We need to talk about White people

Gillborn, David

DOI:
10.1080/15210960.2019.1606632

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Gillborn, D 2019, 'We need to talk about White people', *Multicultural Perspectives*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 97-101. https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2019.1606632

We need to talk about White people

David Gillborn
Director, Centre for Research in Race & Education, University of Birmingham, UK & editor, *Race Ethnicity and Education.*
d.gillborn@bham.ac.uk

Abstract:
On both sides of the Atlantic, the interests, fears and voices of 'ordinary' White people have become a prominent part of mainstream political and educational debate. This article reflects on recent developments, including a critique of so-called color-blindness, as a form of racism denial, and the argument that White people are merely an ethnic group, 'like any other,' who are denied their rights by political correctness. The author argues that, because of their uniquely powerful influence on economic, cultural and social systems, White groups cannot be treated as just another ethnic group.

Key words: racism; policy; Whiteness; political climate; White fragility; color evasiveness; racism denial.

> 'So what's going on, I ask Professor David Gillborn. "Aggressive majoritarism," he says emphatically. What's that? "'Rights for whites' dressed up as an anti-political correctness agenda," he says. "We are in an incredibly dangerous place at the moment. It's 'let's focus on the white people'. It's deeply worrying."' (Muir, 2010)

It's not good to be proven correct when you study racism and predict that things are getting worse. The quotation above is taken from an article in *The Guardian* newspaper – Britain's leading left-of-centre daily. Published in 2010 the author, Hugh Muir, is one of the few Black British columnists working in the mainstream daily press in the UK. Hugh had interviewed me about a recent publication where I warned that there was real danger in the government and media determination to portray White school students as a kind of forgotten and embattled ethnic group, outperformed by the minoritized students that used to be known as the nation's 'under-achievers' (Gillborn, 2010). Based on clever, and deceitful, misrepresentation of the national education statistics, both main political parties seemed to view the 'White working class' vote as their path to power, and education had become a key policy battleground. Less than a decade later and the 'rights for Whites' discourse,

which used to live at the margins of political debate, has occupied the mainstream, with nationalist popularism winning elections in Europe, Australia, North and South America. 2016 saw the election of President Trump and, in the UK, the vote to leave the European Union. There are numerous factors behind these events, but the influence of racist anti-immigrant sentiment is undeniable. Trump's popularity rose after he pledged to 'ban' Muslims from entering the country (Gass, 2015), and the UK 'Leave' campaign's slogan (*We want our country back*) could hardly have been clearer in its appeal to White voters who were inundated with tabloid stories of the supposed threat of unchecked European immigration and a wave of crime, welfare cheats, and cheap labor ready to 'steal' British jobs (Dorling & Tomlinson, 2019). Whiteness has moved from the pages of academic journals and into the political spotlight.

In this article I want to reflect on some of the current arguments about Whiteness and White people. When 'multicultural perspectives' are raised – in policy debate or in classroom discussion – there is sometimes an uncomfortable silence, sometimes an aggressive kickback. Either way, we need to talk about White people and how they, and their interests, are represented, manipulated, and reconfigured in contemporary educational and political debate.

There's nothing fragile about white fragility

It is useful to start by reminding ourselves that 'Whiteness' and 'White people' are different things. In general terms, 'Whiteness' refers to a system of beliefs, practices, and assumptions that constantly centre the interests of White people, especially White elites. People who identify and/or are identified by others as 'White' may act in the interests of Whiteness, but it is not automatic nor inevitable. White-identified people can challenge Whiteness, just as people of color can sometimes become vocal advocates for Whiteness. As Zeus Leonardo reminds us, ''Whiteness' is a racial discourse, whereas the category 'white people' represents a socially constructed identity, usually based on skin color' (Leonardo, 2002, p. 31).

One of the most well-known attempts to identify and combat everyday manifestations of Whiteness is Robin DiAngelo's notion of 'White Fragility' (2011, 2018):

> White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57)

Whiteness is, in fact, far from fragile. It is resilient, powerful, and actively resists anything that might challenge its claims to neutrality and superiority. Charles W. Mills addresses the problem as 'White ignorance':

> an ignorance that resists (…) that fights back. Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly – not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as *knowledge*. (2007, p. 13)

DiAngelo's concept refers to the kind of fragile ego that cannot brook any challenge (perceived or real). As she notes, Whiteness can feel itself threatened on numerous fronts:

> • Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity);
>
> • People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives (challenge to white racial codes);
>
> • People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regards to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need/entitlement to racial comfort);
>
> • People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to colonialist relations);
>
> • A fellow white not providing agreement with one's interpretations (challenge to white solidarity);
>
> • Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white liberalism);
>
> • Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism);
>
> • An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy);
>
> • Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority);

> • Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or multicultural education (challenge to white centrality). (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 57)

In the rest of this piece I want to consider two particular aspects of contemporary Whiteness and White fragility that are playing an increasingly prominent role in public debates about race equality in education and beyond. First, I critically examine the notion of color-blindness, and second, the argument that White people are simply looking out for themselves like any other group in society.

