



# white people

a documentary

## **A Discussion Guide for Viewers**

What does it  
mean to be  
white?

*White People* is a groundbreaking documentary on race that aired on MTV in 2015. Even more relevant today, as Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately targeted by police and Asian and Latinx people are seen as permanently foreign, the special follows Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and filmmaker Jose Antonio Vargas as he talks to young Americans across the country about race. Since its premiere, *White People* has been a conversation starter that has unpacked crucial topics like white privilege, colorblindness, and reverse racism.

“Most of the white people I talk to either have not thought about their race and so don’t feel anything, or have thought about it and felt guilt and shame. These feelings of guilt and shame are part of the hidden costs of racism.”

— BEVERLY DANIEL TATUM, “WHY ARE ALL THE BLACK KIDS SITTING TOGETHER IN THE CAFETERIA?” [↗](#)

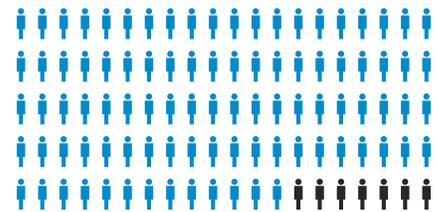
# What does race mean in today's America?

"But race is the child of racism, not the father. And the process of naming 'the people' has never been a matter of genealogy and physiognomy so much as one of hierarchy."

— TA-NEHISI COATES, *BETWEEN THE WORLD AND ME* ↗

## What is whiteness?

Race is a social construct that exists based on widespread acceptance and is usually created by the dominant group. There is no biological basis for race, yet people are treated differently based on their racial identity. As the driving group behind western colonization and chattel slavery, white people today have been given unearned advantages because mainstream institutions were created with their benefit in mind.



**FACT: The average white person's group of friends is 91% white.**

Source: Public Religion Research Institute

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Throughout the film, we hear the term "white" described in various ways, such as "white is not a country" or white is the "default" race. What does "white" mean to you?
- How do you navigate race in your daily life?
- What does being "colorblind" mean to you? Do you think being "colorblind" – in other words, not acknowledging racial differences – is "running away from racial issues" as mentioned in the film?

# Does reverse racism exist?

“The defining question is whether the discrimination is creating equity or inequity. If discrimination is creating equity, then it is antiracist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist.”

— IBRAM X. KENDI, *HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST* ↗

## Reverse racism is a myth.

“Reverse racism” generally refers to the concept of white people being systemically disenfranchised by people of color because of their race. Though people of color can participate in individual acts of bias and prejudice against white people, white people are free from the systemic discrimination that people of color regularly face. Racism inherently references the power structure that allows the dominant group to oppress the disempowered group.

**FACT: “While there is no empirical basis for white people experiencing ‘reverse racism,’ this view is held by a large number of Americans.”**

Source: [Spanierman & Cabrera 2014](#), p. 16

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Do you believe racism impacts white people? How so?
- Katy’s belief that she has been discriminated against by not having access to college scholarships is challenged by data that disproves her theory. Her initial response to being challenged is asking why she’s being attacked. Where do you think that defensiveness stems from?
- Why do you think the statement “Black lives matter” triggers some white Americans? Do you see any parallels between their responses and Katy’s response to finding out she wasn’t being oppressed in the way that she believed?

# What do changing demographics mean for America?

“In any society built on institutionalized racism, race-mixing doesn’t merely challenge the system as unjust, it reveals the system as unsustainable and incoherent. Race mixing proves that races can mix, and in a lot of cases want to mix. Because a mixed person embodies that rebuke to the logic of the system, race-mixing becomes a crime worse than treason.”

— TREVOR NOAH, *BORN A CRIME: STORIES FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN CHILDHOOD* [↗](#)

## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Jose speaks with a young woman who points out that 100 years ago, Italian, Jewish, and Irish immigrants were the newcomers to the U.S. and weren’t seen as “white” until their cultural and linguistic assimilation a generation later. How can looking at immigration waves of the past help us view and manage tensions today?
- Dakota had never introduced his Black friends from school to his white friends from home. Why do you think he had not? What happened when he finally did? Were you surprised by what happened? Why or why not?
- What are the ways in which white people still have power even if they’re the minority in a community?

**FACT: In less than 30 years, white people will make up less than half of America.**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau

# What is white privilege?

“It is a big ask, to check your privilege. It is hard and often painful, but it’s not nearly as painful as living with the pain caused by the unexamined privilege of others. You may right now be saying “but it’s not my privilege that is hurting someone, it’s their lack of privilege. Don’t blame me, blame the people telling them that what they have isn’t as good as what I have.” And in a way, that is true, but know this, a privilege has to come with somebody else’s disadvantage—otherwise, it’s not a privilege.”

— IJEOMA OLUO, *SO YOU WANT TO TALK ABOUT RACE* 

## What is white privilege?

White privilege is not something that people necessarily do, create, or take advantage of on purpose. Centuries of being the dominant group has led to many personal and structural advantages for white people that most aren’t even aware they have.

### QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

- Do you feel you have advantages or disadvantages based on your race, gender, sexual orientation, or other factors? How so? How have they impacted your life?
- Lucas suggests that it doesn’t make sense for white people to feel bad about being white and the privileges that come along with that – that white people can’t change their experience; they can only change what they do with that experience. How does this flawed perception of white privilege lack accountability?
- If you have white privilege, how can you use your privilege to impact individuals and society?

# What next?

“The key to moving forward is what we do with our discomfort. We can use it as a door out—blame the messenger and disregard the message. Or we can use it as a door in by asking, Why does this unsettle me? What would it mean for me if this were true?”

— ROBIN DIANGELO, *WHITE FRAGILITY: WHY IT'S SO HARD FOR WHITE PEOPLE TO TALK ABOUT RACISM* [↗](#)

## TALK TO YOUR FAMILY AND FRIENDS ABOUT RACE

- Was there a time when you believed a harmful stereotype to be true? A time when you used words that you didn't realize were painful? We all have a journey that starts somewhere, and sharing how you came to recognize your own blind spots can help someone feel a little bit safer to share their starting point with you.

## HARNESS THE POWER OF STORY

- People can be reluctant to have a conversation about their own beliefs and behaviors. As you prepare to have this conversation with your family, it may help to start by watching a film or television show together. Pop culture often provides a social script for how we see and treat those around us. Use these stories to ease into the conversation. Commenting on fictional characters is low stakes, and your family may be more open to sharing opinions on the characters and their actions.

**FACTS: Less than one in three white people say that they've talked about race with their family.**

Source: MTV / David Binder Research

**Four out of five white people say they feel uncomfortable discussing racial issues.**

Source: MTV / David Binder Research

[MORE](#) ➔

# What next?

## UNCOVER YOUR IMPLICIT BIAS

- Sign up for a racial bias course that will provide you with daily tasks to help you begin to de-bias yourself.
- Continue to consciously [unlearn racist beliefs](#).
- Investigate ways to [raise racially conscious children](#). It's never too early to start.
- Attend a rally or protest. [Here are some tips about how to protest safely](#).

## USE YOUR PRIVILEGE

- Challenge people around you when they make problematic jokes or statements about people of color. Why do they think it's funny? Who is harmed by jokes like theirs?
- Look at the policies and hiring diversity in your own workplace. Are there conversations you can start for improvement?
- Designate time to make calls to elected officials and sign petitions asking for more just treatment of people of color, incorporate it into your family's routine.
- Be a conscious consumer and support businesses that actively support communities of color.