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Confronting White Ignorance

White Psychology and Rational Self-Regulation

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1. White Ignorance

Many white Americans are ignorant of the extent to which racism persists in American society. They *believe* that the average black family has 80% of the wealth of the average white family, when *in fact* the figure is 7% and shrinking (Kraus et al. 2017; US Census, 2014). They *believe* that black and brown youths buy, sell, and use drugs at a higher rate than white youths, proportionate to their higher incarcerate rate, when *in fact* youths of all races buy, sell, and use drugs at roughly the same rate, and the disproportionate incarceration of black and brown youths owes to biases in legislation, policing, and sentencing (Fellner 2014). And they *believe* that job candidates of color are hired over white job candidates, when *in fact* candidates of color are interviewed at a much lower rate than their equally qualified white counterparts (Quillian et al. 2017). White Americans are ignorant of the persistence of individual and institutional racism, despite there being overwhelming evidence of it—evidence that is as accessible and understandable as the facts just presented.¹ Following Charles Mills, we call this ignorance “white ignorance” (Mills 1997; Mills 2007).

White ignorance is double ignorance. White Americans are not only ignorant of racism, but they are also ignorant of their own ignorance. They don’t know that they don’t know. As James Baldwin puts it:

¹ Following Tommie Shelby (2014), we adopt a wide-scope definition of racism, which includes beliefs of racial inferiority, racial antipathy, racial stereotyping, implicit racial bias, as well as institutional and systemic forms of racism. Following Frances Lee Ansley, we use the term “white supremacy” to mean a “political, economic and cultural system in which whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of white superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of white dominance and non-white subordination are daily reenacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings.” (Ansley 1997, 1024n129).

[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen, and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives *and do not know it and do not want to know it*. (Baldwin 1993, 5; emphasis added)

Elizabeth Spelman (2007) argues that white Americans are doubly ignorant of racism because they do not want to even consider the proposition that racism persists. Better not to think about it at all than to reckon with the truth.

White ignorance is also motivated ignorance. White Americans remain ignorant of the persistence of racism because this ignorance serves their psychological and material interests:

One could say then, as a general rule, that *white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most persuasive mental phenomenon of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and mental economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. (Mills 1997, 19)

In other words, white ignorance enables white people to live more comfortably amidst the horrors of white supremacy (Mills 2007; Bailey 2007; Spelman 2007)—to enjoy the benefits of racial oppression while believing sincerely that those benefits were earned fair and square.

The idea that white cognitive processes unconsciously maintain white supremacy is echoed in the literatures on implicit bias and ideology. Psychologists find that individuals who profess racial equality nonetheless judge white people more favorably than people of color and act on these preferences (Kelly & Roedder 2008; Matthew 2015). Employers, for instance, interview white job candidates at a higher rate than equally qualified black candidates (Quillian et al. 2017). Similarly, scholars and social critics have long observed that the ethos of the American Dream encourages the discounting of structural and systemic obstacles to individual advancement (Gallagher 2003). Exploited, marginalized, and disempowered individuals are encouraged to “pick themselves up by their bootstraps,” as if the only barriers they face are self-imposed. In this way, ideologies undermine the acquisition of knowledge about racism, especially in its structural forms.

Building on this work, we analyze the “cognitive and mental economy” that sustains white ignorance in the face of overwhelming evidence of

persistent racism—a mindset that we call “white psychology.”² For our purposes, a “mindset” is a set of beliefs, desires, and/or emotions that influence how a person makes decisions and solves problems. Cognitive scientist Keith Stanovich (2011) analyzes rationality in terms of two components: “crystallized rationality” consists of stored information that facilitates or inhibits “fluid rationality,” or the ability to reason to true beliefs in novel circumstances. Some mindsets—“crystallized facilitators”—promote the acquisition of new knowledge; others—“crystallized inhibitors”—undermine it.³ We analyze white psychology as a crystallized inhibitor, or a set of beliefs, desires, and emotions that undermine the acquisition of new knowledge about racism.

Our objectives in this paper are two-fold. First, we identify ten components of white psychology that sustain white ignorance. Second, we explore strategies for resisting this mindset. We consider the possibility of *radical self-revision*, or of eliminating the aspects of white psychology that sustain white ignorance, but we find reason to be cautious of this strategy. We then turn to *rational self-regulation*, or the ability to override individual manifestations of white psychology with specific bits of historical, emotional, and conceptual knowledge, and we recommend it as a more viable strategy. We aim to show that, once equipped with a small set of tools for thinking, many of which have applications beyond race, white Americans will be less susceptible to the deceptions, machinations, and obfuscations of white psychology.

To be clear, we do not believe that rational self-regulation alone will eliminate white supremacy or substantially improve the lives of those oppressed by it.⁴ But we do believe that antiracist efforts will be less successful without an emphasis on rational self-regulation, and we believe that rational self-regulation will help sustain projects aimed toward dismantling racist social structures.

² Bailey (2007) criticizes Mill’s analysis of white ignorance for being narrowly focused on cognition. Our analysis is broader, incorporating emotions and desires.

³ For instance, psychologist Carol Dweck (2006) has shown that people with a “growth mindset,” or the belief that the ability to succeed is learned, are better at assessing their abilities and limitations than people with a “fixed mindset,” or the belief that the ability to succeed is innate. A growth mindset is a crystallized facilitator. A fixed mindset is a crystallized inhibitor.

⁴ As Gregory Mengel notes, “by classifying racial bias as a glitch in individual psychology it can be framed as an isolated problem that can be remedied through training, medication, or a bias cleanse... [and] structural questions are largely ignored” (Mengel 2017). To be clear, we don’t think that “psychology cleanses” will be enough to overturn systems of white supremacy, but we do think that interventions at the individual psychological level ought to be included within broader efforts to dismantle white supremacy.

