

You may be wondering ...

Why is it so difficult to think stereotypes for White people?

During the Identity Project, some students have asked about stereotypes for White Americans and the differences between stereotypes for different groups. Here is some guidance for engaging students in these discussions.

A Historical Perspective

When White Europeans founded the U.S., their values and cultural practices (“Whiteness”) were incorporated into national customs and institutions. This contributed to a social and political system that prioritizes “Whiteness” and places other groups in a lower status. Today, the effects of that system create an ethnic-racial hierarchy where Whiteness is considered *normal* and other groups are *other*.¹ As a result, negative ideas about White Americans rarely stick, or do not have the same effects as negative ideas about other groups.

Everyday “Whiteness”

The everyday experiences of Whiteness create an “Invisible Knapsack” of white privilege or experiences and assumptions that come with being a White American. Some of these privileges are small, like easily finding “flesh” color bandages, while others are more significant, like assuming medical professionals will not treat you differently based on your race.³ These experiences are so deeply embedded in our lives they can become “invisible.” When these privileges are not seen, they are not questioned or challenged. If those living with these privileges do not change the conditions that produce them, they will continue to exist.

Everyday Examples of Whiteness as normal²

- What do most people in positions of power look like in the U.S.?
- What do most families look like in television shows?
- What cultures have special aisles in the grocery store?
- What does the term “ethnic” signal when describing clothing, music, physical features, etc.?
- What do most children’s book characters look like?

IN THE CLASSROOM

What if students use the stereotype “White people are racist”?⁴

During Session 2 of the Identity Project, students distinguish between themselves and stereotypes. Someone might say, “I am White, but I am not racist.” Although this is a valid feeling for the student, it can offend students of color who regularly contend with discrimination as a result of racism. The statement can be perceived as allowing White students to avoid acknowledging that racism is pervasive in U.S. society and impacts everyone. Consider using this opportunity to discuss definitions of *racism* and *racist*:

- (1) Racism happens on a systemic level (e.g., school segregation and voting rights laws), not just on an interpersonal level (e.g., comments on social media).
- (2) A person’s actions, words, or ideas can be **racist** based on the impact and implications, regardless of the person’s personal beliefs or intentions.

Why do the stereotypes of people of color often seem more harmful?

Stereotypes often dehumanize ethnic-racial minority groups and justify the mistreatment of these groups. **Although stereotypes exist for all groups, the seriousness of the consequences of these stereotypes is dependent on power and prejudice.**⁵ If those in power hold prejudice against some groups, these prejudices can shape policies and practices that have serious consequences. Due to generations of discrimination, White Americans tend to have that power. Thus, in the U.S., people of color contend with the consequences of these stereotypes at interpersonal and community-wide levels.

POWER: Institutional power often held by the dominant group to enact policies and practices



PREJUDICE: Existing prejudice against a group that might be expressed through stereotypes



CONSEQUENCES OF STEREOTYPES

IN THE CLASSROOM

If students struggle to identify inequitable impacts of stereotypes for different groups, have them brainstorm (a) common stereotypes for different groups and (b) the potential consequences of those stereotypes. See the chart below for examples.

Stereotypes	Consequences
White people cannot dance	Discrimination when applying for school dance team
Latinx people are all undocumented	Police more frequently ask for citizenship documentation
Black people are more violent and criminal	Excessive force more frequently used during arrests

Key Takeaways:

(1) Stereotypes about White people are less common because Whiteness is made invisible due to the position that being White occupies in the U.S. racial hierarchy. The social and political origins of the U.S. led to a contemporary system where White American cultural norms and beliefs are dominant and appear *normal*. This status offers White Americans privileges including protection from negative stereotypes.

(2) Stereotypes against people of color often have more significant and harmful consequences than those for White people. This is largely the result of the institutional power and authority that privileges Whiteness and creates policies and practices shaped by negative stereotypes of non-dominant groups.

References and Articles for Further Reading:

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