

# An Open Letter to University of Minnesota Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior Faculty about Diversity and Inclusion

from the EEB Graduate Students and Postdoctoral Associates

*June 24, 2020*

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To the UMN Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior Faculty,

We, the undersigned graduate students and postdocs in the Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Behavior (EEB), are writing today in reflection on the events of the past two weeks. Our intent in this letter is to **provide context for our response** on #ShutDownSTEM day and **justify the manner of our critique**, which may have seemed abrasive to some. We then **describe our initial goals** for moving forward. Finally, we **introduce a framework** to guide the EEB community in sustained anti-racism work.

## **Context**

The department-level response to the murder of George Floyd, as communicated via emails from department leadership, was a catalyst that crystallized long-standing frustrations in the graduate student and postdoc community. Persistent instances of discriminatory behavior and [racism](#) within our department are chief among these frustrations<sup>1</sup>, which occur despite the fact that, over the past five years, graduate students and EEB faculty have led initiatives to make our department more inclusive ([Table 1](#)) and build community more generally ([Table 2](#)). Most of these efforts have been uncompensated. Furthermore, many of these initiatives faced faculty apathy (e.g., BREWS seminars, ethics seminars) or active opposition (e.g., Welcome Week schedule changes). More importantly, these initiatives have not eradicated racism or succeeded in making our department a fully inclusive space. It has become clear to us that existing structures within our department fail to hold our community accountable for perpetuating systemic injustices. In addition to the chronic stress from these conditions, we are all dealing with the acute stress brought about by the murder of George Floyd in an already uncertain environment caused by COVID-19<sup>2</sup>. These concerns weigh particularly on Black graduate students and postdocs, who face the reality of a virus that disproportionately affects and kills members of Black communities in the U.S.<sup>3</sup> on top of systemic anti-Blackness in academia and society<sup>4,5</sup>. We had been drafting letters to address these issues before #ShutDownSTEM day, but when we received an email touting our program's successes in diversifying EEB and suggesting that faculty are unaware of the challenges that still persist, we felt it was necessary to respond at once.

## **The necessity of collective action**

The emails and testimonies shared by graduate students and postdocs within EEB on the 'reply-all' email chain<sup>6</sup> reflect both our concerns and the imperative to express them collectively. Despite the oft-expressed desire of the faculty to talk one-on-one or in lab groups, we believe that, given the inherent [power differentials](#) in academia, the only safe and effective avenue for us to voice our concerns is through shared protest. If we push too hard against the status quo, we risk jeopardizing our relationships with our advisors, committee members, and mentors—and thus our future career opportunities.

We acknowledge that our collective email response was perceived by some as being overly confrontational. We understand that the email chain may have left you feeling attacked and

discouraged. We ask you to understand why such action was *necessary*. Our collective email response, in solidarity with those students directly impacted by racism in our department, aimed to ensure that animosity or retribution would not be unequally cast upon those who spoke up. It also reflects the inadequacy of current structures to handle fears of retaliation for speaking out about racism. The surprise the faculty members expressed at the existence and scope of our grievances provides further evidence that our concerns had not been heard when communicated in less confrontational ways. **Our goal was to raise awareness of issues that had long gone ignored in order to force change.**

### **A call to action**

While every member of EEB has a responsibility to contribute to a culture of [anti-racism](#), faculty are uniquely positioned to be leaders in these efforts, and we call on you to do so now. Compared to undergraduate students, graduate students, postdocs, and staff, faculty—especially tenured faculty—are relatively permanent members of the EEB community with much greater power, security, and institutional knowledge. We understand that faculty are not exempt from research setbacks, career and personal stress, or power differentials. We acknowledge that, in the current conditions of academia, anti-racism work is strongly under-valued compared to research achievements particularly for faculty advancement and tenure. Nonetheless, it is imperative that faculty personally invest in building anti-racist consciousness, as a critical part of their work both as mentors and members of a diverse University of Minnesota and Twin Cities community. To us, it is clear that everyone—especially faculty—must engage in this work if we are to produce changes in our department that go beyond metrics of diversity to achieve *justice*.