From color-blind to color evasion and racism denial

There are numerous devastating critiques that show how a claim to be blind to color – to simply treat all people alike – tends to benefit the already powerful by defending and extending White racial advantage (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Haney-Lopez, 2007; Wells, 2014). A recent addition to the critical literature, by Subini Annamma and colleagues, is especially important because it makes the case for a new term, 'color evasiveness', as a means of explicitly naming the tactic at the heart of so-called color-blindness:

> Color-evasiveness as an expanded racial ideology acknowledges that to avoid talking about race is a way to willfully ignore the experiences of people of color, and makes the goal of erasure more fully discernible. In other words, to use the term 'evade' highlights an attempt to obliterate. (Annamma, Jackson & Morrison, 2017, p. 156)

Advocates of color-blindness tend to present themselves as occupying the moral high-ground, e.g. as rising above petty racialized disputes in order to see the true worth of people and the arguments that they make. In practice, however, color-blindness has become an argument to ignore race-inequality and silence critical discussion of racism in all but its most crude and obvious forms.

The new term, color evasion, has several advantages; it makes clear that adopting this stance is a *deliberate* act. Color evasion is neither innocent nor passive; it is an active refusal to engage with race inequality. Regardless of the moral, theoretical, or practical arguments that might be marshalled to defend color-blind ideology, in practice the position is an assertion (in effect if not intent) that the experiences of minoritized groups are not important enough to be considered or acted on. The term color evasion also avoids feeding into patronizing and exclusionary assumptions about people with certain dis/abilities: people with visual impairments are able to perceive the world in great complexity but the term color *blindness* equates this with a kind of ignorance and/or lack of perception.

An example is instructive here. A specialist committee of the British parliament was considering the actions of the BBC (a national broadcaster funded in part by compulsory public subscription via a license system). The corporation was criticised by a Conservative politician for taking deliberate steps to raise the proportion of employees from minoritized backgrounds:

> "I personally consider it to be a racist approach … I think that the true racist sees everything in terms of race, or colour. Surely what we should be aiming to be is colour blind."
> Philip Davies MP, member of the Commons Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee (Sweney, 2014).

In the UK, in all but a very few exceptional circumstances, it is illegal to exclude someone from a job on the basis of their ethnicity. However, it is legal – and encouraged by race equality legislation - to take 'positive action' to try to raise the proportion of *under*-represented groups, say by advertising in different places so as to encourage more people to apply from those backgrounds. But this member of parliament is arguing that *any* attention to race is – by definition – racist. This is a common tactic, and it achieves two ends. First, as Annamma and colleagues note, the strategy *evades* any discussion of existing inequities; and second, in effect, the stance denies the possibility of discussing whether there is currently racism in the BBC's employment policy, which might account for the under-representation of people of color. In essence, the stand neatly acts as both *color evasion* (we shouldn't talk about race) and *racism denial* (racism isn't worth discussing).

White People: just another ethnic group?

A Whiteness trope that is growing in popularity, on both sides of the Atlantic, trades on the assertion that White people are just another ethnic group. This is an unusual tactic because Whiteness has, historically, gained a great deal of its strength from assuming a position that ethnicity is something that *Other* people have – hence, 'ethnic' is a code for non-White, and White is synonymous with 'normal' (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997). However, White racism is quick to morph to new conditions and opportunities (Gillborn, 2018). When White people seek to embrace the status of an ethnic group, you can be sure that it brings certain privileges for them. Current proponents of this view, in the US and the UK, construct a worldview where White racism is presented as merely a *natural* preference for one's own. Most tellingly, this tactic presents White people's actions in defence of their existing advantages (and their continued oppression of others) as a 'legitimate' form of identity politics. This kind of racist intellectualizing has been championed in the UK by *Policy Exchange* – a think tank and registered charity – that describes its mission as 'The non partisan advancement of education in the economic, social and political sciences and their effect on public policy and the policy making process in the UK and the promotion and publication of objective research' (Policy Exchange Limited, 2017, p. 1).