2. White Psychology

White psychology is a mindset. It is a set of beliefs, desires, and emotions that inhibit the acquisition of knowledge about racism. Many of these attitudes are transmitted culturally, and thus white psychology may take on different forms in different cultural contexts.⁵ We focus on the form that it takes in contemporary U.S. American society, and we identify ten components of this mindset. To be clear, we claim neither that all white Americans have this mindset, nor that only white Americans have this mindset. Our claim is that many white Americans who remain ignorant of the persistence of racism do so because they exhibit one or more components of this mindset.

White psychology functions to insulate white Americans from the realities of racism. This insulation has three layers. First, white psychology keeps white Americans from gathering evidence of racism. Second, it discourages them from drawing proper inferences from this evidence, should they gather it. And third, it prevents them from taking responsibility for racism, should they accept that it exists.

2.1. The First Layer: Evading Evidence

The first aspect of white psychology is **internalized white normativity**. White normativity is the result of complex social processes that make white bodies, white identities, and white cultural practices appear normal, natural, and right within a multiracial society (Westley 1997, Morris 2016). White normativity is evidenced in popular film and television, where white actors portray purportedly universal human experiences, while actors of color portray experiences specific to their racial group. As Jamil Smith puts it in his commentary on *Black Panther*, “For so long, films that depict a reality where whiteness isn’t the default have been ghettoized, marketed largely to audiences of color as niche entertainment, instead of as part of the mainstream” (Smith 2018). By contrast, “No one talks about Woody Allen and Wes Anderson movies as ‘white movies’ to be marketed only to that audience” (Smith 2018).

⁵ We say little in this paper about how white psychology and white ignorance are transmitted culturally. Historians (e.g. Blight 2001; Zimmerman 2004) have long emphasized the role that formal education (including American history textbooks) and popular culture (including *Gone with the Wind*) have played in preserving racism through ignorance about the history and legacy of racist institutions.

White Americans who internalize white normativity tend to view people of color as “other” and may exhibit a lack of interest in stories depicting their experiences. They regard these stories as being alien and disconnected from their own experiences, which they presume to be more generic, “normal” American experiences. The lack of interest in the experiences of people of color perpetuates white ignorance by preventing white Americans from learning about the daily indignities and systemic disadvantages facing people of color.

Reni Eddo-Lodge documents an example of this in her book, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017). She registered for a class in college on the transatlantic slave trade with a white friend. Eddo-Lodge was mesmerized by the experience, but her white friend quickly dropped the class. When asked why, the white friend responded, “It’s just not for me” (2017, 1-2). Eddo-Lodge comments: “Her words didn’t sit well with me. Now I understand why. I resented the fact that she seemed to feel that this section of British history was in no way relevant to her. She was indifferent to the facts” (2017, 2). Uninterested in learning more about the history of slavery, the friend will remain ignorant of the ways in which white people continue to benefit from slavery.

The second aspect of white psychology is **white fragility**. Robin DiAngelo defines white fragility as “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves... includ[ing] the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation” (2011, 54). Racial stress is an “interruption to what is racially familiar” (2011, 57). DiAngelo observes that American society insulates white Americans from having to think meaningfully about race and racism, and that this insulation preserves their racial comfort (2011, 55). Thoughts and conversations about race create discomfort, which often manifests in defensiveness. When a white person is confronted with evidence that they are the beneficiary of a widespread system of white supremacy, for instance, they may eschew the opportunity to gain knowledge from this experience and instead react defensively—denying the evidence or reinterpreting it in a way that enables them to maintain moral purity. White fragility thus perpetuates white ignorance by preventing white people from enduring the stress of learning about their own unearned advantages.

Jennifer Mueller (2017) documents an example of this in her study of white ignorance. A white student, tasked with investigating whether his family had benefited from racist social programs in the recent past, chose not to complete the assignment. He explained that he didn’t want to ask his family about it because that he is “very non-confrontational” (2017, 226). As a result of wanting to avoid the stress of talking to his family about an

uncomfortable topic, the student was unable to gather evidence about his family's involvement with racist social programs and thereby remained ignorant of the extent to which he continues to benefit from these programs.

The third aspect of white psychology is **the feeling of entitlement to racial comfort** (DiAngelo 2011). Because many white Americans are intolerant of racial stress, they demand that conversations about race should be conducted in ways that make them comfortable. If a conversation becomes uncomfortable, they may view this as a failing on the part of their interlocutor, rather than as a failing on their own part. Often, this feeling of entitlement is manifested in tone policing: "I can't hear you when you are angry." The feeling of entitlement to racial comfort is problematic because it places all the burdens of emotional labor on people of color. It becomes the person of color's responsibility to suppress her own feelings in order to make the white person comfortable, rather than the white person's responsibility to deal with her own feelings of racial discomfort. The entitlement to racial comfort perpetuates white ignorance by circumscribing the range of educational experiences that a white person will expose herself to.

bell hooks recounts an experience of taking a class on feminist theory, for which nearly every reading was written by a white person. When she commented on the whiteness of the syllabus,

white women directed an anger and hostility at me that was so intense I found it difficult to attend the class. When I suggested that the purpose of this collective anger was to create an atmosphere in which it would be psychologically unbearable for me to speak in class discussions or even attend class, I was told that they were not angry. I was the one who was angry. (hooks 2000, 12-13)

hooks was trying to bring an instance of anti-black bias to the attention of her classmates, yet her testimony was rejected out of hand, on the grounds that she was being uncivil. Black philosophers often observe that their writings on racism are read as angry, and thus beyond the pale of civil discourse, regardless of how soft or sharp their writing actually is (Yancy 2018). In response to his popular op-ed, "Dear White America" (2015), which carefully avoided any language that might be interpreted as angry, George Yancy became the target of a racist hate campaign. He later reported that one of his colleagues remarked to him: "What if you had *actually* written the letter in anger" (2018, 57; emphasis added)? By construing a text as "angry," white readers take it to be expressive as opposed to informative, and antagonistic as opposed to generous. This interpretive frame discourages them from engaging self-critically with the text, as Yancy argues in his reflection on the reaction to his op-ed, appropriately titled *Backlash* (2018).