### **Initial goals for moving forward**

From here, we will be pursuing three immediate actions:

- (1) **Participate in a series of mediated department-wide conversations.** We have asked department leadership to hire a mediator from outside of EEB who will remain a neutral party during upcoming open discussions. We are also working with department leadership and the Graduate School Diversity Office to provide a workshop for faculty on white privilege, white fragility, and how even well-meaning people perpetuate racism in academia.
- (2) **Establish the Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Action (IDEA) taskforce.** This will be composed of faculty, graduate student and postdoc representatives who will channel the immediate concerns of graduate students and postdocs into more concrete steps for moving forward.
- (3) **Hire a dedicated Diversity and Inclusion Officer for the College of Biological Sciences.** A Diversity and Inclusion Officer within the College of Biological Sciences would provide expertise and resources to help faculty navigate these issues without putting extra work on graduate students. They can guide and support efforts across the college to promote equity

and inclusion, including identifying and addressing college-level barriers. This Officer would also provide a channel to air grievances outside of the power structures of EEB and would act as a college-level advocate to hold all members of our department accountable for change. This position exists in several other colleges at the University of Minnesota, including the College of Food, Agriculture and Natural Resource Sciences and the School of Nursing.

We believe that these actions will put us on a path to progress together, but the work will not end there. To facilitate future work, we identify four essential pillars for sustained anti-racist work: Self-Awareness, Action, Accountability, and Support (SAAS).

### **SAAS: A framework for anti-racism in EEB**

The purpose of this framework is to identify the barriers that have prevented effective action in the past and provide broad guidance for overcoming those barriers. While we realize that you may have been hoping for a list of specific, actionable items, we do not provide such a list at this time for two major reasons. First, developing a comprehensive list of *effective* actionable items will require collaboration between graduate students, postdocs, and faculty, as well as a significant amount of time and labor. Secondly, and crucially, collectively developing effective actionable items that address [systemic racism](#) is not possible until we recognize the attitudes and behaviors in ourselves and others that perpetuate systemic racism. The fundamental systemic change we demand cannot simply be ticked off a checklist.

#### **Self-Awareness**

We emphasize that internal work is just as critical as discrete action items and is a prerequisite for structural change. While many individuals in the department acknowledge that [institutional racism](#) and anti-Blackness are present in STEM more broadly and in our field in particular, we find a frustrating lack of awareness of [individual racism](#) and anti-Blackness within our own department. For example, the gradSERU results highlighted that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) did not feel supported in CBS and especially not in EEB ([Figure 1](#)). Recent events suggest that many faculty either cannot recognize anti-Black comments or actions, or they do not know how to respond when they occur. Recent events have also revealed symptoms of [white fragility](#) among the faculty and a lack of awareness of [power differentials](#). Inadvertently, this lack of awareness results in even well-meaning faculty causing harm either by 1) failing to recognize when students need their vocal support, 2) shutting down healthy and active discussion because the topic of discussion may cause discomfort, or 3) policing the channels and the tone of communication in such a way that silences BIPOC students in particular. The voices of BIPOC students are constrained when the only available channels of communication are uncomfortable or hostile to them (oral confrontations), reinforce power dynamics (one-on-one talks between students and faculty), or require additional emotional labor.

Therefore, **efforts to improve the department culture must involve increasing awareness of racist and anti-Black comments and actions both in yourself and in your colleagues.**

We can increase our self-awareness by identifying the ways in which racism and [white supremacy](#) manifest in our own actions and words. Improving department culture also requires awareness of the presence of [white supremacy culture](#) in EEB and academia as a whole<sup>7</sup>. Without this kind of humble introspection, the most well-intended responses will likely be insensitive or counterproductive. Real change requires meaningful self-involvement and reflection from all members of the community. Building an understanding of how we as individuals contribute to the system will lead to deeper, more meaningful solutions.

