

## Tactical and Strategic White Racial Knowledge: What Does Whiteness Look Like?

ASDIC Notes developed from Zeus Leonardo, *Race Whiteness Education*

**A. Whiteness in performance, perspective/worldview, entitlement (behaviors associated with ways of acting in accord with *white racial knowledge*, i.e., *the white racial frame*):**

- 01) Engages in discourses of colorblindness
- 02) Displays an unwillingness to name the contours of racism
- 03) Avoids identifying with a racial experience or with a racial group
- 04) Minimizes racist legacy
- 05) Displays colonialist mindset and behaviors
- 06) Engages in behaviors of domination over others
- 07) Assumes ownership and entitlement over racialized “territories”
- 08) Transforms everything around it as an object of its domination and disposal
- 09) Engages in an obsessive pursuit of honor and status
- 10) Claims aesthetic and moral superiority with preeminent right to name and recognize and to speak on its own behalf and on the behalf of the Other
- 11) Projects its image of humanity as universal—its bodily image as ideal representative of all
- 12) Displays blindness to its own position—projects its rationalization onto all others
- 13) Insists on white normality as central reference for social organization and interpretation
- 14) Puts forth self-serving rationalizations and myths as “common sense,” universal, and normative
- 15) Converts its self-serving rationalizations, worldview, and “common sense” into law—giving them legitimacy and moral authority

*If you had to pick just one, which item in this set do you believe is in most need of attention, and why?*

**B. White Racial Knowledge:** White people use *racial knowledge* to suppress their gaining a full *racial understanding*. *White racial knowledge* is a consciousness that emerges from white people’s racial conditioning, evidence of the internalization of *the white racial frame*. What “properly” socialized white people know about race indicates they are truly not ignorant of its operations. When Leonardo describes what “whites know,” he is referring to understandings about themselves and their social world that whites who have been socialized into *white racial knowledge* receive (usually unaware, direct or indirect learning), internalize, and use as a display of *white belonging* and *social bonding*.

- 01) White people’s awareness of their own *social condition* depends on their knowing about race and racism; awareness of their social condition is given in their language and social norms.

*White social condition:* The circumstances under which whites live their lives – what happens or does not happen because they are white. What they can expect or not expect because they are white. (Peggy McIntosh’s white privilege indicators). The language and culture of the United States clearly communicate what it means to be white.

Words and signs carry encoded meaning, signifying *social condition*: hierarchy, evaluation, power, attractiveness, worth, merit, and entitlement as associated with such dichotomies as male/female, black/white/brown, North/South, European/African, suburb/urban. Awareness of the *social codes* behind words and signs allows people to observe the rules of social distance,

deference, inclusion/exclusion, belonging, recognition, and interpret and communicate from a white perspective, and it allows them to make sense of their social world conferring privilege to whites as an entitlement.

- 02) Whites disengage in activities that might lead to an in-depth understanding of the operations of race and racism; however, they do not generally seek out racial understanding.
- 03) A fundamentally superficial grasp of the history and evolution of racism better serves white interests than a deeper, more profound understanding does.
- 04) A deep engagement of race and racism by whites would limit their ability to efficiently enforce the differential treatment of people of color.
- 05) Deeply engaging with race and racism might lead to uncovering contradictions such as white benefits being unearned, arbitrary and at the expense of people of color (theft of land and labor) and such as the existence of laws and norms that advantage whites and disadvantage people of color.
- 06) Whiteness is vulnerable when knowledge about its unspoken structures is named, analyzed, and used to subvert its privileges.
- 07) Whites know where to traverse the social landscape in respect to geographical racial boundaries – they know who occupies what spaces and what assumptions are to be made about people and activities in these spaces.
- 08) Whites know how to talk about race using racially neutral or colorblind language to share their “racial views” and how to use coded language to conjure up racist images and attitudes without appearing to be racist.
- 09) Whites know how to use racist folklore of the past and present – chants, jingles, metaphors, descriptive phrases – to discipline white behavior and aesthetics toward what is culturally approved by whites in opposition to black culture.
- 10) Whites know how to speak with authority and expertise on race issues when they do not like what they hear, when what they hear goes against white interests.
- 11) Whites know how to act in a racially “acceptable” manner, knowing the racial implications of particular social interactions and what is expected of them, and knowing when to invoke “race” when it is to their interests to do so.
- 12) Whites know how to turn a personal racial confrontation about one white person’s racist performance into a generalized confrontation (racial attack) on all white people.
- 13) Whites know how to use the request for “safe-space” dialogue to demand space where the norms of whiteness are not challenged, where a challenge to whiteness becomes a threat and a violation.
- 14) Whites know how to downplay or subvert the historical record and sociological knowledge by calling it “opinion,” asserting the need to hear the “other side of the story,” or taking the general rule, the systemic or the normative pattern, as having equal weight to individual practice or experience.
- 15) Whites know how to discount the authority of the social sciences in naming and explaining social behaviors by construing sociological generalizations as determinative of the individual behavior, as though all generalizations must necessarily be true of particular white individuals (true regarding themselves as white individuals).

