**The White Racial Frame: Historical and Contemporary**

***Interpreting Joe R. Feagin 2013***

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**A Brief on the White Racial Frame**

What is “the white racial frame” (WRF)? The white racial frame is a way of framing reality -- a frame or template through which (or in terms of which) we make sense of the world. It involves a way of seeing, knowing, valuing, interpreting, and emotionally responding. It is embedded in beliefs, assumptions, and worldview beholden to notions of white superiority and the inferiority of non-white people.

The white racial frame is an “interested” or “invested” system of naming, developed in the period of the Enlightenment, exploration, and colonization by European intellectuals (travelers, writers, scientists, politicians, theologians, and philosophers), who named the world from the perspective, context, and interests that served their enterprise (economic exploitation), their social-economic purpose. It was they who created the word "white" to name themselves and to set forth the idea of "white" and the concept of "whiteness" as a way of distinguishing themselves from those who were not white, those who they perceived to be "other," those who would come to serve their interests. “Whiteness” was the *digest* of the ideas, representations, rationales, and social patterns that embodied their race-oriented perspectives.

The white racial frame is a particular instrument for organizing experiences, giving us a cognitive map – a way of knowing (epistemology). Specifically, the white racial frame is the lens, template, or frame, given to us in the ways US historians tell or interpret history, in the ways we experience each other because of living in a social system in which race is the central organizing principle. The messages about us tell us - who has virtue and is to be recognized and deferred to, whose rights and needs are to be attended to, what norms and laws are to be created for whose benefit, who has entitlement to land and natural resources, who ought to rule - to be in charge, whose norms and cultural ways are to define what constitutes "civilization," proper behavior, or morality.

The white racial frame comes to us through language. Our language represents the world in a culturally distinct way, providing explanation, categorization and classification, meaningful symbols for encoding and decoding what we experience, imagery for reality. We use our language to construct and share meaning with others - we name things; in the very naming we say how the things relate to other things (explanation, classification, how to feel about that which is named, implications for action). Because something is named in a particular way, we are able to "know" it, form assumptions about it, interpret it, form a belief and value system, and form a system of social relations around it. This is what "the white racial frame" is about - all aspects of what I have just identified.

In a word, the idea of "the white racial frame" is that we all see the world, make sense of the world, through the *lens* or *framework* of the culture of which we are a part. (The social world and the ***culture*** arising out of the social world, of which we are a part, are founded in racism.) We make sense of the world through the lens of language and story, through the cultural symbols and cognitive categories provided in a culture. Language reflects the shared experiences, understandings, and collective patterns developed over time by a people (i.e., culture).

The white racial frame, then, constitutes a worldview (a unified way of seeing how the world holds together), a system of ideas that serve those who create that system of ideas (e.g., notions of what constitutes "superior" or "inferior" and who possesses such characteristics), beliefs, values, assumptions, expectations, interpretations, and appropriate feelings about a thing or person.

The white racial frame or "whiteness" is not a condemnation of "white" people or "white" culture, it is a summing up of an ideology or worldview that holds white (European) civilization as the essential definition of what must count as virtuous, innately and universally good, along with preeminent rights and privileges – to rule and to be the universal standard of correctness. The WRF and whiteness is not about skin color or ancestry it is about a belief system, a way of knowing the world. A person of any “race” can hold to a “white-framed” worldview or even a white supremacist worldview. But why are some of us more susceptible to embracing the ideology of whiteness or of white supremacy? Is it not socialization and conformity to prevailing norms and social patterns where those norms or social patterns coincide with our self-interests or with those of our identity groups?

What is to be remembered, here, is that the white racial frame is LEARNED, received in the process of socialization, of enculturation. We are all exposed to the white racial frame and affected by it because it comes with our learning of language and culture. All who are exposed to US culture (speaking only for the US) are exposed to the white racial frame in the media and in all of our cultural institutions - schools, churches, temples, courts, businesses, workplaces, and social networks. The point is to recognize the white racial frame in its various manifestations and the ways it is affecting us.

