

white people

A Discussion Guide



White People: A Discussion Guide

What does it mean to be white?

MTV's "White People" is a groundbreaking documentary on race that aims to answer that question from the viewpoint of young white people living in America today. The film follows Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas as he travels across the country to get this complicated conversation started. "White People" asks what's fair when it comes to affirmative action, if colorblindness is a good thing, what white privilege really means, and what it's like to become the "white minority" in your neighborhood.

This discussion guide is meant to help lead a conversation before and after viewing the film. After the opening activity, you can watch the whole film and discuss the topics in each section in order. If your time is limited, you can pick and choose the topics that are most relevant for you and only view the related segments of the documentary.

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Before Viewing the Film

OPENING ACTIVITY: DEFINING TRAIT: “WHO ARE YOU?”

- ABOUT

Write down five aspects of identity that you feel identify you most strongly right now (can be anything from “Latino” to “sister” to “soccer player” to “queer.”) Once you are all ready, cross off the one that is least important to you. Repeat until you are left with one word. Share what that word is, and why.

- WHY

Often times, people of color or those experiencing oppression identify themselves more strongly with that part of them than their counterparts in the majority or “dominant” group. For example, it is more common for a person of color to identify strongly with their race than it is for a white person to feel that whiteness is their most defining trait. This activity may spark a conversation among viewers about privilege in the sense of not constantly being aware of one’s identity, or what makes them “different.”

After Viewing the Film or Select Segments of the Film

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS:

- What are your first reactions after watching the film?
- What feelings emerged for you?

WHITENESS AND RACE:
What is Whiteness?

- **DESCRIPTION**

This section introduces the concept of whiteness and race as a social construct. It also discusses how whiteness has changed over time and explores the topic of “colorblindness.”

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENTS**

[Full documentary](#)

- **WHAT IS WHITENESS?**

Race isn’t biological – it’s a social construct that exists based on everyone in a community accepting it, and is usually created by the dominant group. But “just because race isn’t something biological, that doesn’t mean it’s not real.” People are treated differently based on their race. In the United States, that means white people are often given unearned advantages.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [whiteness](#), [racial identity](#), [racial microaggressions](#), [white privilege](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- At the beginning of the film, Jose says “white is not a country.” Another student says that white is the “default” race. Later, Dakota says that he “doesn’t see people of any kind of race” in his town – “only white.” What does “white” mean to you?
- Do you think the definition of whiteness has changed over time? If so, how?
- What does being “colorblind” mean to you?
- Do you think being “colorblind” – in other words, not “noticing” or acknowledging racial differences – is a goal we should strive for, or is it “running away from racial issues” as mentioned in the film? Please explain.
- How do racial issues surface in your everyday life?
- What are some scenarios in which you think you might have been treated differently if you were of another race? Why?

IMPACT OF RACISM ON WHITE PEOPLE:
Are white people hurt by racism?

- **DESCRIPTION**

This section talks about the ways that racism impacts white people, for example the psychological impact of living within a racist society, the way that racism impairs white people and people of color from having meaningful relationships, etc.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENTS**

[Katy](#), [Samantha](#), [Dakota](#)

- **WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF RACISM ON WHITE PEOPLE?**

There are a number of ways that racism impacts white people as well as people of color. It can make it harder for white people and people of color to form authentic friendships across race and have open conversations, since white privilege can make white people feel uncomfortable or guilty when talking about race with people of color and can cause people of color to feel unsafe and not be their authentic selves. Fighting racism can have a liberating effect on white people as well, as it helps them be less bound by race-based stereotypes and fears. For more on how white people can be an ally, click [here](#).

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Have you seen how racism impacts white people? How so?
- In the film, Dakota has never introduced his black friends from school to his white friends from home.
- Why do you think he had not introduced them?
- What happened when he did finally introduce them? Were you surprised by what happened? Why or why not?
- Have you ever felt race issues prevented you from developing friendships with people of another race? Please explain.

CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS:

How do changing demographics impact our society?

