

## The paradox of whiteness: tempering white privilege?

The paradox of whiteness brings up sharply fissures in the fabric of societies. How is it experienced and how can strategic pathways be built to temper white privilege?

**Experiencing the white gaze** Whiteness is inherently about power deeply sedimented within society and organisations—wielded collectively and individually. It is a collision of privilege, that is both historical and current, entrenched in organisations and societies. This knowledge bite is a call to rise above skin colour ranging from white, to the colour of earth and ebony. Robin DiAngelo's *White Fragility* explores the structural and historic nature of racism. He encourages white people to accept individual and collective responsibility for white oppression and supremacy and to begin the difficult work of challenge and change. Yet this creates fragility in white people who can become angry, violent and defensive. Semantic differences abound such as white ignorance, implicit bias, white privilege, white guilt, whiteness and colour-blind racism. Beyond the semantic whirl, there is need for critical awareness in how whiteness operates and how an epistemology of ignorance and supreme unknowing can be tempered with intersectional understanding of social and cultural practices through widening the arc of power and knowledge. There is the choice to act.

**Algorithms of Oppression:** How Search Engines Reinforce Racism, by Safiya Umoja Noble and Ruha Benjamin's *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, show how search results can be oversimplified as they structure knowledge in how they replicate, prioritise, rank and encode discriminatory beliefs in the everyday architecture of life

**Poignancy of the moment** Troubling patterns based on an ecosystem of whiteness have achieved prominence globally through Black lives matter movements, refugee influxes and migrant rights. The dominant ideology and hegemony of whiteness can no longer be circumvented through white ignorance, white fatigue and politeness protocols. There are stark questions that need to be addressed regarding who has access to social, political, educational and economic opportunities.

For structural narratives position whiteness as superior often erasing non-white pedagogies and epistemologies with white credentialing of universities and organisations. In the poignancy of the moment what is our entry point to knowing, critiquing and disassembling the nested power of whiteness? Being poised on the threshold of rupturing dominant structures and veering towards the common weal could mean a transformative shift in the paradox of whiteness

### Strategic respectful pathways

Whiteness reproduces itself through communicative acts in public discourse, media representations, and organisational narratives. While adequate representation at all levels is a welcome step, we need connectors and influencers who understand underlying vulnerabilities and evidence-based action and constructive strategic respectful pathways. Creating opportunities for regular organisational conversations to share, learn and reflect can minimise white privilege.

Early Buddhist Pali texts note four divine states as being metta (love), karuna (compassion), mudita (empathy) and upekkha (equanimity) and their combination is rational compassion. More recently Paul Bloom in *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* writes about a cost-benefit analysis with concern for the wellbeing of others. We need repertoires of respect and interconnection – think of all the wonderful white people we interact with.



Professor Edwina Pio

New Zealand's first professor of  
Diversity and University Director of  
Diversity

Auckland University of Technology,  
Aotearoa New Zealand



[edwina.pio@aut.ac.nz](mailto:edwina.pio@aut.ac.nz)