

**MEDIA EDUCATION
FOUNDATION
STUDY GUIDE**

Tim Wise on White Privilege
Racism, White Denial & the Costs of Inequality

Study Guide by Jason Young

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we’ve structured the guide so that you have the option of focusing in depth on one section of the video at a time. We’ve also set it up to help you stay close to the video’s main line of argument as it unfolds. The structure of the guide therefore mirrors the structure of the video, moving through each of the video’s sections with a series of key summary points, discussion questions, and assignments specific to that section.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of each section of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

In this lecture, Tim Wise, the author of *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son*, offers a deeply personal take on whiteness, white privilege, and racism in America. Wise explains how white privilege damages not only people of color, but white people as well, in the process providing an accessible, and powerful, introduction to the social construction of racial identities.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

- 1) What is race? What were the messages you heard growing up about your race? Other races? Do you think these messages about race are based on physical characteristics and differences assigned at birth or are filtered through cultural beliefs and learned? Explain.
- 2) Do you believe the United States is a racist society? Why or why not? How would you define racism, anyway? Is it a societal and institutional phenomenon, or a personal, individual mindset? Perhaps both?
- 3) What is privilege? How can it be applied to race in the U.S.? Who has it? Who does not? How can people with privilege affect society in ways people without privilege cannot?
- 4) Name some examples where white people receive certain advantages – either unconsciously or consciously – that people of color do not receive. Are these examples of white privilege institutional or interpersonal?
- 5) What are some of the costs of racism for white people? Why should white people work to address white privilege? And most importantly, how can all people work collectively to address issues of race and privilege?

INTRODUCTION

Key Points

- Tim Wise doesn't claim to be an expert on race, and credits people of color with much of what he knows about racism, but he does believe that his white skin gives him an advantage when it comes to talking about white privilege.
- He hopes one day a person of color will be able to give his same lecture and be taken as seriously as he expects to be taken.

Question for Discussion & Writing

Do you believe a person of color could come to your campus or community and give a lecture on white privilege? Why or why not?

Assignment

Keep a record of the proclaimed “experts” you read, see, or hear from this semester – whether it’s another lecturer on campus, a pundit on a cable news channel, or the author of your textbook, etc. Research the person’s credentials, and then answer the following questions:

- Who decided I should listen to this person?
- What makes this person a proclaimed expert on this topic?
- What other perspective(s) should I hear from on this topic?
- When it comes to selecting experts, does there seem to be a bias toward academic credentials?

THE ERASURE OF RACE IN POLITICS & CULTURE

Key Points

- Politicians often talk about issues like poverty, housing, education, and healthcare, but they rarely connect them to the role that racism plays in the United States.
- While the Fair Housing Act was passed in 1968, the highest number of discrimination complaints based on race was 38 years later, in 2006.
- The media often reports individual hate crimes, while systematic and institutionalized injustice is not typically reported. For example, a 2004 study published by the American Journal of Public Health found that, between 1991 and 2000, there were almost one million black people in the U.S. who died because of insufficient healthcare. The study received almost no media attention.
- Black and Latino males are three times more likely than white males to have their cars stopped and searched for drugs – even though white males are four-and-a-half times more likely to actually have drugs on them when they are stopped.
- During training sessions with law enforcement officers, Wise asks, “What’s the first thing you think when you see a young black or Latino male driving a nice car in your neighborhood?” Without exception, they respond, “Drug dealer.” Wise then asks, “What’s the first thing you think when you see a young white male driving the same type of car in the same community?” Again, without exception, they say, “Spoiled little rich kid. Daddy probably bought him the car.”
- The average white family in America has 12 times the accumulated net worth of the average African American family, and eight times the accumulated net worth of the average Latino family.
- In the middle of the 20th century, loans were all but off limits to people of color, even though white working class families near the poverty line were routinely given loans.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Why does Wise suggest that issues like poverty, housing, education, and healthcare are race-related issues? What other political issues are race-related but rarely debated in that context?
2. Why do you think mainstream media report on individual, interpersonal cases of racism far more than systematic and institutionalized forms of racial injustice?
3. What are your thoughts on racial profiling? Do you feel it can be an efficient, effective, and fair way for law enforcement officers to prevent crime? Why or why not?
4. Why do you think American wealth is distributed primarily among people who are white? What historical periods and specific events may have led to this? Explain.

