director of the Multicultural Teaching Institute.