

Decentering Whiteness in a Multiracial Society

BY STEPHANIE M. PATTERSON

Illustration by Angie Wang

Regardless of race, from the moment we take our first breaths on American soil, our existence rotates around whiteness. In this country, whiteness is the standard, the default. From the faces celebrated as beautiful to the people serving as leaders, from styles of dress to patterns of speech, whiteness¹ shapes us as a country and as individuals.

People of color subconsciously learn that whiteness is superior, preferable, the ultimate prize. To achieve happiness, admiration, love, acceptance, visibility and attain full value by society, assimilation to whiteness is a necessity. Yet, the culture and customs of people of color are absorbed, repackaged, then labeled euro-unique which makes them more palpable for white people. This silences cultures outside the center.

People who are white benefit from this structure from birth, so are less compelled to consider whiteness. Social justice trainer and author Robin DiAngelo writes, “Like most white people raised in the U.S., I was not taught to see myself in racial terms and certainly not to draw attention to my race or to behave as if it mattered in any way.”² It is like the tale of asking a fish what it is like to live in water and the fish replies, “What water?”



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about the tenth birthday of the son of one of my students. The class began discussing what a treat it was for a child to become a preteen because the doors of independence begin to open a little wider. After all, they are growing up and getting closer to adulthood.

My students talked joyfully about what they taught to their preteen children. Even though the conversation continued to be upbeat and filled with laughter, my body began to fill with anxiety. I began to think about how my situatedness—where I come from, particularly as a woman of color—is different from what society considers the norm. “No, not today, please not today. Not again,” I thought to myself. Then one of my students asked me if I had a child, and more specifically, if I had a son, and, if so, what I taught him when he was a preteen.

Being the only black woman in much of my day-to-day professional life makes it challenging to fully participate in discussions. My words often introduce a different perspective, a non-centered perspective. It doesn't seem to matter whether my thoughts are viewed as correct or incorrect—they are not white. So I bite my lip and smile in an effort to not stray too far outside my safe space.

Robin DiAngelo notes that white people, who rarely have to consider their race, find such conversations and non-centered view difficult. Robin says, “The smallest amount of

racial stress is intolerable—the mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses. These include emotions such as anger, fear and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and withdrawal . . . These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort and maintain [white people's] dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as *white fragility*.”³

Outside the Center

In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* Beverly Daniel Tatum explains, “People of color learn early in life that they are seen by others as members of a group. For whites, thinking of oneself only as an individual is a legacy of white privilege.”⁴ People of color still tend to believe that if they look like someone else, there is more of a chance that they will be accepted and not get hurt. They also believe in migrating together with those like themselves to remain safe. So, in American society, where whiteness is considered the societal norm, people of color continue to gather together for comfort.

In my day-to-day routine, I smile while being unnoticed, even when I and my accomplishments deserve attention. I smile while overlooking microaggressions—those subtle and often unintentional slights rooted in assumptions about my

Our entire lives center around whiteness and yet, simultaneously, whiteness remains invisible to so many. Decentering whiteness—in order to make room for a diverse, multicultural center—requires that we become aware of the voices we center and the ones we push to the margins.

A Different Perspective

Recently, while I was teaching a technology class to adults in Louisville, Kentucky, we deviated from our course topic to rejoice

race—pretending I am unaffected by them. I smile while telling my truth and risk being thought of as an angry black woman, or worse, being told that I've misunderstood, in an effort to explain away my truth. I smile at the words I place on this page, praying that this article, this invitation to reconsider whose voices we listen to, will be received with love and not animosity. I smile while I creatively avoid questions about my personal struggle, so as not to disturb the comfort level in the room for the people who are white.

Too many times, I smile even though I die a little inside each time. I choose between a smile and fully revealing myself, in fear that I will be judged unfairly or the target of anger.

Whiteness and the Mainstream

To be white means to have the experience of centrality, being thought of as the standard. Engaging the topic of race has given rise to many terms over the years—*diversity initiatives, inclusion, antiracism* and other terms. The term *racial equity* speaks to these ideas and also the belief that whiteness should not be the sole norm.

Several books and resources have been written on the topic of racial

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equity, by both people of color and people who are white. It is not surprising that those written in white voice commonly gain the most attention and are the ones white people engage with the most. Therein lies the dilemma. To work for racial equity, we need to cease making the white voice the forefront of all conversations.

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The United States is less white than in past generations,⁵ but mainstream U.S. culture and the balance of power remain heavily white and male. Women, people of color and white progressives have challenged this domination for years and continue to do so. Admittance to America's mainstream has been

opened by people of color at virtually all levels.

