

Why 'white' isn't a racist slur

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Language operates and affects people in profoundly different ways, bestowing power upon minorities through their reclamation of words that were otherwise used to demean them, or deployed effectively to typecast and dehumanise.



I hung out with a group of Indian-Australians while I was a first-year university student who called themselves 'curries', but the unspoken camaraderie and deep sense of pride that ensued from this self-identification stood in stark contrast to that time I was called a 'fucking curry' by a passing car full of white people.

It is commonly understood why Indian-Australians are able to call themselves 'curries', while white people and, to a certain extent, other minorities are not — the desire to subvert the narrative and a shared understanding of the nuanced ways in which one can be an Indian-Australian allows this cultural group to reclaim the word without further entrenching negative stereotypes.

Yet you often hear from white people, even the seemingly progressive ones, that they can't be called 'white' because that too is racist language. This reflects a flawed assumption that societal structures advantage and disadvantage people in the exact same way, and that we operate on a level playing field.

To be white is to not face the same tangible repercussions that come with being a person of colour in Australia. White people aren't asked 'what's the deal with white people?' and 'are they all the same?' by one of Australia's most renowned breakfast radio hosts. White celebrities aren't told to 'leave the country' or called 'un-Australian' when they dare question the hypocrisy of certain national celebrations. White people have never had their skin colour co-opted in the spirit of a Halloween costume, harking back to a deeply corrosive history of whiteface minstrelsy, and had their ensuing outrage demonised as 'batshit crazy' by a multimillion dollar media mogul.

White people don't suffer material disadvantages by virtue of being white, which extend to resume-based discrimination in the labour market, prejudice in the criminal justice system, education apartheid, disproportionately high incarceration rates and lower life expectancies.

Of course, whiteness often intersects with womanhood, lower socioeconomic status, queerness and disability, so it would be a misnomer to paint the realities of all white people with a broad brushstroke. But the identifier 'white', in and of itself, can't be considered derogatory within a framework that serves to protect and further the interests of white people at its every juncture.

"Racism doesn't occur when one person says something offensive or mean to another person. Racism occurs when there is privilege and power."

As American feminist Peggy McIntosh adroitly summarises in her 1989 piece 'White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack', being white means many things, but none of them are bad. It means seemingly inconsequential things like being able to find a 'skin-colour' band-aid in a way that legitimises your primacy in the world, to more fundamental privileges like being able to turn on your TV or open to the front page of the paper and see your race widely represented and never being asked to speak for all the people of your racial group. It means remaining oblivious to the language and customs of people of colour, who constitute the world's majority, without feeling any penalty for such oblivion because the irreversible effects of colonialism continue to play out through structures that actively exclude minorities. Historical context matters.

Moreover, racism doesn't occur when one person says something offensive or mean to another person. Racism occurs when there is privilege and power. McIntosh writes about how she'd been taught to decode racism in the context of the individual, instead of the societal structures that are reinforced and consolidated by virtue of its transgression. 'I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognise racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.'

In episode five of Netflix original comedy-drama series *Dear White People* (see main image), a fight breaks out between African American character Reggie and a white student after the latter sings along to every word in Future's *Trap Niggas*, including the n-word.

Reggie: It felt kind of weird to hear you say it. I mean, how would you feel if I started rapping to songs, you know, that say 'honky' and 'cracker'?

White student: I wouldn't care at all.

Reggie: Exactly, that's the difference. The fact that you don't care and that I do.

The words 'honky' and 'cracker' and to a lesser extent 'white' will only become racist words when they sit within a system that disadvantages white people based on their race. And when has that ever happened?

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