### Action

As mentioned in emails from #ShutDownSTEM day, many of the initiatives highlighted were the products of unpaid graduate student labor within the past 5 years ([Table 1](#)). BIPOC students in particular have often undertaken this work because they feel the need to improve the graduate and postdoc experience for themselves and future trainees like them. However, this labor is emotionally exhausting and often thankless work, at least until it has become successful enough for the department to acknowledge it. This is inherently exploitative of our most vulnerable students. **The graduate students and postdocs ask that faculty members engage equally with us as [allies](#) to improve the experience of all individuals in the department**, especially BIPOC undergraduate and graduate students, postdocs, and (future) faculty members.

Historically, actions in our department have focused on *recruiting* BIPOC students rather than *retaining* or supporting them ([Table 1](#)). Actions geared solely at increasing recruitment ignore what makes academia difficult for BIPOC students and especially Black students. By focusing primarily on recruitment, faculty and the department also circumvent the need for critical self-reflection about how they contribute to an unwelcoming and hostile environment for BIPOC colleagues. This instinct further puts the burden on ‘diverse’ members of the academic community to solve racism and ignores the fact that racism stems from whiteness<sup>8</sup>.

Collaboration between faculty, students and postdocs will balance the need for student and postdoc perspectives and experiences to accurately address problems in our department, while more equitably distributing the work and increasing the range and scope of actions that can be taken.

### Accountability

Graduate students and postdocs expect new systems of accountability to ensure that all members of the department are engaging meaningfully in anti-racist work, and to ensure that those who commit acts of racism or act in [collusion](#) against anti-racist work (intentionally or unintentionally) are held accountable. We cannot afford a lack of accountability as it ensures that some faculty will persist in their passivity. Those who fail to engage in anti-racism work undermine the work of others by being complicit in or perpetuating racist attitudes or activities. We urge the faculty to **find a way to hold accountable those who are unwilling to do the necessary anti-racist work**. Additionally, instances of racism in the department have highlighted the institutional inability to hold tenured faculty in particular accountable for racist

actions and attitudes. We request that the **establishment of a safe and confidential reporting system** for tracking and addressing incidences of racism be a priority of our work going forward. We emphasize the importance of a transparent and effective protocol for addressing these incidents; collecting incident reports and then not acting on them gives the appearance of action without actually creating consequences for racist behavior.

### **Support**

The success of well-supported recruitment efforts demonstrates that adequate support for diversity and equity initiatives is effective. For us to be able to effectively engage in the important work of improving our community, all members of EEB—faculty, postdocs, graduate students, and undergraduate students—require both community and institutional support. Community support should include a retaliation-free and receptive space for meaningful engagement around shared experiences and anti-racism issues. The graduate students' most urgent expectation as far as institutional support is compensation and credit for the time- and emotionally-intensive labor they undertake to support departmental diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. We can no longer allow EEB to exploit its graduate students' labor and sense of obligation.

In addition to supporting graduate student labor directed at anti-racist work, we also call for better support for faculty directly responsible for dealing with student affairs. We recognize that the labor of the Director of Graduate Studies, Director of Graduate Admissions, and the Director of Undergraduate Studies falls on people who already have many other commitments, which often prevent them from devoting all the time and energy they might want to student affairs. Despite these limitations, faculty who have held these positions have initiated many actions towards social justice and equity ([Table 1](#)). To encourage faculty who hold these positions to dedicate more time to students, the department could provide better compensation in the form of course releases and relief from other committee appointments. We strongly believe that providing faculty proper compensation for their labor by redirecting funds would signal that the department prioritizes this work and will further strengthen our community by providing faculty with dedicated time and resources for their work. **We invite the faculty to strategize with us about how to incentivize graduate student, postdoc, and faculty labor directed at anti-racist and social justice in the department as well as in academia.**

