

[What You Need To Know](#)

Understanding Whiteness

To understand the history of the ideology of 'race,' and combating racism today, involves understanding (and challenging) 'whiteness' as the foundation of racial categories and racism.

At first glance, it may seem that in common usage in Alberta, the word 'white' is used to refer specifically to 'skin colour' or 'race.' Initially, this might seem like reverting back to, or reinforcing, the old (and racist) categories of European imperialism, and in some cases, it may in fact be meant that way! (We are profoundly concerned, for example, by the increase in neo-Nazi/white supremacist activity in our province.) In our experience, however, we have found that when people refer to 'white people' (either in self-identifying, or identifying individuals/groups), it is in fact being used as a shorthand reference to **whiteness**, about which people may have varied understandings you will need to clarify. In other words, it is being used as a shorthand for the privileges/power that people who appear 'white' receive, because they are not subjected to the racism faced by people of colour and Indigenous people.

As with the term 'race,' it is important to clarify the differences between "white" (a category of 'race' with no biological/scientific foundation) and "whiteness" as a powerful social construction with very real, tangible, violent effects. Here are some useful definitions of 'whiteness,' followed by a list of its key features:

Racism is based on the concept of whiteness—a powerful fiction enforced by power and violence. Whiteness is a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white ([Kivel, 1996, p. 19](#)).

'Whiteness,' like 'colour' and 'Blackness,' are essentially social constructs applied to human beings rather than veritable truths that have universal validity. The power of Whiteness, however, is manifested by the ways in which racialized Whiteness becomes transformed into social, political, economic, and cultural behaviour. White culture, norms, and values in all these areas become normative natural. They become the standard against which all other cultures, groups, and individuals are measured and usually found to be inferior ([Henry & Tator, 2006, pp. 46-67](#)).

Drawing on the important work of [Ruth Frankenberg](#) (1993), the authors of [Teach Me to Thunder: A Manual for Anti-Racism Trainers](#), write that whiteness is

a dominant cultural space with enormous political significance, with the purpose to keep others on the margin....white people are not required to explain to others how 'white' culture works, because 'white' culture is the dominant culture that sets the norms. Everybody else is then compared to that norm....In times of perceived threat, the normative group may well attempt to reassert its normativity by asserting elements of its cultural practice more explicitly and exclusively. (21)

An example of this normative whiteness was the furor concerning [Baltej Singh Dhillon's fight](#) to wear a turban, for religious reasons, as part of his RCMP uniform. The argument that the Mountie uniform was a 'tradition' that should not be changed belied white Canadians' perceptions of Sikh people and communities of colour as 'threatening' their position of privilege in Canada.

Key Features of Whiteness

Whiteness is multidimensional, complex, systemic and systematic:

- It is **socially and politically constructed**, and therefore a learned behavior
- It does not just refer to skin colour but is **ideology** based on beliefs, values behaviors, habits and attitudes, which result in the unequal distribution of power and privilege based on skin colour ([Frye, 1983](#); [Kivel, 1996](#))
- It represents a **position of power** where the power holder defines the categories, which means that the power holder decides who is white and who is not ([Frye, 1983](#))
- It is **relational**. "White" only exists in relation/opposition to other categories/locations in the racial hierarchy produced by whiteness. In defining 'others,' whiteness defines itself.

- It is **fluid** - who is considered white changes over time ([Kivel, 1996](#))
- It is a **state of unconsciousness**: whiteness is often invisible to white people, and this perpetuates a lack of knowledge or understanding of difference which is a root cause of oppression ([hooks, 1994](#))
- It shapes how white people view themselves and others, and places white people in a **place of structural advantage** where white cultural norms and practices go unnamed and unquestioned ([Frankenberg, 1993](#)). Cultural racism is founded in the belief that "whiteness is considered to be the universal . . . and allows one to think and speak as if Whiteness described and defined the world." ([Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 327](#))

White versus Whiteness

- race is scientifically insignificant.
- race is a socially constructed category that powerfully attaches meaning to perceptions of skin colour; inequitable social/economic relations are structured and reproduced (including the meanings attached to skin colour...) through notions of race, class, gender, and nation.
- whiteness is a set of normative privileges granted to white-skinned individuals and groups; it is normalized in its production/maintenance for those of that group such that its operations are 'invisible' to those privileged by it (but not to those oppressed/disadvantaged by it); it has a long history in European imperialism and epistemologies (for those who are of mixed ancestry and 'pass' as white, this normativity, I would assume, would not occur).
- distinct but not separate from ideologies and material manifestations of ideologies of class, nation, gender, sexuality, and ability.
- the meaning of 'whiteness' is historical and has shifted over time (ie Irish, southern European peoples-Italian, Spanish, Greek; have at times been 'raced' as non-white).

take a stand stand up stand alone stand together stand tall stand strong stand still stand down . . . understand

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