Assignments

1. Watch a political debate on television or the Internet. It may be either a debate for political office or a panel discussion on a news network like CNN, Fox, or MSNBC. As you watch, think about Wise's analysis of how race shapes public discourse in ways we often don't even notice, and record your impressions. Be sure to respond to each of the following: Who is debating? What is the debate about? Do any of the debaters mention race? If so, what were their arguments? If not, do you believe race should have been considered during the debate? Why or why not?
2. Review the facts about the American healthcare system presented in Michael Moore's documentary *Sicko*: http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/Sicko_Facts.pdf

Think about these facts in relation to Tim Wise's observations about how race often factors into policy issues, and write a paper exploring whether or not you think race and white privilege are relevant to debates about healthcare in America. Be sure to look beyond Wise's lecture and the *Sicko* factsheet as you build support for your perspective.
3. Research the history of the War on Drugs, and write a paper examining how race has – or has not – factored into its execution. Consider these questions as you frame your argument: Do you think the war on drugs has disproportionately targeted African-Americans and other racial minorities? Do you think it has disproportionately targeted white people? Or do you think it has been pretty much color blind? Beyond its execution, do you think the War on Drugs has shaped perceptions of race in the United States over the years? Be sure to cite Wise's lecture, in addition to your own sources, to lend support to your arguments and illustrate your key points.
4. Administer a survey to a sample group on your campus or in your community. Ask questions, and offer multiple choice answers, similar to those Wise asks during his training sessions with law enforcement officers. Be prepared to report your findings to the class.
5. Research one of the following U.S. legislative policies: the Indian Removal Action, the Homestead Act, Jim Crow laws, the Wagner Act, the Social Security Act of 1935, the Housing and Urban Development Act. Then write a paper about how this policy may have given advantages to white people. If you think your chosen policy was enacted and enforced without any racial bias whatsoever, then write a paper explaining how and why – specifically – the arguments Tim Wise presents are not relevant in any way to this specific policy. Either way, after analyzing the racial dynamics inherent in these policies, talk about whether you believe traces of this policy still exist today.

WHITE DENIAL

Key Points

- In every generation, white people have said that racial discrimination is not a significant national problem. For example:
 - A recent poll revealed only 6% of white people believe racism is a national problem;
 - In 1963, 80% of white people believed that black people were treated equally;
 - In 1962, 90% of white people believed that black children received equal education;
 - At the time of the March on Washington in the summer of 1963, 2/3 of white people believed that the civil rights movement was asking for too much too soon;
 - More than a hundred years earlier, in 1850, Dr. Samuel Cartwright said he believed that slaves who ran away from bondage were mentally ill – a disease he termed drapetomania.
- The dominant group is the norm by which all minority groups are compared. According to Wise, this is why February is recognized each year as Black History Month, while there is no White History Month. His point is that white privilege is so ingrained, and normalized, that it's basically White History Month every other month of the year.
- Racism is perceived as affecting only the “underprivileged” and not the dominant group. Yet for every act of racism against the “underprivileged,” there is an advantage given to the “overprivileged.”

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. According to Wise, what is white denial? How is it prevalent in our society today?
2. Do you believe racial discrimination is a significant national problem? Why or why not?
3. How are minority groups compared – and positioned in relation – to the dominant white group? Be sure to give examples other than those from Wise’s lecture.
4. What are your thoughts on Black History Month? Should there also be months dedicated to other minority groups? How about a White History Month? Why or why not?
5. How does racism affect both minority and dominant groups? Do you think that believing racism only affects the underprivileged is a form of white denial? Explain.

Assignments

1. Tim Wise’s lecture on white privilege was given in 2007. Research the latest poll data on how Americans view race and racism. Write a paper comparing your research to the history of white denial Wise discusses.
2. Research the American physician Samuel Cartwright, and write a paper on his scientific contributions to society. To watch a satirical commercial for the fictional “Cartwright Institute for Freedom Illnesses,” download this clip from the 2004 film *CSA: The Confederate States of America*: http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/Cartwright_Institute.zip
3. Research the origins of Black History Month. How has it evolved over the years since its inception? What was the theme of the most recent Black History Month? What is the significance of that theme?
4. Read Wise’s book *Between Barack and a Hard Place: Racism and White Denial in the Age of Obama*. According to Wise, how did the election of President Barack Obama feed the culture of white denial?

