

CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

The work of addressing how white supremacy and other forms of oppression play out in the workplace requires intentional, sustained effort. Engaging in this work also requires that we bring to bear some shared language about what it is that we are attempting to identify and counteract. The [White Supremacy Culture Characteristics](#) (Okun, 1999) offer one important construction of these ideas, summarized in the table below.

White Supremacy Culture Characteristics <i>by Tema Okun</i>		
Perfectionism	Only one right way	Individualism
Sense of Urgency	Paternalism	I'm the only one
Defensiveness	Either/or thinking	Progress is bigger, more
Quantity over Quality	Power hoarding	Objectivity
Worship of the written word	Fear of open conflict	Right to comfort

	Continues under the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture (WSC) below, with modifications
	Now exists under the Characteristics of the Culture of Capitalism (CoC) below, with modifications
	Elements have been modified below and split between WSC and CoC
	Not included in the framework below

This construction of the work offers us a great deal of [useful insight into how white supremacy operates](#). The adaptation of Okun's original framework below attempts to offer a new framing of many of the characteristics Okun identifies, as well as an additional construct entitled the "Culture of Capitalism." The impetus for this evolution of Okun's work comes from experience using her tool and confronting some limitations. For example, some of the original characteristics might be better described as personality traits that cross racial lines, or features of many white cultural spaces, but not necessarily an articulation of how those features are weaponized to perpetuate systems of oppression.

In addition, this tool attempts to articulate both the characteristics of white supremacy and those of our capitalist economic system, which often - but not always - work in complementary ways to preserve existing power structures and racial hierarchy. This economic lens offers an important explanation for why we often see changes that, although symbolically important, don't result in significant structural change. For example, the simple replacement of white people in power with people of color not only doesn't necessarily result in significant structural change, it can in fact replicate the same sorts of oppressive systems under the guise of reform (e.g. the election Black politicians, the naming an AAPI CEO of a company, or Clarence Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court). This point is further illustrated when thinking through an international lens and recognizing that many features Okun identifies as white supremacy culture are present in nations or regions of the world with radically different histories, conceptions of race, social hierarchies, and demographics, but who share a capitalist economic system.

It is also important to note that the workings of oppressive systems are often [intersectional](#). White supremacy, capitalism, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia, and others, often compound and are operationalized in concert to preserve power dynamics in a variety of settings. As a result, this tool is by definition incomplete. However, the hope is that it builds upon important existing work from Okun, and many others, to support groups and individuals with naming the issues they are confronting, and beginning the process of identifying antidotes they might consider bringing to bear as they work to create more just, and more humanizing spaces together.



CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

Revised Framework Table of Contents

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture	Characteristics of the Culture of Capitalism
1. The right to default status	1. Dehumanization
2. Paternalism & power hoarding	2. Imperialism
3. Anti Indigeneity, anti Blackness, & xenophobia	3. Progress is bigger, more
4. Individualism	4. Value = production & consumption
5. Objectivity	5. Urgency that replicates oppression
6. Right to comfort	7. Measurability above all else
7. Fear of open conflict	
8. Defensiveness	



CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture	Antidotes for Consideration
The right to default status - How white people are/think is normal, how others are/think is abnormal (even if treated benevolently) - Conversations and decisions should center white people, their needs, and their stories - Assumption of superiority, and that superiority is factual and cannot be questioned - Assumption that white/western civilization is the best possible manifestation of humanity that could exist, to which all others should aspire - Belief that history should be understood as the progression of white/western civilization. Other narratives are to be told in relation to white history - Belief that white people are the sole creators and protectors of civilization and democracy - Expectation that others must assume and perceive one as benevolent	- Intentionally hold space for varying ideas, opinions, and perspectives - Interrogate unspoken assumptions, such as what is considered normal, or privileged in a given situation - Look for, name, and consider the implications of ways in which the group's work is upholding, celebrating, or championing cultural practices and elements of history that have had oppressive effects on marginalized groups - Celebrate and acknowledge traditions, holidays, and other important markers of history and culture that are not traditionally part of the dominant culture - When telling the narrative of your work, consider the story of marginalized groups from a strengths based perspective, not in relation to whiteness
Paternalism & power hoarding - Presumed right to credibility and authority - Entitlement to be in spaces where decisions are made - Presumed authority to exclude others - Belief that those with power are in that position because that's how it should be, and those without power are in that position for the same reason (e.g. god, nature, genetics, culture) - Presumed right to make decisions and exercise power over others - Resistance to sharing power and creating structures that inevitably legitimize the authority of those in power	- Include power sharing in your organization's values, core processes for governance, and decision making - Recognize that an effective leader cultivates the power and skills of others - Interrogate the presumption of consent from those who will be most impacted by decisions - Create pathways for groups outside of those in the dominant cultural group, or with positional power, to exercise impactful leadership (e.g. using a framework like liberatory design) - Exercise power with, not power over - Cultivate relationships and trust - Ask those you work with, and for, to evaluate your performance
Anti Indigeneity, anti Blackness, & xenophobia - Belief that Blackness is pathological, dangerous, scary, ugly, irredeemable - Belief that indigeneity is admirable in some ways, but fundamentally primitive, ignorant, savage, and requires saving - Belief in the perpetual foreigner status for Asian and Latinx immigrant groups and their descendants, regardless of language, or citizenship - Conditional acceptance or fetishization of some peoples of color, provided they conform to and reflect white cultural norms, and do not challenge power - Belief that the racist violence that peoples of color experience is ultimately deserved, part of an inevitable course of history, and even a necessary expression of white custodianship - Scapegoating of immigrants for social ills as a means of preventing solidarity and redirecting dissent	- Study the history of whiteness and the creation of the social construct of race - Intentionally educate the group about the history of racism, colonialism, and migration in this country and globally - Cultivate authentic relationships and respectful dialogue across difference - Avoid tokenization of people from marginalized groups - Practice what you preach! Where possible, put resources into historically marginalized or underserved communities (e.g. when signing contracts, making purchases, using vendors, endorsing other groups, etc.) - Interrogate how these mindsets and practices might show up in your group's practices (e.g. hiring, promotion decisions, inclusion/exclusion from networking spaces, etc.) - Intentionally construct systems and practices that guard against these mindsets



CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture	Antidotes for Consideration
Individualism - Seeing success as an accomplishment of individuals, rather than as a product of groups, teams, and social factors - Willfully ignoring the ways in which privilege is conferred to some groups and not others, that results in predictable disproportionality. - Claiming the results of unearned privilege as examples of individual accomplishment - Valuing individual accomplishment above collective accomplishment - Belief that reliance on others for support is a sign of weakness or deficiency - Competition is more highly valued than cooperation - Where cooperation exists, little time or resources are devoted to developing skills in how to collaborate - Belief that progress happens through individual effort rather than group interaction and dialogue - Devaluing of oral tradition and stories - Devaluing of relational expressions of leadership	- Include teamwork as an important value in your group's collective work - Celebrate wins as the result of collective effort, not just individual contributions - Recognize privilege as it exists in different contexts, and how it impacts both the experiences of individuals and groups - Interrogate systems that tend to disproportionately recognize accomplishments of privileged individuals, and devalue those of marginalized people - Set team goals - Reinforce practices that result in, require, or reward interdependence among groups - Invest in professional learning opportunities that support a strong culture of teaming and collaboration - Engage in storytelling, celebrate oral histories, and make space for collectivist cultural practices - Recognize and incentivize demonstration of strong relational leadership practices
Objectivity - Belief that there is such a thing as being objective or neutral, that you possess it, and others do not - Belief that white people's perspectives, ideas, and culture carries with it an inherent ability to be objective, and is therefore superior to that of others - The belief that emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not play a role in decision-making or group process - The right to accuse others of being emotional, even while expressing one's own emotions demonstrably - Impatience with, and dismissal of, thinking that appears to be irrational, or rooted in emotion, or that does not make sense to white people	- Recognize that everyone has a world view, biases, and experience - Recognize that this perspective shapes how we form understandings of the world - Assume that all human beings are rational, with valid perspectives, and then seek to understand the perspective of others from that starting point - Interrogate the dismissal of emotions as weak, inappropriate, or threatening - Use intentional practices that acknowledge the emotional experience of people and groups, and that honors those feelings - Sit with discomfort, interrogate its source, and avoid the instinct to run from it immediately.
Right to comfort - Belief that those with power have a right to comfort in all settings, and that it is the responsibility of others to ensure it for them - The right to withdraw from difficult conversations and avoid accountability - The right to use one's discomfort as evidence of the malicious intent of the accuser - Expectation that the agenda will shift to avoid discomfort or threat for white people and white dominated institutions	- Interrogate whose comfort is being prioritized and who is being asked to tolerate discomfort or oppression - Work on yourself. Engage in therapy, support groups, reflection, or other settings where the healthy exploration of feelings can be cultivated - Be a co-conspirator for/with others when you witness someone attempting to exercise this right in an oppressive way - Understand that growth requires discomfort



CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture	Antidotes for Consideration
Fear of open conflict - Suppression of, and punishment for, engaging in direct conflict or disagreement - Expectation and emphasis on white cultural norms for politeness - When someone raises an issue that causes conflict/discomfort, the response is to blame the individual for raising the issue rather than addressing the issue - Conflating the raising of challenging issues with being impolite, rude, or hard to work with	- Understand and acknowledge that there are different cultural norms for how conflict should be dealt with in an appropriate or respectful manner - Challenge the expectation that there is a culturally right or wrong way to engage in conflict or disagreement - Role play ways to handle conflict before it happens - Create structures for people or groups to manage conflict constructively (e.g. restorative practices, dialogue, mediation, etc.)
Defensiveness - Expectation of forgiveness for transgressions and the perpetual expungement of an institution's or individual's record - Upholding a high, often impossible to reach, threshold for proof of malicious intent in order to accept accusations of racism or discrimination - Distancing oneself from the actions/policies of the "real racists" - The right to withdraw from difficult conversations and avoid accountability - The right to alter the terms of a conversation so as to reframe it in ways that assign responsibility elsewhere	- Start with the assumption that a person raising a concern about racism has a point, and deserves to be heard - Accept that harm can be caused regardless of intent or action. Inaction is also a type of action - Work on your own feelings of defensiveness and interrogate their source - Understand the link between defensiveness and fear (fear of losing power, losing face, losing comfort, losing privilege) - Name defensiveness as a problem, when it is one - Expand your network of critical friends who can help you recognize, analyze and overcome your defensiveness

Characteristics of the Culture of Capitalism	Antidotes for Consideration
Dehumanization - Belief that people's value derives from their ability to produce goods, profit, or wealth for those in power - Requiring people to suppress their culture, identity, and needs in the workplace to conform to the dominant culture or norms of the organization - Undervaluing people's time, effort and sacrifice - Undercompensation for labor - Denial of opportunity (whether intentional or systemic) based on immutable characteristics or identity - Seeing people as less valuable, or dismissable, based on the type of labor they perform within an organization	- Interrogate organizational policies or practices that communicate to individuals (especially those from marginalized groups) that their worth/value comes only from productivity - Identify and change policies and norms that have the effect - intentional or otherwise - of requiring that some people suppress aspects of their identity in order to conform or be successful (e.g. norms around hair, cultural dress, gender expression, language(s) spoken, etc.) - Conduct equity audits to study how compensation structures may cause or exacerbate equity gaps for certain groups - Elevate voices of marginalized groups in core decision making processes, particularly those that impact decisions like hiring, promotions, and compensation - Develop a culture of appreciation, where the organization takes time to make sure that people's work and efforts are appreciated



CHARACTERISTICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE & THE CULTURE OF CAPITALISM

Characteristics of the Culture of Capitalism	Antidotes for Consideration
Imperialism - Presumption that “our way” of doing things is the right way - Presumption that this mindset is, or should be, shared by everyone - Presumed right to exercise power over others using coercion, manipulation, violence, or other means to force compliance - Belief that the extent of the power and dominance of the dominant group is only further evidence of the righteousness and inevitability of their power - Resistance to, or rejection of, the practices of democracy	- Recognize that your conception of the “right way” of doing things may be subjective, and arbitrary - Be curious about the thinking, perspective and ideas of others, and find value in them - Recognize the need to learn about communities' ways of being/doing, people, and orgs you serve, particularly when working across differences in race, class, gender, culture, language, etc. - Never assume that you or your organization know what's best for the community in isolation from meaningful relationships with that community - Slow down. Allow for democratic processes to take place that ensure consent and shared investment in the work
Progress is bigger, more - Prioritizing profit or market share above other conceptions of success and value - Belief that perpetual growth is necessary and desirable as an indication of strength and value - Belief that efficiency is the most desirable outcome and should always be rewarded - Valuing quantity over quality as expansion is prioritized	- Interrogate the motivation for decisions that pursue organizational growth or expansion. Instead prioritize quality of outcomes, the human experiences of those involved, and mission alignment - Ensure that any cost-benefit analysis considers all the costs, not just financial ones - Recognize that in some cases efficiency is not the most important factor, and in fact can lead to negative outcomes or org culture
Value = production & consumption - Belief that things only have value if they produce profit and/or consume goods - Elimination of conceptions of value that do not fit this mold, and framing of them as inferior, even dangerous - Commodification of culture - Disempowering or displacing marginalized groups to convert space or items into goods that can be repurposed, owned, bought, and/or sold - Conditioning all members of the group to uphold this value in all decisions	- Create core values to drive your work and ways of being as a group - Celebrate and reward things that embody those values, regardless of productivity, revenue, profit, or impact on expansion - Cultivate the disposition to recognize power dynamics, and identify where power is being usurped or imposed, particularly with regard to marginalized groups, or groups to which you do not belong - Interrogate the motivation for decisions and recognize the impulse to see value in a choice based on production, profit or revenue
Urgency that replicates oppression - Suppression of the process needs of the group for the material needs of those in power - Timelines and budgets that require too much work to be done, with insufficient resources, in not enough time - Belief that those in power have the right to frame the discussion of what changes should be considered, and the terms of the outcomes of any changes - Moving to quick solutions before those not in power are able to effectively participate - Prioritizing completion over the quality of process - Centering the demands of funders and external powers over the needs of those most affected by decisions	- Create realistic project plans that allow for processes that ensure the voices of those who will be impacted by decisions, and marginalized groups, are elevated - Set goals for diversity, equity, and inclusion - Share power - Prioritize quality of process, experience and outcomes - Ensure adequate funding for key initiatives that allows people to move deliberately enough to intentionally interrupt inequity - Be clear about how you will make equity driven decisions in an atmosphere of urgency

Characteristics of the Culture of Capitalism	Antidotes for Consideration
Measurability above all else - Belief that the only outcomes that matter are those that can be measured with easy, standardized, quantitative metrics - Belief that subjective, qualitative, or cultural measures of success are inherently inferior - Presumption that those who determine the metrics of success should have the right to do so, and are benevolent - Presumption that achieving equality within the chosen metrics is possible without radical or systemic change	- Set goals that are intentionally qualitative. Worry less about precision of measuring success, and more about the descriptions of success the people involved give as the outcome - Recognizing that often attempts to be objective carry significant amounts of subjectivity, and that the subjectivity of those in power is usually privileged, and considered “objective” - Be sure that things that are written down are easily understood by the intended audience - Consider the ways in which determining and measuring outcomes can replicate systems of oppression and further alienate marginalized communities

Acknowledgements

The work above draws upon a combination of the brilliance, ideas, and research of numerous scholars, authors, and luminaries in the various fields of scholarship that study the ways in which systems of oppression operate in our world, as well as the years of experience of the author living in the United States, navigating the lines of our racial and class caste systems through education, employment, and social life, and working in the field of education for nearly two decades. Below is an incomplete list of the individuals whose work is drawn upon, or who have inspired this adaptation of the original work of Tema Okun.

Tema Okun
Michelle Alexander
Kimberle Crenshaw
Beverly Daniel Tatum
Derrick Bell
Howard Zinn
Ward Churchill
James Baldwin
Nell Painter
Dena Simmons

Gholdy Muhammad
Pedro Noguera
Tyrone Howard
Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz
Winona Laduke
Robin DiAngelo
Nikole Hannah Jones
Audre Lorde
Randall Robinson
Martin Luther King Jr.

Ibram X. Kendi
Bettina Love
Lisa Delpit
Resmaa Menakem
Tim Wise
Peggy McIntosh
Ta-nehisi Coates
Naomi Klein
Paolo Freire

In addition, I would like to give credit to the following friends, family and colleagues who’ve provided thought partnership, inspiration, and feedback that has been instrumental to the creation of this document.

Joe Truss
Manuel Rustin

Gina Garrett
Andy Winger
Ameer Kim El Mallawany

Joe Chang
Alex Leonard