The fourth aspect of white psychology is the **ideology of colorblindness** (Bonilla-Silva 2017). According to this ideology, (1) racism is a problem of the past that has largely been overcome, and (2) continued discussions of race threaten to undermine racial equality (Mazzocco 2017). For our purposes it will be useful to treat these two ideas separately. We discuss the first idea here, under the label of “the ideology of colorblindness.” We discuss the second idea in the next section, under the label of “the ideology of individualism.”

The idea that racism is a problem of the past that has largely been overcome is difficult to square with the fact that racial disparities persist—and in some cases have worsened since the civil rights movement. Rather than attributing these disparities to racism, the ideology of colorblindness attributes them to nonracial dynamics, and thus encourages white Americans to misinterpret evidence of racial injustice as evidence of something else entirely (Bonilla-Silva 2017). Since race is presumed not to matter, any disadvantage or hardship that a person faces must be the result of something that does matter, such as a lack of ability, effort, or wealth. The ideology of colorblindness obscures the true cause of racial disparities by insisting upon a race-neutral explanation.

Jennifer Mueller analyzes a student’s reflection on the benefits her family received on the basis of being white. The student writes:

I don’t feel that the color of my skin or of my ancestors necessarily made it easier on them than other immigrant families. My grandfather came to the U.S. not knowing a word of English and owning only the clothes on his back. Primarily through hard work and our own merit my family has been able to accumulate a little wealth and...pass some of that on to the next generation. (Mueller 2017, 227)

Mueller observes that the student immediately shifts from writing about race to writing about immigration status. The student compares her ancestors to “other immigrant families” rather than to people of another race. And she presumes that the hurdles that her family faced—linguistic, economic—are the same as those faced by people of color. Race drops out of the picture, and a new colorblind vocabulary is introduced, which fails to acknowledge racial discrimination.

So far we have identified four aspects of white psychology that sustain white ignorance by shielding white people from evidence of racism.

1. **Internalized white normativity** manifests in a lack of interest in the experiences of people of color.

2. **White fragility** manifests in defensiveness in conversations about race.
3. **The feeling of entitlement to racial comfort** manifests in tone policing.
4. **The ideology of colorblindness** manifests in the translation of racism into a race-neutral idiom.

By limiting their exposure to racism, white Americans can maintain a view of the world in which race is of little to no importance, such that nearly four out of five conservative whites think that “seeing discrimination where it does not exist” is more of a problem than “not seeing discrimination where it really does exist” (Pew 2019).

2.2. The Second Layer: Impairing Inferences

White psychology sustains white ignorance by motivating white Americans to avoid evidence of racism. When the first layer of insulation fails—when white Americans cannot avoid this evidence—white psychology puts up a second layer. We now consider those aspects of white psychology that motivate white Americans to reason sloppily about evidence of racism so as to avoid drawing proper conclusions from it.

White-centeredness is the tendency to frame thoughts in a way that places white people at the center of attention. White-centeredness results in various fallacies of redirection, in which a person shifts the conversation from white racism to something else, often white victimhood. In an interview for the *Whiteness Project*, Robert, a white interviewee from Buffalo, New York, states, “I’m totally for reparations because, as it turns out, my ancestors were sold into white slavery. So, if any other group that was forced into slavery gets reparations hundreds of years after it happened, I should be in line too.” With this statement, Robert takes evidence of anti-black racism, namely the history of black slavery, and arrives at a conclusion about reparations for white people. By refocusing the conversation on white slavery, Robert is able to avoid grappling with the legacy of black slavery. Thus, white-centeredness sustains white ignorance by prompting white Americans to turn conversations about wrongs against people of color into conversations about wrongs against white people.

Similarly, in response to the slogan “Black Lives Matter,” some white Americans respond by saying “All Lives Matter,” which inserts white lives into the center of a conversation about black lives. Ian Olasov (2016) argues that advocates of “All Lives Matter” have committed a particular error in reasoning called a false implicature. In brief, these advocates mistakenly

assume that “Black Lives Matter” means “*Only* Black Lives Matter,” when in context it really means “Black Lives Matter *Too*.” This mistake proceeds from the assumption that white people ought to be central to any conversation. In this case, white-centeredness sustains white ignorance by preventing white Americans from appreciating the extent to which an injustice, namely police brutality, uniquely impacts people of color, especially black Americans.

The sixth aspect of white psychology is the **ideology of individualism**, or the presumption that categorizing people by race is incompatible with treating them as individuals. (As discussed previously, this is the second premise underlying the ideology of colorblindness, but we found it useful to treat the two premises separately, since they perpetuate white ignorance in different ways.) Lee Mun Wah’s film *The Color of Fear* portrays an interracial group of men discussing race. At one point a man identifies himself as Chinese American, and a white man responds: “Why can’t he just be American and excited about being American?...Why do these guys have such a problem with being a color, why can’t they just be individuals and go out and find a place for themselves? And I hear you saying that we whites won’t allow it, that we keep you down, but why aren’t we just humans? Why aren’t we brothers?” Here, the white speaker assumes that to be an individual, one must refrain from adopting racial or ethnic labels. Indeed, many white Americans do not like to think of themselves as white, and often bristle at being labeled as such (Sullivan 2006). *American Idol* star Bo Bice made national headlines after reporting that a restaurant employee referred to him using a racial slur. The slur was “white boy.”

The ideology of individualism sustains white ignorance by discouraging white Americans from observing patterns across individual cases of discrimination and disadvantage. If one views police brutality as randomly affecting isolated individuals, and not as selectively targeting black people, then one will remain ignorant of police brutality as a systemic racial injustice.

The seventh aspect of white psychology is the **meritocratic ideal**. At its core, this ideal posits that people ought to be judged solely on the basis of their ability and character, and thus that social goods ought to be distributed according to merit. Jobs ought to be given to the most qualified. College admission ought to be granted to the smartest. Distributing social goods in any other manner would be unfair and unjust.