- **DESCRIPTION**

In some communities, demographics are shifting rapidly and historically white communities are becoming majority non-white; similarly, sometimes white people choose to be in communities where they're in the minority. This section helps explain why white people who are in the minority are not likely to become a disenfranchised group and explains the positives of the demographic shift.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENTS**

[Sam](#), [Dakota](#), [John](#)

- **WHAT ARE CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS?**

Changing demographics mean that, in many parts of the country, the racial makeup of neighborhoods is evolving. In the next few decades, America will become a “majority-minority” nation, with more people of color than white people – and that shift is happening within the next few years for people under eighteen. Increases in interracial marriages, immigration, and births among people of color are some of the causes of this shift.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [majority-minority shift](#), [immigration](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Early in the documentary, Jose Antonio Vargas discloses his status as an undocumented American. Were you surprised that an Asian person could be an immigrant without papers? Do you associate being undocumented with a specific personality or nationality?
- Were you surprised to hear the projection that in three decades, whites in America will become the minority? As Jose explains, in 2014, white people made up less than half of the U.S. public school population. How do you think that growing up in a more racially diverse generation will impact racial attitudes in the years to come? Do you think it will change power and racial dynamics? How so?
- In the bakery in Bensonhurst, Jose speaks with a young woman who points out that 100 years ago, the Italians, Jews and Irish were the newcomers to the U.S. and weren't seen as “white” until their cultural and linguistic assimilation a generation later. How can looking at immigration waves of the past help us view and manage “melting pot tensions” today? What did the young man mean when he suggested they are “growing pains”?

- John from Bensonhurst expresses frustration at being unable to communicate with recent immigrants to his community. What are some ways people can reach out to and connect with people who don't speak English?
- In describing the growing Chinese population in their community in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, John's mom says "there's us, then there's them." John's dad admits that it's frustrating for him that many people in the neighborhood don't speak English, but he later describes his difficulty in coming to the U.S. at age 5, not knowing how to speak English. He says, "It happens to every nationality" (when they arrive in the United States). How does this resonate with your experience? How can we use our own stories and cultural histories to foster empathy for others?
- What are the ways in which white people still have power even if they're in the minority in a community?
- If you are currently in the racial majority in your community but it changed tomorrow so that 50% of the people were a different race than you, would you stay there? Please explain.

“REVERSE RACISM”:

Can white people experience racism?

- **DESCRIPTION**

Some young people believe that people of color can be racist against white people. In this section, we explain that even though people of color can participate in individual acts of bias, racism inherently references the power structure that allows the dominant group to oppress the disempowered group.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENTS**

[Dakota](#), [Sam](#)

- **WHAT IS REVERSE RACISM?**

“Reverse racism” generally refers to the concept of people of color being racist against white people. Though people of color can participate in individual acts of bias and prejudice against white people, white people are free from the systemic discrimination that people of color often face. In order for racism to truly exist against a group, that group must experience racial discrimination resulting from their lack of access to the power structure, not only individual biased acts. This lack of structural equity can play out in a variety of settings for people of color such as housing, education and the justice system.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [reverse racism](#), [racial stereotypes](#);
talking tips on [racial slurs](#), [racial stereotypes](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What are some settings in which people of color have more or less structural power than white people?
- What are some reasons individual acts of discrimination might be less problematic than structural discrimination?
- Sam introduces us to the term “Wasichu”, which is Lakota for “he who takes the best meat.” On the Oglala Sioux reservation in Wanblee, South Dakota where she lives, the Native American population uses the term to refer to white people. Why do you think this term is used to describe white people? One of her students said that she wouldn’t use the term because she was raised not to be “racist.” Is there a difference between racial slurs against white people and those against people of color? Why or why not?
- Are there reasons biased comments against white people might have a different impact than biased comments against people of color?

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION:
Is affirmative action fair?

- **DESCRIPTION**

This section sets out a definition of affirmative action and discusses the historical reasons for it coming into being, as well as explaining why it's still important.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENT**

[Katy](#)

- **WHAT IS AFFIRMATIVE ACTION?**

Affirmative action is defined as “a set of procedures designed to eliminate unlawful discrimination between applicants, remedy the results of such prior discrimination, and prevent such discrimination in the future.” Affirmative action is generally a goal, [not a quota system](#). It doesn't mean being partial, but rather means to treat candidates fairly and equally.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [affirmative action](#);
talking tips on [affirmative action](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What do you think about policies intended to eliminate unlawful discrimination and remedy historical unfairness?
- Despite the statistics that Jose presents, why do you think Katy and so many other young white people feel discriminated against when searching for college scholarships?
- Do you think white people can benefit from more diversity in schools and in places of work? How so?

WHITE PRIVILEGE:

What does it mean to be privileged?

