

# A User's Guide to White Privilege

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Abstract: Picking up where Peggy McKintosh's "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" left off, this essay looks further into the ways that racial privilege manifests itself in the lives of white Americans. It explores some of the reasons that white privilege is hard for whites to see and it explores the question of how white people can act responsibly given the unavoidable realities of racial privilege

RECENT DISCUSSIONS have highlighted the ways that racism is a part of the lives of all people living in a racist society. This is a real change from older approaches that focused on racism as something that only affects people of color. For those of us who are white, there is often genuine concern about racism. Rarely, however, do we see the issue as central to our own lives.<sup>1</sup> Coming to terms with the ways that we are implicated in the racism of our society often involves coming to terms with the reality of white privilege. For many white people, an inability to understand the workings of white privilege becomes a stumbling block that gets in the way of real commitment to anti-racist action.

For the past three years, along with my colleague Jean Miller, I have been teaching a class on white awareness of racism at De Anza college. The class has been offered to faculty and staff as well as to our regular students. Every time we have taught the class, we have come up against serious challenges from our students to two different elements of the concept of white privilege. Many don't feel comfortable identifying themselves as "white," nor do they see themselves as having privilege. We have found the process of dealing with these challenges to be one of the most rewarding parts of our class. Often, after working through all of the complexities involved in seeing themselves as white and in seeing themselves as having privilege, students are much more willing than before to take initiative in challenging racism.

For many white people, the idea that we have racial identities is difficult to come to terms with. We usually see ourselves as simply people. Whiteness, by virtue of its status as the dominant social position, is unmarked. It is relatively easy for a white person to go through life never thinking about their own racial identity. Whiteness functions as the normative ideal against which other people are categorized and judged. But, because we occupy the dominant position in the racial hierarchy, white people are important parts of the racial system of the United States. And, as a result of the part we play in that system, we have a crucial role to play in dismantling racism.

The claim that we occupy a privileged position in the racial system is hard for many white people to take, since most of us feel disempowered in many aspects of our lives. In general, social power is very hard to see in the United States, where there is a strong cultural tendency to understand the world in terms of

individualism. Usually, it is only in places where we are disempowered that we can easily perceive social forces at work. In our class, when the issue of white privilege was raised, many students, responded by pointing out the lack of privilege they experience as women, as working class people, or in terms of the lack of democracy in our political system in general. But disempowerment in one area does not necessarily mean a lack of privilege in another. Most of us are both privileged and disempowered at the same time. Since we live in a society structured through a variety of systems of power, we can each be targeted by one system while being privileged by another. Most of us do not experience the world as a set of doors opening before us. We can be privileged by racism while we are targeted by sexism, classism, ageism, or homophobia. But as long as we are white, the doors associated with racism will open before us. An important step in undermining these privileges is acknowledging our position in society's racial structure.

This acknowledgement that we have a role to play in challenging racism can have powerful positive effects on white people. If we believe that there is nothing we can do to challenge the current racial order, then looking at our own racial privilege is likely to lead to guilt and feelings of self-loathing.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, knowledge of what to do with our privilege can make it feel like less of an emotional burden. Once we stop trying to shield our own consciences from the historical reality in which we are implicated, we are in a much better position to be able to broaden our field of view and see the world around us for what it is without it provoking fear and anxiety in us.

#### WHITE PRIVILEGE

In her very influential essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," Peggy McKintosh outlines some of the ways that whites experience racial privilege. McKintosh asks white people to imagine we all carry a knapsack of privileges that helps us out in everyday encounters. Some of my favorite examples from her essay are:

I can turn on the television or open the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented. . . . When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is. . . . I am never asked to speak for all of the people in my racial group. . . . I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies without being seen as a cultural outsider. . . . I can easily buy posters, post cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.<sup>3</sup>

White privilege is often experienced simply as a sense of one's self as a good person, as deserving the things one has in life. It allows us to have a sense of ourselves as deserving respect. Whiteness works like wind on the sails of our self

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esteem. Most aspects of white privilege are things we would want for all people. Unfortunately, because of our racist history, in the United States, we have a cultural system that often creates the meaning of whiteness as good though a complex dialectical dance with the identities of people of color, constructed in our imaginary worlds as "the other."