Kwame Anthony Appiah (2018) argues that although meritocracy can help a society to function efficiently by filling social positions with capable candidates, it is a mistake to think that meritocracy is fair. The belief that meritocracy is the fairest system of allocating social goods is premised on the mistaken belief that merit is equally accessible to everyone. In truth, the wealthy use their wealth and privilege to increase their merit, thereby further

increasing their wealth and privilege. Two students may be equally smart and hardworking, but if one has access to a quality tutor and the other does not, the tutored student will have better grades and be better prepared for college. If colleges grant admission on the basis of merit alone, the tutored student ought to be admitted over the untutored student, since the former has more merit. Merit, it turns out, can be bought. Appiah argues that meritocracies end up looking just like aristocracies. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The difference between meritocracy and aristocracy is that the winners in a meritocracy believe that everyone gets what they deserve, and thus Appiah worries that they will have less compassion for those who end up at the bottom.

The meritocratic ideal sustains white ignorance by promoting false equivalences between the experiences of different minority groups. For example, some white Americans argue that since (in their view) many Asian Americans have achieved financial success, all people of color can achieve financial success simply through hard work. Insofar as they perceive Black and Latinx people as failing to achieve financial success, they infer that this is due to a lack of hard work. Of course, the history, context, and social realities for many Asian Americans are not equivalent to those of Black and Latinx Americans, and drawing this sort of analogy allows white Americans to ignore history and the realities of how modern systems of white supremacy function (Kim 1999). By motivating these false equivalences, the meritocratic ideal promotes victim blaming and the erasure of distinct racial realities and experiences.

The eighth aspect of white psychology is a **narrow definition of racism** that leads white Americans to think of racism in terms of irrational prejudice, and to think that all prejudice is fundamentally the same, whether directed toward race, gender, hair color, age, or anything else (Peller 1995, 131). As Gary Peller depicts this oversimplified conception of racism:

racism is accordingly represented either as ‘prejudice,’ the prejudging of a person according to mythological stereotypes, or as ‘bias,’ the process of being influenced by subjective factors. The key image here is irrationalism: the problem with prejudice is that it obscures the work of reason by clouding perception with beliefs rooted in superstition... The ideal was to transcend stereotypes in favor of treating people as individuals free from racial group identification. (Peller 1995, 129)

A narrow definition of racism sustains white ignorance in several ways.

First, it prevents white Americans from appreciating systemic aspects of racism. White Americans sometimes proclaim their antiracism by saying things like, “I don’t care if you are black, brown, green, or purple with polka

dots” (see DiAngelo 2018). Like the ideology of colorblindness, this attitude reflects the belief that racism is irrational prejudice, and thus that disliking someone because she is black is as ridiculous as disliking someone because she is purple with polka dots. This attitude also reflects a failure to understand the ways in which anti-black racism is institutionalized. Purple people with polka dots do not face pervasive job, housing, and educational discrimination. Purple people with polka dots are not criminalized and deprived of basic rights. Popular films and television shows do not stoke fears about purple people with polka dots.

Second, a narrow definition of racism grants white Americans plausible deniability about their own and others’ racism. The principle of charity demands that we avoid attributing irrationality to people if we can interpret their behavior as rational. If racism is irrational prejudice, then ascriptions of racism are, by definition, ascriptions of irrationality. As a result, white Americans are hesitant to ascribe racism to themselves or others. They look always for other explanations for why someone said or did something that is manifestly racist. When white people are called out for racist speech or behavior, they often respond by insisting that they don’t have “a racist bone in their body.” They may even believe this, given that they are not consciously aware of hating people of other races, and they do not understand that there is more to racism than hate.

At this point we have identified four more aspects of white psychology, which promote white ignorance by leading white people to draw the wrong conclusions from evidence of racial injustice.

5. **White-centeredness** manifests in fallacies of redirection.
6. **The ideology of individualism** manifests in a false dilemma between race-consciousness and individualism.
7. **The meritocratic ideal** manifests in false equivalences.
8. **A narrow definition of racism** is manifested in oversimplified, decontextualized thinking about racism.

As a result, even when white conservative Americans acknowledge that black Americans face hardships on account of their race, they are more likely to attribute these hardships to a lack of hard work, to family instability, and to a lack of good role models within the community than they are to attribute these hardships to racial discrimination (Pew 2019).

2.3. The Third Layer: Curtailing Conclusions

Even once white Americans confront evidence of white supremacy and draw proper conclusions from it, they often find ways to avoid acknowledging the role that they or other white people play in maintaining white supremacy.

The ninth aspect of white psychology is the **good/racist binary**.⁶ Robin DiAngelo notes that discussions about race among white people tend to assume a false binary in which a person is either racist and therefore bad or good and therefore not racist (DiAngelo 2012, 238). As a result, these discussions often center on exonerating people whose racist behavior has come under scrutiny. For example, after *Seinfeld* actor Michael Richards denigrated Black audience members at a comedy club in 2006, Richards apologized on the *Late Show with David Letterman* by saying “I’m not racist. That’s what’s so insane about this” (Yancy 2008, 232). Richards had said, “Shut up. Fifty years ago, we’d have you upside down with a fucking fork up your ass...” He pointed aggressively at the Black audience members and called them the n-word at least six times (Yancy 2008, 231-232). When one man protested, Richards responded, “That’s what happens when you interrupt a white man” (Yancy 2008, 231). Despite the fact that Richards’ statements were obviously racist, David Letterman attempted to portray Richards as a good guy and therefore not truly racist. As Richards recounted his behavior, Letterman interrupted to clarify that the audience members had been heckling Richards prior to his outburst, suggesting that they had incited Richards’ rage. Letterman interrupted Richards again to ask whether Richards would have reacted similarly to white hecklers, suggesting that Richards’ remarks were inspired more by defensive rage than genuinely racist attitudes.