UNBURDENED BY RACE

Key Points

- Tim Wise grew up without class privilege, but he was perceived in school as being more capable than students of color. When he got bad grades, he was seen simply as underperforming.
- White people don't need to worry about their actions being ascribed to their race, whereas people of color constantly have to worry about their performance triggering negative group stereotypes.
- When white people perform terrorist acts -- as when Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols blew up a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168 people -- their whiteness is never part of the news story. However, when people of color perform terrorist acts, like the 19 Arab Muslims who attacked the World Trade Center, their ethnicity and race dominate media coverage.
- As a capitalist society, the United States encourages its citizens to take advantage of their advantages -- and guard their privileges.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. What is class privilege? How is it different from racial privilege? How is it similar? List as many examples of privilege as you can, and compare and contrast each to what you know about white privilege.
2. Why do you think white students are perceived as simply underperforming when they receive bad grades in school? If you are white, has this ever happened to you? If you are not white, have you ever witnessed it happen? Explain.
3. Why do you think the terrorist attacks on 9/11 led to increased hatred for Arabs and Muslims when the Oklahoma City bombing didn't lead to increased hatred for white people or Christians? Explain.
4. Do you believe the economic system of capitalism encourages American citizens to take advantage of their privileges? Is this necessarily a bad thing? How do we square this mentality with other American values, like equality and fairness and justice?

Assignments

1. Take some time to analyze your own upbringing. Write a personal account of all the ways privilege may have played a role in how you grew up.
2. Within one month of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the popular television series *The West Wing* offered its reaction to the attacks in an episode called "Isaac and Ishmael." Download this short clip: <http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/WestWing911.zip> and write a reaction paper relating the clip to Wise's lecture.
3. Research capitalism, from its early forms up to its modern day incarnation in the United States. Write a paper exploring how a free market economy can contribute to racism and class bias. Be specific, and don't forget to analyze the role of privilege in this economic system.

THE CREATION OF WHITENESS

Key Points

- Prior to the mid 1600s, in the colonies that would later become the United States, there was no importance placed on whiteness.
- By the 1670s, the indentured servitude of Africans was on the rise. So to keep white European servants and black African servants from forming a rebellion against the power elite, white European servants were given certain privileges that black African servants were not, including land and the ability to testify in court.
- A couple centuries later, during the Civil War, rich Southerners persuaded poor white people, who didn't even own slaves, to fight by convincing them that their skin color was more important than their interest in a free job market.
- This mentality continues today. For example, in 2005, the two communities hit the hardest by Hurricane Katrina were the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans and St. Bernard Parish, Chalmette – which were 94% black and 95% white, respectively. Both have high levels of poverty. When Wise asked citizens of St. Bernard Parish who was to blame for the area's economic status, they believed it was people of color.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. How was whiteness co-opted by the power elite of colonial America to prevent both white European and black African servants from forming a rebellion?
2. How did rich Southerners persuade poor white people to fight in the Civil War? Why would people who didn't even own slaves fight in a war for slavery?
3. What contemporary examples show that the "creation of whiteness" has continuing ramifications? In these instances, which members of society are advantaged and which are disadvantaged? Is it possible for some members to be both advantaged and disadvantaged at the same time? Explain.

Assignments

1. In the old countries of Europe, before the colonization of America, there were many violent conflicts among Europeans. Research these conflicts, and write a paper that sheds light on the social situation leading up to the colonization of America.
2. Research indentured servitude in both Europe and the American colonies before the introduction of African servants. Write a paper that compares and contrasts early indentured servitude with American slavery.
3. This section of Wise's lecture focuses on the creation of whiteness as a social construct. Take a step back, and write a research paper on the origins and theories of the appearance of light-skinned people on the earth.