The white racial frame is a "cultural" (knowledge, beliefs, worldview) and “structural” (arrangement of practices) phenomenon, something socially constructed; again, it is learned. Being so, it can be identified, unlearned, and dealt with (de-constructed). This is what Joe R. Feagin's text gives us. Through the medium of Feagin’s retelling of our history, we come to see what the "WRF" looks like in its various forms (words, behaviors, images), its origins, its articulation in “back stage” or “off’ stage,” enactments, and the concrete ways it came to be embedded in our way of life.

*The White Racial Frame* (text of Joe R. Feagin 2013) gives us a way of seeing how we have come to be who we are as the people of the United States and how through the WRF we have come to perceive and understand others and ourselves in a particular way. *The White Racial Frame* also invites us to look at the historical push-back from both particular whites and people of color in the “liberty and justice frame” and the “resistance/counter-frame” of people of color. With this foundation, we are led to ask what can be done and, currently, what is being done to create a new social order where democracy may prevail in reality, not just in name as a cover-up for exploitive economic relationships.

**The Contemporary White Racial Frame**

***Excerpts from, and notes on “The White Racial Frame,” Feagin 2010:***

The contemporary *white racial frame* not only encompasses cognitive stereotypes and articulated values (the important conceptions of what is desirable or undesirable on racial matters), but also important nonlinguistic elements such as racialized emotions, images, and even smells. Altogether, these various elements of a racial frame act as an “organizing principle;” that is, the ideas, images, feelings, dispositions, assumptions, perspectives, and worldview *about race* are used to interpret social reality (used to make sense of relational roles and responsibilities, to understand who is owed deference, who is deserving, who ought to control or lead, and so forth) (Note: page references are from **Feagin 2010**)

Fostered constantly by white elites through the institutions of cultural transmission –academia and faith communities, political discourse and media – and reinforced by a majority of white parents and peers, the contemporary white racial frame is deep and pervasive, having numerous sub-frames. “The white racial frame is so institutionalized that all major media outlets [including MPR] operate out of some version of it” (141).

This dominant frame shapes our thinking and action in everyday life situations. [This is so for all of us who live by the norms and values of US society – whites as well as people of color. We absorb perspectives, assumptions, dispositions, and values of the white racial frame in ways outside of our awareness; even while impacted by it, some of us are aware of its insidious, pervasive action and resist it with *counter framing*. ] Where and when whites find it appropriate, they consciously or unconsciously use this frame in accenting the privileges and virtues of whiteness and in evaluating and relating to Americans of color.

**A. Virtuous Whiteness**

1. Sense of white moral Teflon – No matter how many people of color find a white community intolerable and eventually leave it, whites continue to understand themselves to be good, decent folk Whites’ “accented view of *white virtue* overrides the actual reality of racist performances” (126) with no conscious awareness of, or with major minimization of, the actual racist behavior being enacted by oneself or others in one’s white community.
   * No on-going interrogation of what might be lacking or morally imperfect in oneself and one’s community in regards to issues of race
   * Thought only rarely given to what one could, and would wish to, improve in one’s racial understandings, and no significant transformation in that regard
   * Strong sense of personal and group entitlement to what whites have – with an underlying assumption that this is fair – while willfully ignoring (intentionally forgetting, remaining “invincibly ignorant” of) the horrific history and the on-going injustices that, in fact, produce these things. (147)

One of the main things whites accept as a right is “symbolic racial capital,” which “encompasses the shared assumptions, understandings, and inclinations to interact in certain ways” traditional to white families and networks. It is in exercising this “symbolic capital” that a white individual receives the multitude of daily privileges associated with whiteness. Many of these privileges protect whites from bearing the brunt of society’s violence, such as profiling by police, injustice from employers, oppositional responses from important institutions, disapproval and exclusion from social networks, etc. (137)