### **Conclusion**

At this time, we urge faculty to prioritize the perspectives being shared by BIPOC students. We also urge you to control any instincts to criticize graduate students and postdocs, especially BIPOC graduate students and postdocs, for not being 'constructive' and 'respectful.' The channels deemed by you to be 'constructive' and 'respectful' have so far proved ineffective both at communicating problems and at solving them, leaving us no choice but to bring them to your attention in a way that could not be ignored. **We ask you to trust that we bring our grievances to you in good faith and with the hope that you will help us solve them**

**together.** Rather than tearing at the fabric of our department, as some may fear, the issues brought to light reveal long-standing problems, and, if you allow it, they can serve as a catalyst for finally addressing those problems. We ask you to embrace your discomfort as an opportunity for both personal growth and institutional change, and to realize that it does not diminish your power within this institution. It is our hope that our voices empower you to take bolder steps in dismantling racism at the personal- as well as institutional-level and that while you do so, you continue to seek our input and feedback.

The current national and worldwide uprising against systemic racism began in Minnesota with the murder of George Floyd. We in Minnesota, at the University of Minnesota, in the EEB department can begin to make things right. We have the opportunity and the responsibility to dismantle our own piece of the racist system in which we live. We ask that you work with us to take this momentum and lead our department forward in dismantling the structural racism that permeates the department, the University and academia.

Sincerely,

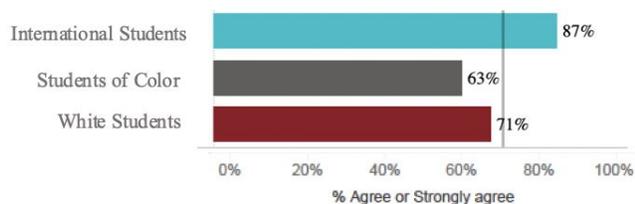
The undersigned EEB Graduate Students and Postdocs  
**(69 students and postdocs signed this letter)**

## Figures and Tables

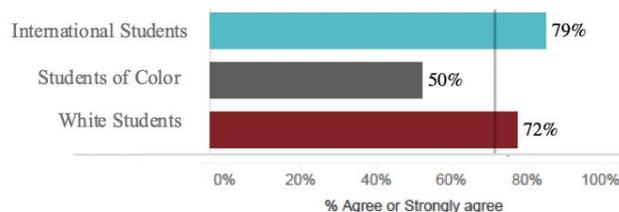
### Percent responding 'Agree' or 'Strongly Agree' in response to the following prompt:

*The climate for racial/ethnic minority students in my program/department is at least as good as it is for non-minority students.*

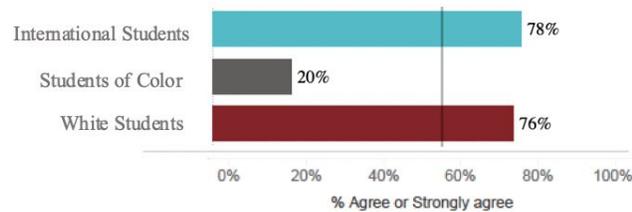
#### A. University-wide Graduate Student Population:



#### B. College of Biological Sciences Graduate Students:



#### C. Ecology, Evolution and Behavior Graduate Students:



**Figure 1.** Results of the 2019 UMN GradSERU broken down by race/ethnicity. Data reflects the percent responding “Agree” or “Strongly agree” in response to the prompt: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about your current graduate/professional program: The climate for racial/ethnic minority students in my program/department is at least as good as it is for non-minority students.”

- A.** University-wide data for all students enrolled in PhD programs.
- B.** Responses of those enrolled in a College of Biological Science PhD program (BMBB, EEB, MCDB&G, and PMB).
- C.** Responses of those enrolled in the Ecology, Evolution and Behavior PhD program - 47 out of 64 enrolled students reporting.

