



Exploring whiteness, white privilege and power

By Dr Rachel Starr

I was delighted to be invited to lead a training session for the Association of Christians in Counselling and Linked Professions in January 2024. This article is a summary of the session. I begin by reflecting on the fluid, contextual nature of identity. I situate discussion of whiteness within a UK context of racial inequality and injustice. In conversation with Janet E. Helms, studies of white racial identity formation, I reflect on the process of un/becoming white. I ask how we might recognise and critique white privilege and power at individual, communal and social levels of interaction. I introduce conversations happening within some churches about the continued impact of colonialism and the normalisation of whiteness. Finally, I note themes emerging from conversations about whiteness within counselling and pastoral care studies.

Exploring whiteness and white identity

Our identities are complex and fluid. While my focus in this article is on race, ethnicity and colour, these aspects intersect with a range of other internal and external markers. And all of these are shaped by context. As a white woman, my whiteness functions in different ways depending on where I am and who I am with. I have been

perceived to be a poor working-class northerner when studying at a wealthy English university; a *gringa* out of place in Peru; and a gentle English woman who speaks like the then Queen (in my Wolverhampton accent!) when living in New York. And just as fluid is my own self-understanding. As white anti-racist activist Mary Foulke observes, “We journey to come into our own” often facing challenges and setbacks as we seek to be more fully ourselves. “Even in the Scriptures, journeying implies movement and change, peril, discovery, loss, gains, repeated departures, uprooting and adventure” (Foulke, 1996, pp. 35–36).

As the above example from my own experience illustrates, much classification is due to perception rather than reality. It’s widely acknowledged that race is a political concept, rather than a biological category. Yet, “While we know that ‘Black’ or ‘White’ is an unstable, fluid and contradictory reality, we also know that persons perceived to be Black will be treated differently from those perceived to be White” (Foulke, 1996, p. 9). In the UK, people who identify, or are identified, as black, brown and Asian experience political, socio-economic and cultural inequality and injustice (Bhopal, 2018). They face generational trauma and everyday violence due to historic, ongoing racist structures, beliefs and practices.



While many white people are quick to criticise racism, they often are unaware of even having a racial identity, let alone one that impacts on racial dynamics. Whiteness, the normalisation and idealisation of white identity that sustains white privilege and power, is unexamined.

Anti-racist activist Paul Kivel comments:

“When the subject is racism, many of us don’t want to be white, because it...brings up feelings of guilt, [and] shame. There are others who proudly claim whiteness under any circumstances and simply deny or ignore the violence that white people have done to people of [other] color....some of us are quick to disavow our whiteness, or to claim some other identity which will give us legitimate victim status...We must notice when we try to slip into another identity and escape being white” (Kivel, pp. 10–11).

Kivel notes the way in which whiteness works to prevent white people from recognising themselves as white, that is, as having a distinct colour identity. Yet, until that step is taken, it is difficult for white people to begin to engage with questions of racial inequality and injustice.

Soon after returning to the UK from studying in New York, I began work at a theological training college in Salisbury. As part of an anti-racism training programme, I shared my own experience of ‘Coming out as white’, reflections which were later published (Starr, 2000). Recently, I was asked to revise those reflections for *Deconstructing Whiteness, Empire and Mission* (2023), a collection edited by black theologians, Anthony G. Reddie and Carol Troupe. It was at times excruciating to

revisit my thoughts of 20 years previous. How naive I was – how confident of myself and my ability to change the world, church and my white self! I tried to tell my story again. This time I chose to title it: ‘Unbecoming: reflections on the work of a white theologian’. I recognised the ongoing work I had still to do.

In my work, I make use of Janet E. Helms’ model of white racial identity (Helms, 1993, 2020). Helms, a black psychologist based at Boston College in the USA, suggests white people move back and forth between different ways of understanding their whiteness. In summary, she notes six different schemata:

- “I don’t see colour”, a claim which works to deny the reality of both self and other.
- Initial awareness of colour difference which can result in unease.
- Reintegration into white privilege and power, often while claiming ‘victim status’.
- Basic acknowledgement of racism, which can result in a naive idealisation of black and brown identity and cultural appropriation.
- Deeper learning about different identities, which can result in acknowledging how whiteness perpetuates racial inequality and injustice.
- Openness to self, difference, ongoing learning and critique.

I often invite groups to explore Helms’ model to see how it fits with their own experience as or of white people. This helps white participants recognise that there is more space for them to explore than simply denying their own and others’ colour identity.