Policy Exchange declares an income of more than £3 million a year, benefits from charitable status, but does not declare the identity of any of its funders. The website '*Who funds you?'*, which campaigns for transparency in Think Tank funding and operations, gives Policy Exchange its lowest possible transparency rating (Who Funds You?, 2018). In 2017 Policy Exchange published a report entitled *Racial Self-Interest' is not Racism*, authored by Eric Kaufmann (Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London). Kaufmann has recently expanded the arguments into a book *'Whiteshift: Populism, Immigration and the Future of White Majorities'* (2018). The latter begins:

> We need to talk about white identity. Not as a fabrication designed to maintain power, but as a set of myths and symbols to which people are attached: an ethnic identity like any other. (Kauffmann, 2018, p. 1)

And so, the second line of the book sets out one of its dominant themes; that White identity deserves the same respect and understanding as 'any other' (non-majority) identity. The book's release was covered in *The Times* newspaper with the stunningly insensitive (or perhaps deliberately crass and provocative) title 'don't lynch me for spelling out what immigration means' (Hemming, 2018). Kaufmann's argument is that commentators have been too quick to denounce White group interests as racist and that this has closed down debate and forced White people towards extremist nationalist positions. Launching Kaufmann's report, Policy Exchange's 'Head of Demography, Integration and Immigration', David Goodhart, argues that:

> The challenge here is to distinguish between white racism and white identity politics. The latter may be clannish and insular, but it is not the same as irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group — the normal definition of racism (…) The liberal reflex to tar legitimate majority grievances with the brush of racism risks deepening western societies' cultural divides. (Policy Exchange, 2017)

Note that a false distinction is drawn here between White racism (limited to the most extreme and obvious forms of 'irrational hatred, fear or contempt for another group') and White 'identity politics' (which is described as *legitimate* grievance). In this way, racism is re-defined in the narrowest way possible as 'irrational hatred'; systemic inequities that persistently and significantly favour White people (for example, in the economy, in health, in the criminal justice system, and education) are simply ruled out of bounds. Such differences cannot be racist in the Goodhart/Kaufmann universe (even though they favour one group at the expense of others) because they do not arise from plain and simple fascistic politics. In this way, such arguments close down critical discussion of pernicious and widespread structural racism. The move is disguised as thoughtful and even academic; the Policy

Exchange report has the sub-title '*ethno-demographic interests and the immigration debate*'. The consequence of this argument, however, is that White people would be free to say and do pretty much whatever they like (short of violence) to protect their own racial self-interest. But White people in countries like the US and UK are not 'an ethnic identity like any other' – they are decidedly *unlike* any other. They are the dominant holders of power, and their move to protect their existing slice of the cake is not a romantic strategy to protect some folkloric image of red-cheeked children in an innocent past; it is an attempt to safeguard an oppressive and racist status quo. Whiteness enforces its power in numerous ways, sometimes subtle, sometimes less so. Kaufmann strikes an ominous tone early and often:

> The loss of white ethno-cultural confidence manifests itself in other ways. Among the most important is a growing unwillingness to indulge the anti-white ideology of the cultural left. When whites were an overwhelming majority, empirically unsupported generalizations about whites could be brushed off as amusing and mischievous but ultimately harmless. As whites decline, fewer are willing to abide such attacks. (Kaufmann, 2018, p. 2)

And so, the view of White people as just another ethnic group (who happen to control the levers of power across society) is married to an implicit threat; don't call them racist because you'll make them angry, and you won't like White people when they're frightened and angry.

Conclusion: what about poor Whites?

In a wonderfully incisive and important paper, Ricky Lee Allan (2009) reflects on the fact that, growing up poor and White, the only time he heard 'nonpoor' Whites express any concern for his kind was when White racial privilege was being questioned. He argues that poor and nonpoor Whites form a 'White hegemonic alliance' from which both draw benefits (emotional, psychological and economic). In particular, White elites are able to use poor Whites to question the existence of any such thing as *White* privilege – and defend Whiteness from critical scrutiny (see Bhopal, 2018).

> Conversations about Whiteness might best happen within the context of a larger conversation about racism. (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 66)

DiAngelo's entreaty to keep racism in sight is vitally important. Critical discussions of White racial power quickly encounter arguments that cast the critic as a racist aggressor and/or a disingenuous agitator. In this piece I have reflected on some of the many analyses that provoke White fragility; considered how the 'color-blind' defence is actually an aggressive piece of evasion and racism denial; and finally reflected on the argument that White people are just another ethnic group, simply looking

out for their interests. But White people – by definition in societies like the US and UK that are structured in racial domination – are not just like anyone else.