Though submission of the GradSERU is optional, 73% of the EEB graduate student body reported. The EEB results reflect not only a failure to cultivate/support a culture of inclusivity within the department, but one that falls well below the average at both the college and university level. Full results of the 2019 survey can be found [here](#).

**Table 1:** List of past department diversity and equity initiatives and leadership. These are broken out into initiatives that are aimed at increasing the recruitment of a more diverse graduate student body versus retention and success of those students. This table represents our best understanding of these initiatives; any gaps or inaccuracies highlight the lack of transparency or communication around diversity initiatives.

Initiative Target	Initiative	Leadership	Notes	Year Implemented	Compensation
Recruitment	Updates to program webpage	Graduate student initiated	Highlighted diverse perspectives and clarified application process	2016	None
	Removal of GRE requirement	Graduate student initiated	Initially opposed by faculty and DGA	2018	None
	Offer letter modified to include fees	Graduate student (Grads United fees campaign)		2019	None
	Recruiting at SACNAS (Society for Advancement of Chicanos/Hispanics and Native Americans in Science): The Diversity in STEM Conference	Initially grad students and DGA attended, funding DGA-led the past several years. Faculty presence recommended by graduate students.	2019 - faculty, grad student, and program coordinator attendance	2016 - grad student attendance began with DGA	College funded 1-2 years, then DGA worked to keep funded by Department
	Create Inclusive Communities Cohort	DGA (+ others?)		2018 - did not receive in 2019	Yes*
	Welcome Week Schedule Changes + Diversity Panel	Graduate student	Faculty resisted schedule changes proposed by diversity committee	2016 - initiated by diversity committee; 2017 - Saturday activities began	None
	Welcome Week Diversity Coordinator	Graduate student	Direct refusal to appoint someone on the diversity committee as a WW coordinator. No diversity coordinator until 2016-17	2017	Unpaid for the first 2 years, then paid less than other WW coordinators until 2020.

Initiative Target	Initiative	Leadership	Notes	Year Implemented	Compensation
Recruitment & Retention	Paying international student fees	Graduate student (EEB, Grads United, and COGS)		2019	None
	Exit Interviews	DGS-led	Not uniformly conducted. Having exit interviews conducted by faculty poses conflicts of interest.	2017	Yes*
	Advising Statements	Individual faculty?	Not required	2019(?)	None
	Gender Neutral Restrooms	Graduate student (Whose Diversity?, Trans Commission, and COGS)	Faced University pushback	Begun in 2013, implemented in 2016	External to EEB
Retention	BREWS** (Broadening Representation and Equity With Science)	Graduate student initiated/led; 2 faculty committee members	Limited faculty attendance (each event ~10% faculty in 2018-19)	2018	\$1000 for food, 2020 was first semester that money went to speaker fees
	Ethics Seminars**	Graduate student	Limited faculty attendance	Before 2013	None
	Individual Development Plans	Grad student initiated and led, consulted with DGS	Not required	Initiated 2019, available Fall 2020	None
	Faculty mentoring - (LGBTQ+ and first-gen faculty)	Individual faculty?	No grad students we know of were aware of this until the email on #ShutdownSTEM		None
	Consideration of Foundations readings	Graduate student initiated		Initiated 2020	None
	Inclusive Community Fellowships	DGS initiated, grad students carry out		2019, first awarded for spring 2020	50% FTE appointment (2)

\* as part of DGS salary bonus; \*\* particularly relevant past seminars: Discussion about academic privilege and social justice (“Philando Castile and how we can come together as a community in the future”); workshop on ‘How Do We Talk About Race At Work?’; Dr. Sehoia Cotner’s talk entitled “The ‘Course Deficit Model’: Teaching for More Equitable STEM Education (Fall 2019), Noro Andriamanalina’s talk “Top 10 Challenges to Diversifying Graduate Education” (April 2018)

**Table 2.** Community building activities not specifically focused on addressing inequities in science or the department. While important for building relationships, these do not directly address underlying issues within the department that we discuss in this letter. This is not an exhaustive list.

