

'Whiteness' is more than just someone's skin colour

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"When we talk about 'white people', we are not really talking about skin colour but about those who most benefit from whiteness." Photo: Getty

Race has never been more prominent in our national discourse than it is right now. But social progress always garners backlash and anti-racism is no exception.

From denial of white privilege to accusations that pointing out racism is itself racist towards white people, to the myth of the 'race card', much of this defensiveness stems from a misunderstanding of what is meant by the terms 'white' and 'whiteness'.

Historically, colonialism and imperialism involved the imposition of the values of white-skinned Europeans by force. Together, they firmly entrenched the European way of life as the benchmark by which others are judged (and found inferior). Social, legal, and political systems that privileged white Europeans and their descendents over all others were created and rigorously enforced.



An angry crowd on the move at North Cronulla beach in December, 2005.

These systems are what we refer to as 'whiteness'. As Paul Kivel writes, over time whiteness has become "a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white."

Whiteness is more than skin colour; it is the privileging of those racial, cultural and religious identities that most resemble the typical characteristics associated with white Europeans. Privileges include (but are not limited to) not being discriminated against in employment and education, being less likely to be arrested for the same behaviour, and being adequately represented in all forms of popular media.

Consequently, the terms 'white' and 'people of colour' are not merely descriptive – they are political. When we talk about 'white people', we are not really talking about skin colour but about those who most benefit from whiteness. Correspondingly, when we talk about 'people of colour', we talk about those who are most excluded.

As Kivel indicates, who is and is not 'white' has changed over time.

Despite their pale skin, the Irish were once regarded to be not 'white' but as an inferior race not far above apes. The victims of shocking racism and discrimination in Europe and the US, they were called disparaging terms such as "white chimpanzee" and "n**ers turned inside out."

Likewise, Armenians, Poles and Slavs were also considered not 'real' white people. Jews were firmly and violently excluded from whiteness until the full extent of their persecution by the Nazis became known. Once regarded as the ultimate 'other', and depicted in popular literature as vampires, blood-suckers, witches, thieves, and eaters of Christian babies, they were then welcomed into the fold as the west's Christian heritage expanded to become its Judeo-Christian heritage.

In the US, Asians - frequently called a 'model minority' - are now more likely to be grouped with white people than with other racial minorities. Meanwhile, in Australia, Italians and Greeks - although permitted entry under the White Australia Policy - were racialised and disparaged once they arrived. By the early '90s, however, they were held up as a beacon of how immigrants should be, as the focus of ire shifted to Muslims.

These days, nowhere is the fluidity of whiteness more readily apparent than in the current hand wringing over the Syrian refugee crisis. Last week, senior government ministers openly stated they would favour Christian Syrians seeking refuge in Australia. Couched in terms of prioritising 'persecuted minorities', this is a testament to the shifting boundary separating the acceptable from the undesirable.

Syrians are Arabs, a racial identity that is generally positioned at odds with whiteness. However, because Christianity is a western religion - the one against which all others are compared - Christian Syrians are entitled to privileges that other Syrians remain excluded from.

Of course, this is based on a falsehood. Christians are no more at risk in Syria than other religious, ethnic, or racial groups. Indeed, if we are going to put compassion aside and only welcome those who are in danger of being eradicated, it makes more sense to prioritise Yazidis, Alawites, and Kurds since they do not have a significant presence outside the region. Christians, on the other hand, form the bulk of the world's population.

The focus on Christian Syrians is less about their persecution and more about their Christianity, a religious identity permanently entwined with and privileged by whiteness. In other words, they become de facto 'whites'.

The sudden obsession with 'saving' Syria's Christians has unleashed a tide of media commentary harking back to the glory days of Orientalism, as white men sagely outline all the reasons why it is morally permissible to leave Muslims to suffer and die in conflict zones. This is White Australia under another name.

This is also why it is imperative to know exactly what we are talking about when we talk about whiteness. Somehow it has becoming tolerable to say things about Muslims that would have been unacceptable even just a few months ago.

When people of colour talk about whiteness we are neither isolating individual white people, nor judging them on the colour of their skin. Rather, we are drawing attention to the social structures that privilege white-skinned individuals. We are challenging the system that allows the inclusion of those who share the most common characteristics with white people and the exclusion of those who do not.

Being white doesn't necessarily mean you personally have economic or political power or that your life is easy. It doesn't mean you don't suffer disadvantages in other areas or that you haven't had to work hard to succeed. It simply means that your racial identity is not othered and despised.

And, as demonstrated by the case of Syrian refugees, it means you are often prioritised over others who are no less needy or deserving of help.