- **DESCRIPTION**

This section will explain the ways in which everyone has unearned advantages and disadvantages, discuss how white privilege specifically works, and explain how people with privilege can use their privilege to impact individuals and society.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENT**

[Lucas](#)

- **WHAT IS WHITE PRIVILEGE?**

White privilege is not something that people necessarily do, create or take advantage of on purpose. Centuries of being the dominant group has led to many personal and structural advantages for white people that most aren't even aware they have.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [white privilege](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Do you feel you have advantages or disadvantages based on your race, gender, sexual orientation or any other factors? How so? How have they impacted your life?
- Do you think white people have advantages that people of color don't have? What are those advantages?
- Discussing white privilege at dinner with Jose and his parents, Lucas suggests that it doesn't make sense for white people to feel bad about being white and the privileges that come along with that – that white people can't change their experience (of being white and having privilege), they can only change what they do with that experience. If you are white, do you think you should identify your privileges and how they impact your life? Why or why not?
- How did you feel when Lucas' stepdad says that experiencing Lucas' white privilege workshop didn't change his feelings about being white? Why do you think that is?
- If you have white privilege, how can you [use your privilege](#) to impact individuals and society?

INDIGENOUS ISSUES:

How do Native Americans experience whiteness?

- **DESCRIPTION**

This section will explain the unique ways that Native Americans experience whiteness and talk about the historical impact of whiteness on Native Americans.

- **KEY VIDEO SEGMENT**

[Samantha](#)

- **WHAT ARE INDIGENOUS ISSUES?**

Native Americans (or Indigenous people), along with their traditions, languages, and religious practices, often face threats from mainstream society in the form of [cultural appropriation](#) and [current state laws](#) and policies that give little regard to Indigenous concerns. Additionally, Indigenous people are often underrepresented in media and in our understanding of American history.

- **MORE RESOURCES**

learn more about [cultural appropriation](#)

- **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- Some of Sam’s students make the point that the U.S. history taught in schools is often one-sided; that taught instead should be “all of U.S. history.” How do you think that what you learned in school shaped your views about this country? How should we decide what parts of history to teach?
- Have you seen people pick and use elements of Native Americans culture or their symbols in your community without permission? What do you think about “cultural appropriation”?
- What do you think white people can do to honor Native American history and culture?

- **CLOSING QUESTIONS**

- What stood out for you most when watching the film?
- What did you learn?
- How has watching “White People” changed the way you view the topic of race in America?

Additional activities after viewing and discussing the film

TALK TO YOUR FAMILY ABOUT RACE.

- Check out some talking tips on race and privilege and start a conversation with the people in your life: [See That, Say This](#)

UNCOVER YOUR PRIVILEGE.

- Want to see how privilege can impact a day in your life? Take the “Different Day” [quiz](#). Take the quiz a second time, but this time imagine you are someone of another race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.

LEARN HOW TO USE YOUR PRIVILEGE.

- Check out [these tips](#) for using your privilege to positively impact individuals and society.

SEE HOW IT FEELS TO EXPERIENCE RACIAL MICROAGGRESSIONS.

- Watch these videos showing what it feels like to hear a racial microaggression:

[Your English is so good](#)

[You don't look Jewish](#)

[What's up, Bin Laden?](#)

[You're pretty for a dark girl](#)

[How'd you get into that school?](#)

[You're different for a black guy](#)

[I can't tell Asians apart](#)

UNCOVER YOUR IMPLICIT BIAS.

- Take an [Implicit Bias Quiz](#) to see what hidden biases you may have.

FIND OUT HOW TO WORK ON YOUR BIASES.

- Sign up for a seven-day [racial bias cleanse](#) that will provide you with daily tasks to help you begin to de-bias yourself.

JOIN A CONVERSATION ABOUT PRIVILEGE AND BIAS.

- Check out [Look Deeper](#), a safe space for the conversations you want to have about bias in pop culture, the news, and in your own lives.

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF “WHITENESS” IN THE U.S.

- There are tons of great resources out there, but you can start with this documentary: [Race: The Power of an Illusion](#)

SHARE STATS ON RACIAL BIAS.

- Take a look at the Look Different [research study](#) and share some knowledge with your friends.

PARTICIPATE IN ADDITIONAL ANTI-BIAS EDUCATION

- Check out [educational resources](#) from the Anti-Defamation League, a leading civil rights organization.

For more information, join the conversation at:

race.lookdifferent.org

MTV’s Emmy-Award winning “Look Different” campaign helps America’s youth better recognize and challenge hidden racial, gender and anti-LGBT biases, empowering them to create a more equal future. To support our audience in reaching towards a world without prejudice, MTV has built a coalition of the foremost authorities and is tackling this issue on all of our platforms, including on-air programming, social media engagement, innovative digital tools and much more. To date, over a million actions have been taken by young people nationwide as part of Look Different.

defineamerican.com

Define American is a media and culture organization using the power of stories to transcend politics and shift the conversation around immigrants, identity and citizenship in a changing America. It was founded by Jose Antonio Vargas in 2011. For more information, visit

defineamerican.com.

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