Initiative	Leadership	Notes	Budget
Donut Thursday	American Academy of Circular Pastries; led by Dave but also an idea from a graduate student	A popular event, but one not specifically geared toward promoting racial justice in the department	
EEB student fund for community building	Graduate student presidents	While these funds are appreciated, the events sponsored with it are not solely used by graduate students (solstice party, ice cream social) and are not currently geared at initiatives to promote anti-racism. Additionally, while the funds began in 2018, prior to that these activities were already put on by the graduate students (the solstice party and spring potluck happened at least as early as fall 2014).	\$1000-\$2000
Ecology 100 common space	Graduate students and postdoc	A small group of 2 EEB graduate students and 1 postdoc conceptualized the common space currently used for many department events; creation of the space required a significant amount of labor, from conceptualization and design to budgeting and ordering the furniture. All time spent by these individuals was uncompensated.	

## Glossary of Terms

### ALLY

Describes someone who supports a group other than one's own (in terms of racial identity, gender, faith identity, sexual orientation, etc.). Allies acknowledge disadvantage and oppression of other groups than their own; take risks and supportive action on their behalf; commit to reducing their own complicity or collusion in oppression of those groups and invest in strengthening their own knowledge and awareness of oppression.

*Source: Center for Assessment and Policy Development*

### ANTI-RACISM

Anti-racism is the active process of identifying and eliminating racism by changing systems, organizational structures, policies and practices and attitudes, so that power is redistributed and shared equitably.

*Source: NAC International Perspectives: Women and Global Solidarity*

### COLLUSION

When people act to perpetuate oppression or prevent others from working to eliminate oppression.

Example: Able-bodied people who object to strategies for making buildings accessible because of the expense.

*Source: Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, editors. Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. New York: Routledge.*

### INDIVIDUAL RACISM

The beliefs, attitudes and actions of individuals that support or perpetuate racism. Individual racism can occur at both a conscious and unconscious level and can be both active and passive. Examples include telling a racist joke, using a racial epithet or believing in the inherent superiority of whites.

*Source: Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, editors. Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. New York: Routledge.*

### INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism refers specifically to the ways in which institutional policies and practices create different outcomes for different racial groups. The institutional policies may never

mention any racial group, but their effect is to create advantages for whites and oppression and disadvantage for people from groups classified as non-white.

Examples include: Government policies that explicitly restricted the ability of people to get loans to buy or improve their homes in neighborhoods with high concentrations of African Americans (also known as "red-lining"), city sanitation department policies that concentrate trash transfer stations and other environmental hazards disproportionately in communities of color.

*Source: Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell and Pat Griffin, editors. Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice: A Sourcebook. New York: Routledge.*

### POWER DIFFERENTIAL

A circumstance where one individual has a role that relates to another individual involving teaching, evaluating, providing oversight, supervising, academic advising, mentoring, coaching, counseling, providing extracurricular oversight, and/or otherwise participating in or influencing votes or decisions that may reward or penalize a student or subordinate employee.

*Source: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, "Graduate STEM Education for the 21st Century."*

### RACISM

Racism is a complex system of beliefs and behaviors, grounded in a presumed superiority of the white race. These beliefs and behaviors are conscious and unconscious; personal and institutional; and result in the oppression of people of color and benefit the dominant group, whites. A simpler definition is racial prejudice + power = racism.

*Source: National Conference for Community and Justice — St. Louis Region. Unpublished handout used in the Dismantling Racism Institute program.*

### SYSTEMIC RACISM vs. SYSTEMATIC RACISM

Systemic Racism is prejudice and discrimination that is based solely on race and occurs in and affects the whole societal system of a nation and institution. Systematic Racism is prejudice or discrimination methodically implemented according to a fixed plan or procedure against a given race.