1. Belief in a great chain-of-being, with European-American “civilization” as its peak – This frame provides the way most whites orient themselves in U.S. society. (95)
   * Understanding of white institutions to be the epitome of human accomplishment (and white faith communities to be the manifestation of God’s presence in the world). Interactions with people of color are approached from a strongly paternalistic frame. (131)
   * Assumption that the white worldview is the “natural” order of our society and that people of color should accommodate and assimilate to it. White pressure for conformance and assimilation has serious negative consequences for people of color. (120-121)
   * No on-going interrogation of what white communities typically do not understand that communities of color *do* understand. By failing to actively interrogate what one does not know – what is not visible from one’s position – a white community loses the normal human capacity to self-critique and to create space for its own learning and growing. The failure to engage in a normal level of self-questioning results in significant levels of ignorance. Because the ignorance is not visible from within the white racial frame, whites do not perceive the seriously problematic nature of their understandings.
   * Thought is only rarely given to being guided by the wisdom from the margins, and no significant transformation from the white norm in this regard
   * “Worshipful stance toward a supposed white superiority in knowledge, markets, technology and political institutions,” e.g., assertion that the U.S. is the “best country” in the world. (147, 151)
2. Experience of whiteness as emotionally normative – e.g., whose race is “unmarked”, who “belongs,” who is “naturally” one-of-us, who we find ourselves easily comfortable with
   * In the dominant frame, notions of human beauty and social attractiveness are developed by whites; the frame “beautifies” the white form and features and white social norms, to the detriment of all others. (107)
3. Denial of racism’s magnitude and impact – *see* Pew Research Center study, pp. 130-131
   * Operating from the assumption that the white experience is the universal experience
   * Misperceiving and rarely thinking about the devastating destruction wrought by racism (including within the white institution itself), and failing to acknowledge and to explicitly address that devastation during social interactions
   * Believing the harm of racism to be limited to, and measuring the impact of racism only as affecting, the particular individual of color involved in an incident; failing to recognize the huge compounding of harms to the entire family and community.
4. Color-blind, “un-raced” nature of white thinking and acting
   * “We’re post-racial here” (despite all the research that proves that we *do* see race and act on what we see in major ways)
   * “Let’s not discuss racism here” – learned pronounced discomfort in talking critically about issues of continuing white racism (99)

1. **Negative Stereotyping of People of Color**

In U.S. society today, white progressives “know” not to engage in negative stereotyping in “front-stage interactions” – settings that include white strangers or people of color. Instead whites “know” to engage in negative stereotyping only in “back-stage” settings – settings that are all-white and where participants can assume that no serious objection will be raised to the performance. In back-stage settings, the expression of the white racial frame and the lack of objection to that expression provide a “social glue” that creates a sense of shared identity for the white group. (127-128)

“Even when whites do racist performances targeting Americans of color, the old racial frame accents that they, as whites, still should be considered to be “good” and “decent” people. The dominant racial frame not only provides the fodder for whites’ racist performances, but also the means of excusing those performances.” Such back-stage actions are interpreted as harmless, as “no big deal,” and often as just good interactive “fun.” (129)

Back-stage racial performances provide the images and emotions that generate an array of forms of discrimination by whites within the institutional contexts of society. (130) “Everyday interactions of friends and relatives in these significant networks make up the ‘muscles and tendons that make the bones of structural racism move.’” (94)

1) Major forms of negative stereotyping – In the white racial frame, whites carry a (usually unconscious) sense of moral “Velcro” in their regard of people of color, a recurring suspicion that persons of color are behaving, or will likely behave, immorally. Furthermore, this assumed immorality is perceived and responded to as a “serious problem.” (Contrast this to white moral Teflon.)

2) Continuing white framing of indigenous peoples – primarily consists of rendering indigenous peoples invisible. Without a victim there is no continuing crime. Without any surviving native peoples, there are no remaining treaty rights to the land and natural resources. Without any indigenous people visible to white perception, Native images can be freely parodied (sports mascots), sacred rituals and objects can be appropriated, etc. (112)

Major framing of indigenous peoples takes the form of deeply embedded associations with:

* + “savages” and “blood-thirsty warriors” [the Fighting Sioux]

3) Continuing white framing of African American peoples: is highly developed and complex, compared with other groups of color. “Whites have long placed the anti-black sub-frame at the heart of the white racial frame.” Thus we observe phenomenon such as:

* + Most whites associate the phrase “people of color” as a referent specifically to African Americans. (99-100)
  + Blacks are hyper-visible to white eyes, including white liberal eyes. E.g., the majority of whites *greatly* exaggerate the size of the black population in the U.S. – much more than the white misperception of the sizes of other populations of color. (102)
  + Personal journals used in Picca and Feagin’s research study show African Americans to have been the subject of three-fourths of the racist performances reported, and these anti-black performances were highly emotionally laden. (103)