Somewhere in our cultural unconscious lies the image of the brutal, animalistic, sexual, savage. This image was created long ago as part of the cultural work that was done to make whites feel better about slavery. But even now, with slavery long gone, the images are still part of or cultural system and they impact the cultural meanings of white and black especially. Stereotypes of African-Americans as savage leads many whites, often against their conscious intention, to fear blacks and to mistrust them.

Less obvious for this discussion and more important is the way that this construction of African Americans as savage works to construct whites as civilized. The image of the black thief helps stabilize the image of the average good citizen (who of course is coded as white). When I walk into a store and the clerks look at me with respect and assume that I am not going to steal anything, the trust that I receive is at least partially built upon the foundation of my distance from the image of the savage. When an African American walks into the store that unconscious material comes into play in the opposite way. The tom-toms start to beat in the subconscious mind of the clerk.

Fanon has written of the complex psychological operations involved in this othering. He argued that the availability of a despised groups allowed western colonial societies an escape hatch for all of the elements of their existence of which they were ashamed. If we fear or are ashamed of our own sexuality, we can project those feelings onto people of color. They then become the cultural carriers of sexuality. And as Fannon writes, paraphrasing from a friend, "The presence of the Negroes beside the whites is in a way an insurance policy on humanness. When the whites feel that they have become too mechanized, they turn to the men of color and ask them for a little human sustenance."<sup>4</sup>

These complex cultural processes lead to the construction of white people as generally decent, trustworthy, proper, and civilized. We carry these cultural charms until we do something as individuals to loose them. For people of color the opposite is true, they must work very hard to be seen as trustworthy, decent, rational, etc. Given all of this cultural complexity, it is very important for whites to see that our sense of self is often achieved at the expense of people of color. Seeing our senses of self as constructed through racist cultural discourses is an important part of developing an anti-racist sense of what it means to be white.

### BUT SHOULDN'T WE TRY TO GET BEYOND THE IDEA OF RACE?

Many people argue that since the idea of race seems only to divide us, rather than working to adopt a sense of ourselves as white, all people should work to move beyond the idea of race. It's true that human beings made up the idea of race in

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order to mark a system of stratification that was based on the historical tragedy of European people colonizing the Americas and using African and Native people to work as slaves. That system of stratification was legitimized by stories that were created about the physical differences between members of the dominant and dominated groups. There is no biological basis for the concept of race.<sup>5</sup> Race was created to divide people. But, it is a large step from the claim that we should reject a biological basis for the concept of race to the claim that we should not talk about race, that our goal should be a color blind society.

Calls for a color blind society are calls to erase the fingerprints of history rather than to deal with their consequences. If we take seriously the social structures constituted by hundreds of years of exploitation, we can see that race is built deeply into the fabric of society. We need to look seriously at race and see its manifestations for as long as it is a part of that fabric. Because of this, when white people acknowledge that they are white, they are saying that they notice that race affects them and is one of the forces defining their places in society.

### PERCEIVING PRIVILEGE

The first step in acting responsibly around racial privilege is to break our habits of denial and minimization. One of the myths that we are taught to believe in the United States is that our most significant characteristics are individual, that our fates are determined by our own individual actions and that as long as we do not go out of our way to harm other people, we have no responsibility for their fates. And, yet, the reality is that we are deeply implicated in each other's lives. If we ask ourselves the most simple questions, such as where do we get our food from, we can see that we are tied up in networks of relationships with millions of other people. Our actions are constantly creating, recreating, challenging and transforming the networks of relationships that make up the fabric of our shared world. We influence the fabric of society by the choices we make about whose actions we choose to acknowledge and whose we choose to ignore; by where we take a stand and where we choose not to; by how we treat others and how we expect to be treated.

And yet, as members of a society built around the ideology of individualism, we are encouraged by our culture to be blind to the workings of these networks of relationships. This is especially true for those privileged by a system of oppression. It seems that the more privilege we have the more we tend to see our life situations as created by ourselves through the force of our own wills. One of the most important steps for white people coming to terms with racism in the US is to come to see that we live in a society that is structured along racial lines and that we play a part in its structuring.