Speaking My Truth

In case you are wondering how I responded when asked what I taught my son, I spoke my truth. I told my students that when my son turned 10, I told him he would no longer be able to walk into a store wearing a hood or hat, even in the dead of winter. I instructed my son that he would no longer be able to keep his hands inside his jacket pockets, even if he was cold or simply because it was comfortable. I told him that he should partake with caution in the jokes kids normally tell one another and about one another.

The behaviors I cautioned my son about are considered signs of aggression in preteens outside the center, especially in black males. Each one of these behaviors has been enough reason for a white person to shoot or kill a black person. They are examples of how white comfort takes



Here's What You Can Do

Presbyterian Women has leadership, organizational structure, resource, and general recommendations for achieving racial equity within the organization.* Presbyterian Women at all levels are challenged to

- involve more people of color using every available opportunity to realize this goal,
- employ racial equity education as part of required PW leadership training,
- conduct a triennial evaluation of the progress made,

- utilize resources created for and recommended by PW to help support change, and
- commit to read, study and implement PW's adoption to eradicate racism.

Is your PW already doing amazing things in the area of racial equity education? If so, we want to know about it! Email your story and photos to stephanie.patterson@pcusa.org.

* *Structural Review of Presbyterian Women from an Antiracist Perspective: Report and Recommendations* (July 2012).

precedence over the freedom and even basic safety of black children, youth and adults.

As I explained to my son that he was no longer able to do certain things, we talked about how these unwritten rules are unfair and unjust, and apply mostly to black youth. I told him he should still strive to love diversity as God does and love *everyone* as God intended, and that he should always look for the best in people, even if people don't care to look for the best in him.

Upon my statement to the class, the student who asked the question accused me of promoting hatred. Faced with the obvious injustice of black youth being treated with suspicion, she defaulted to white solidarity—"a form of racism wherein [white people] fail to hold [one] another accountable, to challenge racism [when witnessed], or to support people of color in the struggle for racial justice."⁶ She insisted it was only a myth that people of color had to endure prejudices such as being followed around in stores.

I was saddened by her ignorance, but realized she was part of the center of society and my truth was disrupting her sense of white equilibrium and her experience of the world. I calmly informed her that my teachings to my son were not to promote hate but to keep him out of prison and ultimately alive. Unfortunately, my telling the truth of my day-to-day existence could not convince her that what she believed to be a myth was true. It took another one of my students, a white male, to validate my story of injustices people of color experience before she would even consider my reality to be the truth.

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itself from the center; it will take a collective process to accomplish this deed. It will take a collective process of listening, believing and valuing a broader range of perspectives and experiences. But how can we rebuild the center to achieve a more diverse, multiracial center?⁷

We can begin the process as individuals, one drop in the bucket at a time, through awareness and education, then graduate to the institutional, systemic and structural layers. Racial equity does not mean giving up liberties, it simply means allowing everyone to be fully valued in society and enjoy the same liberties. 🍷

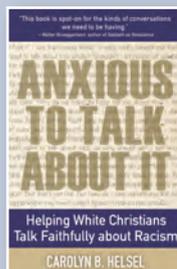
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Notes

1. Peggy McIntosh explores the dominance of whiteness in "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," which first appeared in the July/August 1989 issue of *Peace & Freedom*, the magazine of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, (Philadelphia, PA); it is also available at www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mcintosh.pdf. She describes white privilege as the unearned advantages that come to people who are white.
2. Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon), 7.
3. DiAngelo, 2.
4. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race*, Revised Edition (New York: Basic, 2017), 196.
5. National Research Council, *America Becoming: Racial Trends and Their Consequences: Volume I*, (Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2001), 44; www.nap.edu/read/9599/chapter/4.
6. DiAngelo, 58–59.
7. Jeff Hitchcock and Charley Flint, *Decentering Whiteness* (Roselle, New Jersey: Center for the Study of White American Culture, 2015), 5.

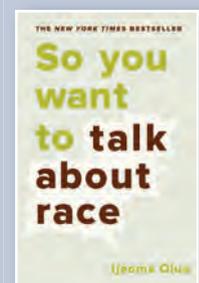
Learn More

PW recommends the following resources on racial equity:



Anxious to Talk About It: Helping White Christians Talk Faithfully about Racism by Carolyn B. Helsel (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice, 2018)

So You Want to Talk About Race by Ijeoma Oluo (New York: Seal, 2019)



For a full listing of resource recommendations from Presbyterian Women's Racial Equity Committee (REC), visit www.presbyterianwomen.org/antiracism.