*Source: Dismantling Racism Works (dRworks)*  
 [<https://www.dismantlingracism.org/racism-defined.html>]

### WHITE FRAGILITY

White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable [for white people], triggering a range of defensive moves. Racial stress results from an interruption to what is racially familiar. Examples of such interruptions include: not protecting

white people's feelings about racism, POC talking directly about their racial experiences and perspectives, a fellow white not providing agreement with another white person's interpretation of racism, the suggestion that white people's views come from racialized perspectives, and a white person receiving feedback that their behavior had a racist impact. Defensive moves from white people in response include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to repel challenges to racism, thus returning white people to racial comfort, and reinstating white racial equilibrium.

Examples of white fragility might include:

- allowing a colleague to say racist things or commit racist microaggressions without correcting them and thus upholding "white solidarity"
- having public emotional outbursts, expressing feeling "attacked", or crying in response to racial stress, thus vilifying POC who put forth justified racial challenges and eliciting sympathy from other whites
- demanding a comforting tone when confronted by POC
- denial that a referenced behavior is racist
- focusing on white feelings of hurt in response to the insinuation of racism rather than the lived racist experiences of POC
- defensiveness, through claiming that they are not or cannot be exhibiting racist attitudes and behaviors due to their social relationships with POC, family or class backgrounds, prior trainings or activism work, or membership of a different marginalized group

Source: *"White Fragility" by Robin DiAngelo*

## WHITE PRIVILEGE

Refers to the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed on people solely because they are white. Generally white people who experience such privilege do so without being conscious of it.

Examples of white privilege might be: "I can walk around a department store without being followed." "I can come to a meeting late and not have my lateness attributed to your race;" "being able to drive a car in any neighborhood without being perceived as being in the wrong place or looking for trouble." "I can turn on the television or look to the front page and see people of my ethnic and racial background represented." "I can take a job without having co-workers suspect that I got it because of my racial background." "I can send my 16-year old out with his new driver's license and not have to give him a lesson on how to respond if police stop him."

Source: *Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women Studies."*

## WHITE SUPREMACY

The idea (ideology) that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions of white people are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. While most people associate white supremacy with extremist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and the neo-Nazis, white supremacy is ever present in our institutional and cultural assumptions that assign value, morality, goodness, and humanity to the white group while casting people and communities of color as worthless (worth less), immoral, bad, and inhuman and "undeserving." Drawing from critical race theory, the term "white supremacy" also refers to a political or socio-economic system where white people enjoy structural advantage and rights that other racial and ethnic groups do not, both at a collective and an individual level.

*Source: Tema Okun, "White Supremacy Culture", Dismantling Racism Works*

## WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE

White Supremacy Culture is the culture upholding white supremacy, characterized by white comfort, white superiority, and the invisibility of white privilege to white people. It refers to the dominant, unquestioned standards of behavior and ways of functioning embodied by the vast majority of institutions in the United States. These standards may be seen as mainstream, dominant cultural practices; they have evolved from the United States' history of white supremacy. Because it is so normalized it can be hard to see, which only adds to its powerful hold. In many ways, it is indistinguishable from what we might call U.S. culture or norms – a focus on individuals over groups, for example, or an emphasis on the written word as a form of professional communication. But it operates in even more subtle ways, by actually defining what "normal" is – and likewise, what "professional," "effective," or even "good" is. In turn, white culture also defines what is not good, "at risk," or "unsustainable." White culture values some ways – ways that are more familiar and come more naturally to those from a white, western tradition – of thinking, behaving, deciding, and knowing, while devaluing or rendering invisible other ways. And it does this without ever having to explicitly say so.

White supremacy culture is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies and binds together the United States white supremacy system. It is the glue that binds together white-controlled institutions into systems and white-controlled systems into the global white supremacy system.

*Source: "Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity," by Gita Gulati-Partee and Maggie Potapchuk, The Foundation Review, Vol. 6: Issue 1 (2014).*

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