In a recent paper, looking at how statistics are frequently misused to defend White racial interests, colleagues and I argue that a useful strategy to help challenge 'commonsense' assumptions about race inequity is to replace the word 'race' with the word 'racism' (Gillborn, Warmington & Demack, 2018, p. 171-173). For example, when considering the fact that Black British students are permanently expelled from school at around three-times the rate experienced by their White peers, a journalist once asked me, 'How is race related to the expulsion of Black kids?' They meant, what is it about Black children (their behaviour? upbringing? genes?) that explains this pattern. But I view the same statistics as prompting a different question, 'How is racism related to the expulsion of Black kids?' This question points us to decades of research – from both sides of the Atlantic - showing that Black students face systematically different expectations and disciplinary actions from their (mostly White) teachers (Gillborn & Demack, 2018). Similarly, as the debate about White identity becomes more prominent, and more heated, it is vital to keep sight of the inequalities of power that shape the political, economic, and educational landscape. White people are not minoritized, neither in terms of numbers nor power. White people exert disproportionate power and influence. They cannot *merely* look out for their own interests because, in contrast to Black and Latinx movements, for example, White movements are not pursuing equity and social justice; they are generally seeking to preserve inequity and injustice.

References

Allen, R. L. (2009). 'What about poor White people?' In W. Ayers, T. Quinn, & D. Stovall (Eds.), *Handbook of social justice in education* (pp. 209-30). New York: Routledge.

Annamma, S. A., Jackson, D. D. & Morrison, D. (2017). Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: Using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in education and society. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *20*(2), 147-162.

Bhopal, K. (2018). *White privilege: The myth of a post-racial society*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.

Bonilla-Silva, E. (2006). *Racism without Racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (Eds.). (1997). *Critical White studies: Looking behind the mirror.* Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *3*(3), 54-70.

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for White people to talk about racism*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Dorling, D., & Tomlinson, S. (2019). *Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of Empire*. London: Biteback Publishing.

Gass, N. (2015, December 14). Trump hits a new high in national poll. *Politico.com*. Retrieved from https://www.politico.com/story/2015/12/poll-trump-new-high-216741.

Gillborn, D. (2010). The White working class, racism and respectability: victims, degenerates and interest-convergence. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, *58*(1), 2-25.

Gillborn, D. (2018). Heads I win, tails you lose: Anti-Black racism as fluid, relentless, individual and systemic. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *93*(1), 66-77.

Gillborn, D., & Demack, S. (2018). *Exclusions review 2018: Evidence on the exclusion of Black Caribbean and Mixed: White/Black Caribbean students*. Birmingham, UK: Centre for Research in Race & Education, University of Birmingham.

Gillborn, D., Warmington, P., & Demack, S. (2018). QuantCrit: Education, policy, 'big data' and principles for a critical race theory of statistics. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *21*(2), 158-179.

Haney-Lopez, I. F. (2007). "A nation of minorities": Race, ethnicity, and reactionary colorblindness. *Stanford Law Review*, *59*, 985–1063.

Hemming, M. (2018, October 14). Eric Kaufmann: Don't lynch me for spelling out what immigration means. *The Times*. Retrieved from https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/eric-kaufmann-dont-lynch-me-for-spelling-out-what-immigration-means-g7ljjws60.

Kaufmann, E. (2017). *'Racial self-interest' is not racism: Ethno-demographic interests and the immigration debate*. London: Policy Exchange.

Kaufmann, E. (2018). *Whiteshift: Populism, immigration and the future of White majorities*. London: Penguin.

Leonardo, Z. (2002). The souls of white folk: Critical pedagogy, whiteness studies, and globalization discourse. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *5*(1), 29–50.

Mills, C. W. (2007). White ignorance. In S. Sullivan & N. Tuana (Eds.), *Race and epistemologies of ignorance* (pp. 13-38). New York, NY: SUNY Press.

Muir, H. (2010, September 7). Hideously diverse Britain: Wrongs and rights for whites. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/sep/07/hideously-diverse-wrongs-rights-whites.

Policy Exchange. (2017, March 3). Racial self-interest' is not racism. Retrieved from https://policyexchange.org.uk/publication/racial-self-interest-is-not-racism/

Policy Exchange Limited. (2017). *Annual report and financial statements for the year ended 30 September 2O17*. Charity Registration No. 1096300. Retrieved from http://apps.charitycommission.gov.uk/Accounts/Ends00/0001096300_AC_20170930_E_C.PDF.

Sweney, M. (2014, July 15). BBC's 'racist approach' to diversity ignores white working class - Tory MP. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/jul/15/bbc-racist-diversity-white-working-class-tory-mp.

Wells, A .S. (2014). *Seeing past the 'colorblind' myth of education policy.* Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center.

Who Funds You? (2018, July 14). *Policy Exchange*. Retrieved from http://whofundsyou.org/org/policy-exchange.