

this experience. I would know that you were different—that you were not racist. I've witnessed this common reflex countless times in my work.

For example, I recently gave a talk to a group of about two hundred employees. There were no more than five people of color in their organization, and of these five, only two were African American. Over and over, I emphasized the importance of white people having racial humility and of not exempting ourselves from the unavoidable dynamics of racism. As soon as I was done speaking, a line of white people formed—ostensibly to ask me questions—but more typically to reiterate the same opinions on race they held when they had entered the room. The first in line was a white man who explained that he was Italian American and that Italians were once considered black and discriminated against, so didn't I think that white people experience racism too? That he could be in that overwhelmingly white room of coworkers, and exempt himself from an examination of his whiteness because Italians were once discriminated against is an all-too-common example of individualism. A more fruitful form of engagement (because it expands rather than protects his current worldview) would have been to consider how Italian Americans were able to become white and how that assimilation has shaped his experiences in the present as a *white man*. His claims did not illustrate that he was different from other white people when it comes to race. I can predict that many readers will make similar claims of exception precisely because we are products of our culture, not separate from it.

As a sociologist, I am quite comfortable generalizing; social life is patterned and predictable in measurable ways. But I understand that my generalizations may cause some defensiveness for the white people about whom I am generalizing, given how cherished the ideology of individualism is in our culture. There are, of course, exceptions, but patterns are recognized as such precisely because they are recurring and predictable. We cannot understand modern forms of racism if we cannot or will not explore patterns of group behavior and their effects on individuals. I ask readers to make the specific adjustments they think

are necessary to their situation, rather than reject the evidence en masse. For example, perhaps you grew up in poverty, or are an Ashkenazi Jew of European heritage, or were raised in a military family. Perhaps you grew up in Canada, Hawaii, or Germany, or had people of color in your family. None of these situations exempts you from the forces of racism, because no aspect of society is outside of these forces.

Rather than use what you see as unique about yourself as an exemption from further examination, a more fruitful approach would be to ask yourself, "I am white and I have had X experience. How did X shape me as a result of *also being white*?" Setting aside your sense of uniqueness is a critical skill that will allow you to see the big picture of the society in which we live; individualism will not. For now, try to let go of your individual narrative and grapple with the collective messages we all receive as members of a larger shared culture. Work to see how these messages have shaped your life, rather than use some aspect of your story to excuse yourself from their impact.

WE HAVE A SIMPLISTIC UNDERSTANDING OF RACISM

The final challenge we need to address is our definition of "racist." In the post-civil rights era, we have been taught that racists are mean people who intentionally dislike others because of their race; racists are immoral. Therefore, if I am saying that my readers are racist or, even worse, that all white people are racist, I am saying something deeply offensive; I am questioning my readers' very moral character. How can I make this claim when I don't even know my readers? Many of you have friends and loved ones of color, so how can you be racist? In fact, since it's racist to generalize about people according to race, I am the one being racist! So let me be clear: If your definition of a racist is someone who holds conscious dislike of people because of race, then I agree that it is offensive for me to suggest that you are racist when I don't know you. I also agree that if this is your definition of racism, and you are against racism, then you are not racist. Now breathe. I am not using this definition of racism, and I am not saying that you are immoral. If

you can remain open as I lay out my argument, it should soon begin to make sense.

In light of the challenges raised here, I expect that white readers will have moments of discomfort reading this book. This feeling may be a sign that I've managed to unsettle the racial status quo, which is my goal. The racial status quo is comfortable for white people, and we will not move forward in race relations if we remain comfortable. The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort. We can use it as a door out—blame the messenger and disregard the message. Or we can use it as a door in by asking, Why does this unsettle me? What would it mean for me if this were true? How does this lens change my understanding of racial dynamics? How can my unease help reveal the unexamined assumptions I have been making? Is it possible that because I am white, there are some racial dynamics that I can't see? Am I willing to consider that possibility? If I am not willing to do so, then why not?