It is worth noting that attempts to demonstrate that manifestly racist behaviors are not *really* racist tend to follow a particular logic. First, a belief or feeling is put forward as being necessary for racism—such as spite toward members of race for being members of that race. Second, it is claimed that the person under scrutiny does not harbor that specific belief or feeling—thus, Letterman suggests that although Richards was spiteful toward Black audience members, he was not spiteful toward them *because they were Black*. Finally, it is concluded that the person cannot be truly racist—thus, Richards proclaims, “I’m not racist. That’s what’s so insane about this.” Joshua Glasgow (2009, 65-71) points out the flaw in this logic. The problem is that there is no particular belief or feeling that is necessary for racism. For any given proposal, it is easy to come up with examples of racists who lack the

⁶ DiAngelo calls it the “good/bad binary.” We call it the “good/racist binary” to emphasize the assumption that good people cannot be racist or do racist things.

proposed belief or feeling. Racism cannot always be reduced to an ideology or emotion.

The good/racist binary sustains white ignorance by preventing white Americans from critically considering the ways in which they contribute to and benefit from white supremacy. Thoughts and conversations about racism tend to be focused on defending one's own status as "good" and therefore "not racist." DiAngelo elaborates:

"If...I conceptualize racism as a binary and I place myself on the "not racist" side, what further action is required of me? No action is required, because I am not a racist. Therefore racism is not my problem; it doesn't concern me and there is nothing further I need to do. This worldview guarantees that I will not build skills in thinking critically about racism or use my position to challenge racial inequality. (DiAngelo 2018, 73)

White Americans who come to accept the realities of racism may nonetheless focus on placing themselves on the "good" side of the good/racist binary, and thus fail to appreciate the fact that "racism is a systematic, societal, institutional, omnipresent, and epistemologically embedded phenomenon that pervades every vestige of our reality" (Akintunde 1999, 2; DiAngelo 2018, 72).

The tenth and final aspect of white psychology is **the assumption of white innocence**. If a white American accepts the realities of white supremacy, he or she may nonetheless look for reasons to absolve white people of guilt. One path to absolution is through the assumption that white supremacy is so deeply entrenched that it cannot be undone, no matter how hard people try. If nothing can be done, then white people cannot be blamed for the continued existence of white supremacy. Jennifer Mueller found that students who accepted the realities of racism would often "mystify practical solutions" (2017, 225). For instance, after learning about how her family had benefited from white supremacy, one student stated:

How can I help 'the larger issue of systemic racial inequality?' Is it my responsibility to change this? Should I feel guilty about what I have? Will I be the only person of my race fighting for a never ending cause?...As a race we are not able to see how the color of our skin plays into our wealth, and then once we do recognize this, we do not know what to do to help the situation. (Mueller 2017, 231-2)

In this case, the student's hopelessness about change resulted in a failure to take personal responsibility or action in the face of white supremacy.

Another path to absolution is through the assumption that white people who contribute to white supremacy do so unknowingly, and thus blamelessly. Mueller discusses a student named Chelsea who wrote that the class assignment of investigating how her family benefited from racism “brought an eerie light to the matter of ‘who is racist,’ because now the racists have faces and names, and they are my kin” (Mueller 2017, 230). Rather than dwelling on this revelation, Chelsea immediately finds a way to absolve them of guilt. “For me to consider my family racially prejudiced, I must accept racism as an unconscious act, because these are not people who would willingly cause harm to others” (Mueller 2017, 230).

A third way in which white Americans seek absolution is by seeking partners in crime. If everyone else is just as bad or just as guilty as white people, then white people needn’t be singled out and held accountable for racism. White Americans often respond to claims about racism by noting instances of anti-white discrimination or by noting instances of people of color discriminating against other groups. These white Americans do not deny the horrors of racism, but they muddy the waters by calling attention to other wrongs.

In this section we have identified two ways in which white people avoid responsibility for white supremacy, even once they acknowledge that it exists.

9. **The good/racist binary** manifests in a refusal to acknowledge one’s own role in maintaining white supremacy.
10. **The assumption of white innocence** manifests in a refusal to hold white people accountable for the horrors of white supremacy.

These aspects work to ensure that knowledge will never be put into practice.

3. Resisting White Psychology

We have analyzed the ways in which white psychology sustains white ignorance. This ignorance allows white Americans to live comfortably amidst the horrors of white supremacy, and thus white Americans are highly motivated to internalize those aspects of white psychology that sustain their ignorance. What can white antiracists do in their daily lives to resist the influence of white psychology and confront white ignorance?⁷

⁷ Note that this question is only part of the larger, more important and pressing question of what white antiracists can do in their daily lives to dismantle white supremacy. We limit our focus here to white ignorance and strategies for overcoming obstacles to knowledge.

One strategy for resisting white psychology is to engage in *radical self-revision*. In other words, a white American can attempt to uproot one or more aspects of white psychology in an attempt to remove the source of white ignorance. However, drawing on the work of George Yancy, we argue that one must approach this strategy with caution. After reviewing the worries about radical self-revision, we offer an alternative strategy, *rational self-regulation*.

3.1. Radical Self-Revision

Radical self-revision is the project of transforming one's mindset—of dismantling white psychology, piece by piece. A white person might attempt to uproot white fragility by building resistance to racial stress, or to uproot white normativity by immersing herself in communities of color, or to uproot the good/racist binary by learning more about systemic racism. The goal of radical self-revision is to identify and eliminate any and all aspects of white psychology that endure within a person's psyche.