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### **C. White epistemology (ways of knowing, i.e., system of justifying beliefs) – the epistemology of white racial knowledge:**

- 01) Constructs the Other as an “idea” in abstract ways rather than as people in the concrete

- 02) Attempts to dodge relative scrutiny of itself as a positionality, as a morally-conditioned, socially-informed perspective
- 03) Idealizes and aggregates different peoples around the world as the same, unchanging and constant
- 04) Claims moral equivalency of differences as though differences are equal and transitive (capable of being passed from one to another without distinction)
- 05) Posits its experience as normative for all other people, all other racial groups
- 06) Holds on to a fragmented understanding (non-relational and partitioned) of racial formation (how racial formations have come to be as they are)
- 07) Resists and avoids a thorough-going analysis and interpretation of racial formation in its totality, by attending to isolated details absent the coherence of historical causation—of linkages
- 08) Attends to how things are now (status quo under white hegemony) rather than how things have come to be
- 09) Resists engaging in a thorough historical understanding of how whites came to be in a position of power
- 10) Focuses on individual merit, exceptionalism, or hard work as explanations for white hegemony (ascendancy over other groups)
- 11) Engages in exercises of willful ignorance and systematic distortion of communication using tactics such as detours, evasions, distractions of taking offence and being hurt, displacement of the problem, disingenuous comparisons, and various strategies to accomplish “not getting the point”—and therefore not being responsible

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#### **D. Operational definitions and functioning of white racial knowledge:**

- 01) White people's epistemological framework (knowledge system) is not determined by their having “white” bodies, although there is certainly a preponderance of white people who interpret social life through “white racial knowledge” (through “whiteness” as an ideology) given their life-long socialization experiences
- 02) White racial knowledge is an epistemology (system of knowledge) of the oppressor to the extent that it suppresses knowledge of its own conditions of existence
- 03) White racial knowledge is a mediated knowledge, the “real” is mediated through a racial frame; in this, race may serve as a medium for interpreting reality (race serving as an organizing principle or as a structuring structure), i.e., the “real” is determined by, interpreted by means of the *white racial frame*. The “real” is perceived as synonymous with white framed perspectives. (Feagin 2010)
- 04) See below for a fuller explanation of the *white racial frame* and other key concepts.
- 05) Within *whiteness* (white ideology), race serves as a structuring principle consisting of pre-given assumptions that inform people how their world is constructed (the *white racial frame*)
- 06) Within *whiteness* (white ideology), pre-given racial assumptions surface in dichotomies, coherences, repetitions (patterns), and rationales
- 07) When groups are involved in relations of oppression, the beneficiaries of their structures perpetuate a system whereby they are absolved of any holistic understanding of its processes
- 08) Within *whiteness* (white ideology), whites have had the luxury to neglect their own development of *racial understanding* (i.e., the understanding of systemic, structural racism, its historical origins, purposes, modes of operation, contemporary manifestations, and enduring effects and consequences). *Racial understanding* should not be confused with racial knowledge (knowledge that serves the collective racial interests of whites – a knowledge often not articulated)

- 09) In operating within the ideology of *whiteness*, whites' unspoken racial knowledge works as a barrier to antiracist education because it denies the reality of racism and it maintains the invisibility of whiteness as a racial identity
- 10) When operating within the ideology of *whiteness*, whites forego a critical understanding of race because their structural position is both informed by and depends on a fundamentally superficial grasp of its history and evolution
- 11) White racial knowledge fails to ask why history worked out the way it did—what actions white Europeans took to secure their domination and to secure the hegemonic assumptions about the goodness of whiteness in everyday discourse

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**E. White people breaking the grip of white racial knowledge:**

- 01) Even though the racial interests of white people are best served by a superficial grasp of the history and evolution of *whiteness*, they have the capacity to come to a realization of their position of privilege
- 02) Whites may come to an understanding of the meaning of their racial position and privilege through life events that “pull them up short” – through life events that interrupt their lives and challenge their self-understanding in ways that are painful but transforming
- 03) While certainly a powerful influence on one's epistemology, one's structural position does not determine how a person ultimately makes sense of that structure
- 04) White people have some choices to make regarding how they will come to know the world
- 05) White people may come to know the world through the historical experiences of people of color as one option informing white knowing
- 06) White people may create a counter-community centered around understanding the problem of *whiteness* (white racial ideology) and rejecting *whiteness* and the effects of white racial knowledge
- 07) Whites and their people of color allies may create conditions for whites to draw from “connected knowledge” achieved through recounting direct and indirect experiences—approximations of the experiences of people of color—that aid whites in interpreting or relating to the oppression of people of color. (Joe R. Feagin 2000, 1995—this and the following)
- 08) Borrowed approximations: relying on stories that people of color tell of themselves to make sense of black and people of color experience.
- 09) Global approximations: relying on general humanism and values of fairness to relate to black/people of color experience.
- 10) Overlapping approximations: relying on aspects of one's own oppression to make sense of similar black/people of color experience.

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