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**What Color is White?**

By Paul Kivel

Let’s Talk

I am talking to you as one white person to another. I am Jewish,

and I will talk about that later in this book. You also may have an

ethnic identity you are proud of. You likely have a religious background,

a culture, a country of origin and a history. Whatever your

other identities, you may not be used to being addressed as white.

Other people are African American, Asian American, Pacific Islanders, Native American, Latinx or Muslims. Other people have countries of origin and primary languages that are not English. White people generally assume people are white unless otherwise noted, much as humans can assume people and animals are male.

Read the following lines:

• This new sitcom is about a middle-aged, middle-class couple and their three teenage children.

• They won a medal on the Special Olympics swim team.

• He did well in school but was just a typical all-American kid.

• They didn’t know if they would get into the college of their choice.

• My grandmother lived on a farm all her life.

Are all these people white? Read the sentences again and imagine the people referred to are Chinese Americans or Native Americans. How does that change the meanings of these sentences? If you are of Christian background, what happens when you imagine the subjects as Muslim or Jewish?

White people assume we are white without stating it because it is “obvious.” Yet there is something about stating this obvious fact that makes white people feel uneasy, marked. What’s the point of saying “I’m white?”

White people have been led to believe racism is a question of particular acts of discrimination or violence. Calling someone a name, denying someone a job, excluding someone from a neighborhood — that is racism. These certainly are acts of racial discrimination. But what about working in an organization where people of color are paid less, have more menial work or fewer opportunities for advancement?

What about shopping in a store where you are treated respectfully, but people of color are followed around or treated with suspicion?

People of color know this racism intimately. They know that where they live, work and walk; whom they talk with and how; what they read, listen to, or watch on TV — their past experiences and future possibilities are all influenced by racism.

For the next few days, carry your whiteness with you. During the day, in each new situation, remind yourself that you are white. How does it feel? Notice how rarely you see or hear the words white, Caucasian or Euro-American.

• Where is it implied but not stated specifically?

• Who is around you? Are they white or people of color? What difference does it make?

• Write down what you notice. Discuss it with a friend.

Particularly notice whenever you are somewhere there are only white people.

• How did it come to be that no people of color are present?

• If you ask about their absence what kinds of explanations/rationalizations do people give?

• Are they really not there, or are they only invisible?

• Did they grow some of the food, originally own the land, build the buildings or clean and maintain the place where you are?