George Yancy raises a series of worries about radical self-revision as an antiracist project. (He frames his discussion in terms of "whiteness," which he defines as a complex "embodied form of being-in-the-world" (2008, 231). We view white psychology as an essential element of whiteness, while acknowledging that there is more to whiteness than white psychology.) First, Yancy notes that we should not assume that the project of radical self-revision is even possible. And even if it is possible, we should not assume that it is easy or practicable. He writes that "Whiteness is not a flimsy category such that one can simply decide to cast it aside" (2008, 232-233). And although he supports attempts to "undo" whiteness, he qualifies this metaphor by noting that "it does not presuppose an ontology of the self that is capable, through a single act of will and intention, of rising above the white discursive streams within which that self is embedded" (2008, 232-233). As a result, he advises that the project of undoing whiteness would have to be ongoing, always working toward but never fully achieving its objective.

Yancy is skeptical about the success of radical self-revision insofar as white psychology is "embedded within one's embodied habitual engagement with the social world and...weaved within the unconscious, impacting everyday mundane transactions" (2008, 230). Individuals manifest racist tendencies in their behavior, often without realizing it, and those who witness these tendencies tend to reproduce them, also without realizing it. In support of this idea, Weisbuch et al. (2009) found that white television actors unwittingly exhibited distrust and discomfort toward black actors in their body language (even when the scene called for trusting, friendly interactions),

and that viewers who completed an Implicit Association Test after watching these scenes registered greater levels of racial bias. Yancy worries that the project of radical self-revision may rest on “the false notion that the self is completely in control of its own meanings and the contexts within which it is located” (2008, 234).

A closely related point is that because white psychology is deeply embedded and embodied, it is not available to introspection. White Americans may not realize that white psychology structures their thoughts, and may even think that they have uprooted white psychology when it is still firmly rooted. Yancy cautions that

Whiteness, after all, is a master of concealment; it is insidiously embedded within responses, reactions, good intentions, postural gestures, denials, and structural and material orders. (Yancy 2008, 229; see also Sullivan 2006)

The tenacious and deep-seated nature of white psychology makes it difficult for white people to comprehend and detect.

Because white psychology is embedded, embodied, and opaque, white antiracists are often surprised when white psychology manifests itself in their behavior. Yancy describes the sudden realization that one is thinking or acting in a racist manner, despite feeling committed to antiracism, as an “ambush” (Yancy 2008, Yancy 2017). Yancy uses the example of white, antiracist activist Tim Wise to illustrate this idea:

In 2003, he boarded a 737 headed to St. Louis. He notes, ‘I glanced into the cockpit...and there I saw something I had never seen before in all the years I had been flying: not one but two black pilots at the controls of the plane,’...Wise admits that he thought, ‘Oh my God, can these guys fly this plane?’ [Wise 2005, 133]. (2008, 230)

Given Wise’s extensive antiracist work and training, this moment allowed him to see that there were parts of his deeply embedded white racist self he didn’t know existed.

Yancy’s final worry about radical self-revision is that it can unwittingly reproduce the very aspects of white psychology that it seeks to uproot (Yancy 2008, 229). In pursuing this strategy, one may end up placing one’s own moral development at the center of one’s antiracism, striving to be on the “good” side of a good/racist binary, working around one’s own racial comfort, and so on.

In sum, Yancy gives us several reasons to be cautious about radical self-revision as a strategy for confronting white ignorance.⁸ We explore an alternative strategy, which can be pursued alongside or in place of radical self-revision.

3.2. Rational Self-Regulation

White psychology may be deeply embedded, embodied, and opaque, but its manifestations can be identified and controlled. A white American may be unaware of her white fragility or feeling of entitlement to racial comfort, but she can know when she is reacting defensively or policing a person of color's tone. We think that a promising strategy for resisting white psychology is to intervene on its manifestations. An American with white fragility can, despite her white fragility, refrain from acting defensively. A white American with a feeling of entitlement to racial comfort can, despite this feeling of entitlement, refrain from policing a person of color's tone. By suppressing the manifestations of white psychology, she can lower her defenses and learn about and accept the realities of racism.

We frame the process of intervening on the manifestations of white psychology in terms of *rational self-regulation*. By “self-regulation” we mean the process of controlling one's thoughts, desires, and emotions for the sake of some goal (Carver & Scheier 1998; Mischel 2014; Gross 1998). By “*rational self-regulation*” we mean the process of controlling one's thoughts, emotions, and desires for the sake of reasoning well and gaining knowledge. People engage in rational self-regulation all the time. They do it whenever they attempt to counter the influence of a bias. For instance, everyone suffers to some extent from the “planning fallacy,” or the tendency to underestimate the amount of time it will take to complete a task. However, by breaking a task down into sub-tasks, by estimating the time it will take to complete each sub-task, and by adding up all the times, one can achieve a more realistic prediction about the time needed to complete a task (Forsyth 2008). This is rational self-regulation: exerting effort to counteract a bias for the sake of reasoning well about something. Similarly, we suggest that white Americans can exert effort to counteract the influence of white psychology for the sake of reasoning well about racism. Rational self-regulation does not aim to uproot white psychology—as radical self-revision does—but it does aim to

⁸ On a more hopeful note, some strategies of radical self-revision appear to be effective in the long run (Gaertner et al. 2008; Devine et al. 2012). These strategies are similar to rational self-regulation, and thus rational self-regulation may be an effective short term strategy that can also lead to radical self-revision in the long term.

inhibit its worst manifestations, and to prevent it from sustaining white ignorance.

Rational self-regulation is a three-step process:

1. **Detection.** First, the subject must identify a mindset bias—in our case, a manifestation of white psychology.
2. **Strategy Selection.** Second, the subject must develop a strategy for suppressing this bias.
3. **Implementation.** Third, the subject must execute this strategy, returning to the first two stages to make adjustments in strategy and to identify new mindset biases that may arise.

In what follows, we discuss each step in greater detail.

3.2.1. Detection

Detection requires a basic understanding of white psychology and a vocabulary for describing it. This requirement raises a practical concern: how can the willfully ignorant be expected to critically examine their own biases and to accept that they are self-deceived? In response, we make two observations.