PRIVILEGE & PATHOLOGY

Key Points

- White privilege generates anxiety among advantaged white people because they are constantly afraid of others gaining on them.
- In a June 2004 study, the American Medical Association found that the rates of mental disorders like anxiety, depression, and substance abuse were twice the global average in the United States.
- An example of the real world intruding on privilege is high school shootings. Since white males almost always commit these acts of violence, members of the targeted communities often react by saying, “This wasn’t supposed to happen here.”
- After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, many people of privilege reacted by saying, “Why do they hate us?” But many people of color did not react this way. Wise believes it’s because people of color tend to be more aware of what others think of them than people of privilege.
- Before the War in Iraq, when people of color were asked whether or not to invade Iraq, they said no. Overwhelmingly, people of privilege said yes. White politicians even said, “They are going to greet us as liberators.”
- Privilege affects both those who have it and those who do not. For example, it allows our policymakers to act in our name against our interests.
- Wise believes it is every American’s duty to fight the injustice of privilege.

Questions for Discussion & Writing

1. Why do you think the United States has twice the rate of anxiety, depression, and substance abuse than the global average? What factors could be responsible for this? What role, if any, might white privilege play in this? Explain.
2. What do you know about school shootings? Where do they happen? Who commits them? Who is targeted? Why do they happen? What role, if any, do you think white privilege plays in these tragedies? If you don't think race has had anything to do with these kinds of shootings – even though virtually all the shooters in the highest-profile cases have been white – do you think your opinion would be different if all the shooters had been black? Explain.
3. What were your initial reactions to the 9/11 terrorist attacks? Years later, why do you think we were attacked?
4. How did Iraqis greet the U.S. during the 2003 invasion of Iraq? Were the Americans greeted, as many predicted, as liberators? Why or why not? How is this relevant to Wise's overall analysis of how privilege shapes perceptions?
5. According to Tim Wise, how does privilege affect both those who have it and those who do not? Explain.

Assignments

1. The United States has five times more anxiety, depression, and substance abuse than Nigeria. Research the current political climate of Nigeria, and write a paper comparing it to the United States. How and why do you think the most powerful and privileged people on the earth have so many more mental disorders? Explain.
2. Research the 1999 Columbine High School massacre. Write a paper summarizing the many discussions, debates, and explanations that filled American newspapers, magazines, and news programming after the tragedy, then analyze how white privilege factored into these discussions.

First, summarize the range of media commentary and explanations as completely as possible. Then, consider these questions: Given that the shooters were both white, did any of the media reporting and analysis you found discuss the race of the shooters? If so, summarize how it was talked about. If not, try to explain why you think this factor wasn't part of the national conversation – and whether its omission might itself be a sign of how white privilege works.

Start by downloading this clip from Michael Moore's documentary *Bowling For Columbine*: http://mefwordpress.s3.amazonaws.com/BowlingForColumbine_MarilynManson.zip

3. Research the budget of the United States. Consider these questions as you gather information: How does the U.S. spend its money? What does the U.S. spend its money on? How does the way the U.S. spend its money compare with other developed countries? How do the spending priorities of other wealthy nations compare to priorities in the U.S.? After compiling your research, and considering these questions, write a paper examining U.S. spending priorities within the context of Tim Wise's overall analysis of privilege – specifically, how it works, and why it matters.

GUILT & RESPONSIBILITY

Key Points

- White privilege has nothing to do with guilt.
- Americans living today are not responsible for the creation of systems of inequality, of privilege, of oppression, and of marginalization. Americans simply inherit the legacy of our country's past.
- Since we don't seem to mind living in the past when it glorifies us, we should also accept and take responsibility for the less glorifying aspects of our past – not because we created these problems, but because we can fix them.

Question for Discussion & Writing

What can you do to challenge white privilege on a personal level? How about on a communal level? A national level? A global level? Explain your ideas in each instance.

Assignment

Peggy McIntosh, an American feminist and anti-racist activist, wrote the 1988 essay “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies.”

Click the following link to download the essay:

<http://www.mediaed.org/Handouts/WhitePrivilegeAndMalePrivilege.pdf>

Read the entire essay, with special attention to McIntosh’s discussion of the 46 effects of white privilege in her daily life. (This discussion begins on p. 5). Write a paper connecting McIntosh’s essay, Tim Wise’s lecture, and the personal effects of white privilege in your daily life.