Major framing of African Americans takes the form of deeply embedded associations with:

* animals and animalistic traits (subhuman)
* deviant gender roles, hyper-sexuality and threat to white sexual performance
* criminality, violence and danger
* dirt and ignorance
* claimed “ungrateful” and oppositional orientation (163)
* incapacity for self-determination or self-protection, and therefore requiring white paternalism and care

The primary emotional message is that African Americans are to be feared. (110)

4) Continuing white framing of Asian American peoples:

* “an alien body and a threat to the American national family,” drawing from former associations with “the yellow peril.” (113)
* devious, immoral and threatening to dominant society’s interests, including a distrust of Asian-American “purposes” in serving in the white-constructed role of “model minority”
* incapable of normal human communication, with white racial framing encouraging mocking of various Asian speech patterns and “accents”

5) Continuing white framing of Latino peoples:

* “lower-scale people” in the “great chain-of-being,” lacking ambition and mental capacity
* invaders who carry disease and burden white society
* “ridiculous” language conventions, readily able to be mocked by most whites

The *white racial frame* gives meaning and power to experience. A racist performance (e.g., a racist joke) “resonates with these racist commentaries,” causing that racist performance to have much more impact on the thinking and actions of participants than the performance would otherwise have. For example, a similar joke about whites would not have this strong impact, because there is no negative anti-white frame in white minds for such commentaries to resonate with.” (127).

Another example can be seen in the 2008 presidential election, during which white supremacist groups – and later most mainstream media and many Republican political groups – focused intensively, for months, on a story about then-Senator Barack Obama’s former African American minister, Dr. Jeremiah Wright, because of what the media regarded as his “radical” views of U.S. society. This mainstream media story lasted so long because the image of a supposedly “radical” black minister resonates loudly with the “dangerous black man” image in the white racial frame. In contrast, a somewhat similar story about the controversial views of an arch-conservative, anti-Catholic minister who was a friend and supporter of Senator John McCain did not last very long in the same media. McCain’s minister story received less that one tenth of the coverage than the Wright story received. The main reason is that there is no common framing in most white minds of “white men as dangerous” for McCain’s minister to resonate with. So the story about him died after a few days. (143-144)

**C. Counter-Framing by Communities of Color** (155-191)

People of color often pull the white racial frame to front-stage settings. This is necessary if the frame is to be discussed, analyzed and addressed within the society. (99) Major themes of counter-framing include:

* accenting of the humanity and strengths of communities of color and their historical forebears – aggressive countering of negative stereotyped framing
* evoking of the “liberty and justice for all” frame, with critique of its hypocrisy in the context of U.S. society
* acknowledgement and analysis of the “unjust enrichment” of whites
* critique of white social structures and conventions, of the claimed morality and wisdom of whites
* calls to revolutionary action

**D. Countering Strategies:**

***The following paragraphs are from Joe R. Feagin 2011, Keynote presentation, Overcoming Racism Conference, 2011. The White Racial Frame: What It Is – How It Works.***

Countering or eliminating racism is an uphill struggle, but systemic racism is human-made and can thus be unmade—even in part only with extraordinary and substantial efforts.

**(1) Areas of personal action**: We must study, know our racist history well. We must teach ourselves and others how to respond to racist events: **Call racist acts out aggressively**. Strategies such as: Use pointed humor (“Rob, Did you learn that joke from the Klan?”). **Recast racist event** to accent positive framing. Where people have conflicting frames in minds (e.g., justice/fairness frame versus white racist frame), activate the justice/fairness frame. Counter-framing is required for change. We must regularly call out racist performances, backstage and frontstage. We must teach/encourage many more (especially white) people to “see” and understand everyday racism & how to **dissent often in all settings, backstage and frontstage**.

**(2) Areas of collective action**: Create more **national** **multiracial organizations** aggressively calling out individual/systemic racism & teaching how to challenge/eradicate everyday racism. Create Stereotyping 101, Racism 101 courses in media & from pre-kindergarten to grad school. Create well-organized movements to aggressively pressure organizations (e.g. media, legislatures) to honestly assess society’s racial oppression and press for structural change. Only ***large-scale coalitions/movements can*** bring **major** changes in systemic racism. Eternal organizing is the price of liberty.