If you are reading this and are still making your case for why you are different from other white people and why none of this applies to you, stop and take a breath. Now return to the questions above, and keep working through them. To interrupt white fragility, we need to build our capacity to sustain the discomfort of not knowing, the discomfort of being racially unmoored, the discomfort of racial humility. Our next task is to understand how the forces of racial socialization are constantly at play. The inability to acknowledge these forces inevitably leads to the resistance and defensiveness of white fragility. To increase the racial stamina that counters white fragility, we must reflect on the whole of our identities—and our racial group identity in particular. For white people, this means first struggling with what it means to be white.

CHAPTER 2

RACISM AND WHITE SUPREMACY

Many of us have been taught to believe that there are distinct biological and genetic differences between races. This biology accounts for visual differences such as skin color, hair texture, and eye shape, and traits that we believe we see such as sexuality, athleticism, or mathematical ability. The idea of race as a biological construct makes it easy to believe that many of the divisions we see in society are natural. But race, like gender, is socially constructed. The differences we see with our eyes—differences such as hair texture and eye color—are superficial and emerged as adaptations to geography.¹ Under the skin, there is no true biological race. The external characteristics that we use to define race are unreliable indicators of genetic variation between any two people.²

However, the belief that race and the differences associated with it are biological is deep-seated. To challenge the belief in race as biology, we need to understand the social and economic investments that drove science to organize society and its resources along racial lines and why this organization is so enduring.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RACE IN THE UNITED STATES

Freedom and equality—regardless of religion or class status—were radical new ideas when the United States was formed. At the same time, the US economy was based on the abduction and enslavement of African

unified society through the process of assimilation, is a cherished idea. Once new immigrants learn English and adapt to American culture and customs, they become Americans. In reality, only European immigrants were allowed to melt, or assimilate, into dominant culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, because, regardless of their ethnic identities, these immigrants were perceived to be white and thus could belong.

Race is a social construction, and thus who is included in the category of white changes over time. As the Italian American man from my workshop noted, European ethnic groups such as the Irish, Italian, and Polish were excluded in the past. But where they may have been originally divided in terms of origin, European immigrants became racially united through assimilation.¹⁰ This process of assimilation—speaking English, eating “American” foods, discarding customs that set them apart—reified the perception of American as white. Racial identification in the larger society plays a fundamental role in identity development, in how we see ourselves.

If we “look white,” we are treated as white in society at large. For example, people of southern European heritage, such as Spanish or Portuguese, or from the former Soviet Union, especially if they are new immigrants or were raised by immigrants, are likely to have a stronger sense of ethnic identity than will someone of the same ethnicity whose ancestors have been here for generations. Yet although their internal identity may be different, if they “pass” as white, they will still have a white experience externally. If they look white, the default assumption will be that they are white and thus they will be responded to as white. The incongruity between their internal ethnic identity (e.g., Portuguese, Spanish) and external racial experience (white) would provide a more complex or nuanced sense of identity than that of someone who doesn’t have a strong ethnic identity. However, they are still granted white status and the advantages that come with that status. Today, these advantages are de facto rather than de jure, but are nonetheless powerful in shaping our daily lives. It is on each of us who pass as white to identify how these advantages shape us, not to deny them wholesale.

Because race is a product of social forces, it has also manifested itself along class lines; poor and working-class people were not always perceived as fully white.¹¹ In a society that grants fewer opportunities to those not seen as white, economic and racial forces are inseparable. However, poor and working-class whites were eventually granted full entry into whiteness as a way to exploit labor. If poor whites were focused on feeling superior to those below them in status, they were less focused on those above. The poor and working classes, if united across race, could be a powerful force. But racial divisions have served to keep them from organizing against the owning class who profits from their labor.¹² Still, although working-class whites experience classism, they aren’t also experiencing racism. I grew up in poverty and felt a deep sense of shame about being poor. But I also always knew that I was white, and that it was better to be white.

RACISM

To understand racism, we need to first distinguish it from mere prejudice and discrimination. Prejudice is pre-judgment about another person based on the social groups to which that person belongs. Prejudice consists of thoughts and feelings, including stereotypes, attitudes, and generalizations that are based on little or no experience and then are projected onto everyone from that group. Our prejudices tend to be shared because we swim in the same cultural water and absorb the same messages.