First, detection can be *interpersonal* as well as *intrapersonal*. Granted, a person who is ignorant of the persistence of racism in American society may not be willing or able to detect white fragility in herself, but her friends and family can point out her white fragility to her. The television show *Good Trouble* depicts an example of interpersonal detection. Davia, a white woman, vents to her friend Malika, a black woman, about the difficulties she faces teaching black high school students. When Malika suggests that Davia’s comments smack of anti-black bias, Davia storms off in anger. Malika later gives Davia a copy of Robin DiAngelo’s *White Fragility* with a note, acknowledging that Davia is not meaning to be racist, but encouraging Davia to be more self-critical. Davia at first throws the book in a drawer, but later retrieves it, reads it, and understands that her defensiveness had kept her from hearing and appreciating Malika’s concerns.

Second, we observe that recent changes in the political landscape have raised awareness among white Americans, especially left-leaning white Americans, of the persisting problems of racism. Pew polls (2017) report that in 2009, only 32% of left-leaning Americans viewed racism as a “big problem.” By 2017, the percentage jumped to 76%. Considering white Americans across the political spectrum, the percentage who view racism as a “big problem” more than doubled from 2009 (22%) to 2017 (52%). Robin

DiAngelo's *White Fragility* became a *New York Times* bestseller in 2018, suggesting that there are increasing numbers of white Americans who are open to critical self-reflection, with or without the help of others.

Detection, whether inter- or intrapersonal, requires the ability to recognize and name a manifestation of white psychology. An individual who can recognize only some manifestations, and who can name only some of them, will not be as good at detection as an individual who can recognize many manifestations, and who can name all of them. Robin DiAngelo (2018) has compiled a helpful list of manifestations of white psychology. By naming them, using the vocabulary that we assembled in section 2, individuals can better understand how these manifestations sustain white ignorance and can develop strategies for suppressing them. Here is part of DiAngelo's list with our identifications in brackets:

- “Lack of understanding about what race or racism is” [**narrow definition of racism**]
- “Seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization” [**ideology of individualism**]
- “Assuming everyone is having or can have our experience” [**white-centeredness**]
- “Lack of racial humility, and unwillingness to listen” [**feeling of entitlement to racial comfort**]
- “Lack of authentic interest in the perspectives of people of color” [**internalized white normativity**]
- “Need to maintain white solidarity, to save face, to look good” [**good/racist binary**]
- “Defensiveness about any suggestion that we are connected to racism” [**white fragility**]
- “A focus on intentions over impact” [**assumption of white innocence**] (DiAngelo 2018, 68-69)

3.2.2. *Strategy Selection*

The next step after Detection is Strategy Selection. Having identified a manifestation of white psychology, the agent must develop a strategy for suppressing it. The goal is not to eliminate white psychology, but to prevent it from sustaining white ignorance by enabling the gathering of evidence, the proper inference from this evidence, and/or the acceptance of the conclusion of that inference.

Strategies for suppressing white psychology fall under three general categories, depending on what type of knowledge is deployed to counter the influence of the mindset bias. Some strategies are based on the application of **procedural knowledge**, especially **emotion regulation skills**. To counter internalized white normativity, one must be able to generate interest and concern in the experiences of people of color. To counter white fragility and the feeling of entitlement to racial discomfort, one must be able to suppress, alter, or better tolerate feelings of discomfort, guilt, and anger.

Recent studies find that (1) some methods of emotion regulation are effective at eliciting desired emotions and eliminating undesired emotions, and that (2) the regulation of emotion can facilitate reasoning and the acquisition of knowledge (see Mayer, Caruso, and Salovey 2016 for a review of the literature). Thus, our claim that rational self-regulation can afford new knowledge of the persistence of racism is consistent with contemporary thinking about bias, emotion, and cognition.

A second set of strategies is based on the application of **factual knowledge**. White psychology often sustains ignorance by encouraging oversimplified, decontextualized, and ahistorical understandings of racism. For instance, the ideology of colorblindness, the myth of meritocracy, and a narrow definition of racism encourage people to think that the racism of the past is irrelevant to people's lives today. This ignorance can be corrected with factual knowledge about how the racism of the past is very relevant to people's lives today. For instance, Richard Rothstein's *The Color of Law* (2017) details how redlining policies in American cities following the Second World War have generated a vast wealth gap between white and black families today.

Merely having this factual knowledge is not enough. One must deliberately apply it following the detection of a manifestation of white psychology. In section 2 we discussed Jennifer Mueller's example of a student who, tasked with reflecting on the role that race played in her family history, quickly shifted from writing about the race of her grandfather to writing about his immigration status. Mueller reports that the student had been presented with information that ought to have overridden this manifestation of white psychology. In particular, the student had learned enough about the history of race in the United States to know that even non-English speaking immigrants who were white enjoyed legal, economic, and educational advantages that immigrants of color, not to mention the descendants of black American slaves, lacked. The student's failure to self-regulate in this case may have been the result of failing to detect the ideology of colorblindness or of failing to apply what she had learned about American history. Had the student's professor or another student pointed out this shift

in vocabulary, then the student may have been able to draw on her knowledge of American history to override the ideology of colorblindness.

Cognitive scientist Keith Stanovich (2018) argues that humans are cognitive misers, who prefer low-effort reasoning to high-effort reasoning unless they detect an error in the former. Even then, humans only switch to high-effort reasoning if they can quickly identify pertinent information to facilitate their reasoning. Otherwise, they default back to low-effort reasoning. Studies confirm that the detection of error *combined* with access to pertinent information does reliably lead to improved reasoning and the acquisition of knowledge (Stanovich 2018). Thus, our claim that the conscientious application of factual knowledge can override the tendency to rely on oversimplified, decontextualized, and ahistorical understandings of racism is consistent with current thinking in cognitive science.