White privilege and power

In the 1930s, African American scholar and activist, W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) identified what he termed an additional “psychological wage” given to white workers. By this he meant that even though white labourers might be poorly paid, their whiteness afforded them respect and acceptance, in contrast with black workers. Several decades later, a white scholar, Theodore W. Allen published a number of texts exploring “white skin privilege”. More recently, Peggy McIntosh’s 1988 essay, ‘White Privilege and Male Privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies’ has been used within anti-racism training. McIntosh explores how her socialisation as a white woman protected her from the reality of racism and her complicity with it. She reflects:



“I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness...never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth” but “I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (1998, pp. 104, 94).

McIntosh (1988, pp. 96–99) lists numerous examples of unnoticed benefits that she has as a white person. These include:

- “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- “I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- “I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
- “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- “I can choose blemish cover or bandages in flesh color and have them more or less match my skin.”

In my experience as a theological educator, McIntosh’s everyday examples often generate new insights among white participants. Black and brown participants can find these examples of white privilege useful as they seek to share contrasting experiences.

While impactful, McIntosh’s approach has come under criticism. ‘Confessing’ white privilege needs to be understood as a starting point, not an end point (Ahmed, 2004). While awareness of unearned privilege is important, white people need to recognise how they access – and perpetuate – such privileges within a wider structure of white power (Leonardo, 2004).

Christianity and whiteness

As a white middle-class Christian woman, I recognise how certain aspects of middle-class white Church culture work to deny white privilege and power. We are encouraged to be nice, polite, welcoming. We are encouraged to see ourselves as a family. We smooth over disagreement. In addition, because of how victimhood is romanticised within Christianity (Gudorf, 1992), with suffering and humility revered as spiritual practices, we find it difficult to see ourselves as oppressors. This can result in white Christians clinging to an identity in which we can maintain ‘victim status’ via our gender, class or other identity marker outside of race. Alternatively, we can fall into the trap of becoming the ‘white saviour’, making our own actions central to the narrative. We can see this, for example, in how white abolitionists are celebrated within white-led denominations, often without acknowledgement of the risky, generational work of black preachers, activists and abolitionists.

More broadly, white Christians need to engage critically with the intertwining of Christian mission with colonialism and enslavement. Scholars such as Carlton Turner (2021) and Willie James Jennings (2020) explore the division and destruction of black African peoples, land and culture through enslavement and colonialism; and how dominant





western Christianity continues to celebrate whiteness in ways which denigrate and fragment black and brown people.

Whiteness in counselling and pastoral care

Within counselling and pastoral care studies, whiteness remains an understudied aspect of identity, relationality and power. Yet in the past decade, whiteness has begun to be analysed by scholars and practitioners. While I write as a theologian rather than a counsellor, I note here some shared insights from wider critical whiteness studies and anti-racism work.

Whiteness as silence

White counsellors are often reticent to mention their own racial identity and the dynamics of race within the counselling space. They may be concerned that the mere mention of race will cause embarrassment or division. Yet unexamined whiteness results in: inauthentic engagement, a failure to attend to power dynamics and a denial of individual racism (Mazzula and Nadal, 2015, p. 320; Wallis and Singh, 2014, pp. 51, 55).

Whiteness as 'success'

If whiteness is not critically examined, it becomes the assumed goal. Instead, within counselling and pastoral care, there needs to be space for a diverse range of narratives of success.

Whiteness as separation

White people are encouraged to see themselves as special, distinct, different. This, Richard Coble

argues, results in white people separating themselves from others, in the process wounding themselves – and others – as community and connection is broken (Coble, 2018, pp. 564–565).

Disrupting white privilege and power

What might be some of the everyday ways in which white people might seek to disrupt their own and other's white privilege and power? Here are some of the things I continue to learn as I seek to do this work:

- Identities are complex and fluid, my own included.
- It can be difficult, embarrassing and risky to talk about racism. As a white person, I need to be attentive to how I am trained to ignore racial identity, inequality and injustice.
- I am responsible for educating myself about racism and my role within it. One way to do this is to seek out different narratives about church life (for example, France, 2020) and wider society (Olusoga, 2016). Another is to listen and learn from black colleagues and clients, friends and family members, scholars and activists.
- As a white person, I need to step back and take up less space. It is not always my story, and I am not always at the centre of the discussion.

Black theologian James Cone invites us to “Begin the antiracist struggle where you are” and “Work at a pace as if you were going to do it for the rest of your life” (Cone, 2004, p. 13). This seems like good advice on which to end.



About the author

Dr Rachel Starr is director of studies at the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham where she teaches biblical studies, feminist and contextual theologies. For a number of years, she has helped deliver training focused on anti-racism work and critiquing whiteness.



Further reading

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