All humans have prejudice; we cannot avoid it. If I am aware that a social group exists, I will have gained information about that group from the society around me. This information helps me make sense of the group from my cultural framework. People who claim not to be prejudiced are demonstrating a profound lack of self-awareness. Ironically, they are also demonstrating the power of socialization—we have all been taught in schools, through movies, and from family members, teachers, and clergy that it is important not to be prejudiced. Unfortunately, the prevailing belief that prejudice is bad causes us to deny its unavoidable reality.

Prejudice is foundational to understanding white fragility because suggesting that white people have racial prejudice is perceived as saying that we are bad and should be ashamed. We then feel the need to defend our character rather than explore the inevitable racial prejudices we have absorbed so that we might change them. In this way, our misunderstanding about what prejudice is protects it.

Discrimination is *action* based on prejudice. These actions include ignoring, exclusion, threats, ridicule, slander, and violence. For example, if hatred is the emotion we feel because of our prejudice, extreme acts of discrimination, such as violence, may follow. These forms of discrimination are generally clear and recognizable. But if what we feel is more subtle, such as mild discomfort, the discrimination is likely to also be subtle, even hard to detect. Most of us can acknowledge that we do feel some unease around certain groups of people, if only a heightened sense of self-consciousness. But this feeling doesn't come naturally. Our unease comes from living separate from a group of people while simultaneously absorbing incomplete or erroneous information about them. When the prejudice causes me to act differently—I am less relaxed around you or I avoid interacting with you—I am now discriminating. Prejudice always manifests itself in action because the way I see the world drives my actions in the world. Everyone has prejudice, and everyone discriminates. Given this reality, inserting the qualifier "reverse" is nonsensical.

When a racial group's collective prejudice is backed by the power of legal authority and institutional control, it is transformed into racism, a far-reaching system that functions independently from the intentions or self-images of individual actors. J. Kéhaulani Kauanui, professor of American studies and anthropology at Wesleyan University, explains, "Racism is a structure, not an event."¹³ American women's struggle for suffrage illustrates how institutional power transforms prejudice and discrimination into structures of oppression. Everyone has prejudice and discriminates, but structures of oppression go well beyond individuals. While women could be prejudiced and discriminate against men in individual interactions, women as a group could not deny men their civil

rights. But men as a group could and did deny women their civil rights. Men could do so because they controlled all the institutions. Therefore, the only way women could gain suffrage was for men to grant it to them; women could not grant suffrage to themselves.

Similarly, racism—like sexism and other forms of oppression—occurs when a racial group's prejudice is backed by legal authority and institutional control. This authority and control transforms individual prejudices into a far-reaching system that no longer depends on the good intentions of individual actors; it becomes the default of the society and is reproduced automatically. Racism is a system. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the intersection of race and gender in the example of suffrage: *white* men granted suffrage to women, but only granted full access to *white* women. Women of color were denied full access until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The system of racism begins with ideology, which refers to the big ideas that are reinforced throughout society. From birth, we are conditioned into accepting and not questioning these ideas. Ideology is reinforced across society, for example, in schools and textbooks, political speeches, movies, advertising, holiday celebrations, and words and phrases. These ideas are also reinforced through social penalties when someone questions an ideology and through the limited availability of alternative ideas. Ideologies are the frameworks through which we are taught to represent, interpret, understand, and make sense of social existence.¹⁴ Because these ideas are constantly reinforced, they are very hard to avoid believing and internalizing. Examples of ideology in the United States include individualism, the superiority of capitalism as an economic system and democracy as a political system, consumerism as a desirable lifestyle, and meritocracy (anyone can succeed if he or she works hard).

The racial ideology that circulates in the United States rationalizes racial hierarchies as the outcome of a natural order resulting from either genetics or individual effort or talent. Those who don't succeed are just not as naturally capable, deserving, or hardworking. Ideologies that obscure racism as a system of inequality are perhaps the most powerful