A third set of strategies is based on the application of **conceptual knowledge**. Several aspects of white psychology encourage individuals to conceptualize facts in a certain way, which sustains ignorance, when an alternative conceptualization would facilitate the acquisition of new knowledge. For instance, the ideology of individualism leads individuals to conceive of race consciousness as incompatible with individualism. Recall the white man in *The Color of Fear* who wondered aloud why a man who self-identified as Chinese American couldn't just identify as American. The false dilemma between race-consciousness and individualism can be overridden by observing that having an identity—even based on facts about oneself that one did not choose—is never thought to conflict with individuality, *except* in the case of race. The white man would not have flinched had the Chinese American identified as a Christian, or as a dentist, or as an only child, or as an introvert. None of these identities are thought to conflict with individualism.

Many components of white psychology promote oversimplified, decontextualized, and ahistorical thoughts about race. *Either* you identify as the member of a race *or* you identify as an individual. *Either* you are good *or* you are racist. We've suggested that more nuanced, careful reasoning can override these mindsets. In at least one case, however, white psychology promotes ignorance by encouraging overly nuanced, hair-splitting reasoning: the presumption of white innocence. "Yes, white Americans perpetuate and benefit from white supremacy, *but...*" The desire to preserve one's starting assumption that white people are innocent in the face of overwhelming evidence of racism results in mental gymnastics. To override this tendency toward convenient distinctions and qualifications, a considerably *less* nuanced and careful thought is needed. In his recent book *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019), Ibram X. Kendi proposes that we ought to think of ourselves as either racist or antiracist, and to deny that there is any such thing

as a neutral non-racist. “Racists” act in ways that knowingly or unknowingly perpetuate racial injustice. “Antiracists” act in ways that deliberately aim toward dismantling systems of racial oppression. The assumption of white innocence feeds on the idea that between the oppressed and the (very few) oppressors are the (very many) innocent bystanders who happen to benefit from the oppression. One way to neutralize this way of thinking is to eliminate the all-too-tempting category of the innocent bystander.

To see how strategies can be matched to manifestations, consider again DiAngelo’s list of manifestations.

- “Lack of understanding about what race or racism is” [**narrow definition of racism**, override with factual knowledge]
- “Seeing ourselves as individuals, exempt from the forces of racial socialization” [**ideology of individualism**, override with factual knowledge]
- “Lack of racial humility, and unwillingness to listen” [**feeling of entitlement to racial comfort**, override with emotion regulation skills]
- “Lack of authentic interest in the perspectives of people of color” [**internalized white normativity**, override with emotion regulation skills]
- “Need to maintain white solidarity, to save face, to look good” [**good/racist binary**, override with conceptual knowledge]
- “A focus on intentions over impact” [**assumption of white innocence**, override with conceptual knowledge] (DiAngelo 2018, 68-69)

Strategies should, however, be tailored to the context and personality of the person involved. We do not think that one strategy will always work for each component of white psychology. The selection of an effective strategy requires practical wisdom, which can be improved through consistent, mindful practice and reflection.

3.2.3. Implementation

Once the agent has selected pertinent knowledge to counter the influence of white psychology, she must implement her strategy, returning to the first two stages to make adjustments in strategy and to identify new mindset biases that may arise. In what follows we work through an example that illustrates how rational self-regulation might play out in practice.

Imagine that a white person is browsing Netflix for a movie to watch. A new drama pops up, featuring a predominantly black cast. Despite loving dramas, the person's first thought is, "this movie is not for me," manifesting internalized white normativity. She scrolls past, but her boyfriend takes notice. "Why did you scroll past that last one?" he asks. Then he adds, playfully, "Sure, it doesn't have Ryan Gosling, or Ryan Reynolds, or some other white guy named Ryan, but it's exactly the type of movie you love to watch." Horrified at the insinuation, the woman becomes defensive, manifesting white fragility. She at first tries to deflect blame, coming up with post-hoc explanation for why she doesn't want to watch that movie, and then she tries to shift blame, saying that she only scrolled past because she thought *he'd* want to watch a movie with a white guy named Ryan. The boyfriend remains silent, giving her a look that says, "*you know* what's going on here." The woman stops to reflect and recognizes that her defensiveness is a manifestation of white fragility. She calms herself down, scrolls back to the movie she skipped over before, and presses play.

Suppose that our white movie viewer has, despite an initial lack of interest, and despite a subsequent feeling of defensiveness, decided to watch *The Hate U Give*, a movie revolving around police violence directed against black people. Afterward, she discusses the movie with her boyfriend. She says, "I totally understand why the protestors in the movie were protesting, but their anger was *so intense*—it was really off-putting. I feel like the protest would have been more effective if they had been less angry." She pauses, looks at her boyfriend, and says, "I'm tone policing, aren't I?" He smiles. She thinks out loud, "Okay, so the anger makes me uncomfortable, but that shouldn't keep me from hearing what they are saying. They are saying that the judicial system is failing to hold police accountable for their behavior—that the institutions that *I* count on to keep me safe and give me justice are not doing the same for them." The night began with the woman scrolling past a movie, but ended with her coming to a deeper understanding of systemic racism and institutional bias.

We use this example to emphasize how deeply intertwined the components of white psychology can be. Defeat one, and another takes its place. Nevertheless, we have hoped to show that the components of white psychology *can* be defeated, and it is not even that difficult to defeat them individually. The challenge is to remain vigilant and to recognize that white ignorance has multiple lines of defense. Through rational self-regulation, agents can lower their defenses and open themselves up to the realities of racism.

Rational self-regulation is beneficial, but it is not a panacea. It is a tool for short-circuiting white psychology in its continual maintenance of white

ignorance. The result of rational self-regulation is, ideally, greater knowledge and understanding of the realities of white supremacy on the part of the white antiracist. Rational self-regulation can easily be incorporated into broader, more ambitious antiracist projects. Yancy urges us not to forget what is at stake here: “While antiracist whites take time to get their shit together, a luxury that is a species of privilege, Black bodies and bodies of color continue to suffer, their bodies cry out for the political and existential urgency for the *immediate* undoing of the oppressive operations of whiteness” (2008, 229).

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