Racism can be overt and intentional- such as denying a person a job because of race, or physical harassment. It can also be covert and unintentional.<sup>6</sup> The actions that create the racist atmosphere in society can be so small that each action in itself is almost imperceptible. For many people of color, whenever they walk into a mostly white space they are looked at. The looks are not necessarily hostile. But they are looks nevertheless. The person of color's presence has a charge

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and, if the tension is to be eased, it falls on the person of color to initiate this. Each individual white person doesn't do much. A meeting of the eyes that is broken off a split second too quickly; a slight pulling in of the arms; a smile that is just a millimeter too forced at the edges. Each action is almost imperceptible. Together they are enough to create a force field of discomfort. Even well meaning white people play active roles in creating this racist atmosphere.

A racist atmosphere can be created simply by denying the reality experienced by people of color. When people of color mention experiences of racism, they are often told that they are reading too much into the situation. The perception of racism, as something that is an everyday part of their reality, is declared out of bounds for most polite discussion, unless the racism is really extreme and blatant, and even then it is often minimized. Then there are the unintentional forms of racism that are based on the cumulative effect of negative judgments. In stores, people of color, especially African Americans, are looked on with suspicion. Their right to have the jobs they hold is questioned. They are believed to be less competent or educated than they really are. When they have expensive things, they are suspected of having stolen them. Third and fourth generation Asian-Americans are often assumed to be foreigners and asked if they speak English. Through these, and thousands of other small interpersonal interactions, racism is constantly recreated and re-woven into the fabric of society.

One of the challenges for white people with regard to race is to see ourselves as part of the racial structure, to see ourselves as having a particular culture and a particular position in the racial structure. Along with this comes the challenge of seeing ourselves as affecting and being affected by racism. In addition to bestowing us with privileges, wanted or not, some of the ways we are affected by racism are negative for us. It is hard for us to make authentic connections with people of color. Dominant sectors of society use race to confuse social issues. For example, the finger of blame was pointed at undocumented immigrants rather than at business when California was experiencing a recession in the early 1990's undocumented immigrants were blamed, rather than having the finger pointed at business, the military, and politicians. We live in a society with generally higher levels of stress and dysfunction than is necessary- from street crime, to homelessness, to lack of services for the mentally ill. Racism makes it much harder for working people to advocate for a strong welfare state than it would be if we were not a racially divided society.

And yet one of the reasons it is hard for whites to see racism is that it offers us a sense of ourselves as good, responsible, respectable, deserving people through the contrast with people of color who are constructed as the opposite. Living in a racist society means that we are given privileges based on our race, by the mere fact of our whiteness.

### LOOKING AT RESPONSIBILITY

There are many instances of white privilege that have nothing to do with our own actions. Often, white privilege comes to us simply because we are white, perhaps

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even against our will. We don't need to ask for racial privilege to have it given to us. Imagine yourself in the following scenarios, and think about the nature of your responsibility for the racism perpetrated.

- You are looking for an apartment and you apply for one along with an equally qualified person of color. You and the landlord connect well and he decides to give you the place.
- A colleague at work, who is a woman of color, was hired before you. She is doing a good job, but doesn't spend much time socializing with the rest of the largely white staff. You get promoted over her, and the boss says that you have excellent people skills that will really help in the job.
- You grew up in a middle class neighborhood and have educated parents. You did very well on the SAT, which has been proven not only to be racially biased, but also to be a poor predictor of college success. You gained admission into all of the schools you chose. Most of them do not admit many students from under-represented groups because they rely heavily on the SAT.
- In your organization, club, study group, class, or work place, whenever people of color speak, their ideas are undervalued, attributed to someone else, or not noticed. Whenever you speak up you are treated with respect and given credit for your contributions.

In all of these cases you did not do anything wrong. You were given privilege by a racist system. What is the nature of your responsibility in these cases? You could say that you should give up your privilege: Turn down the apartment, refuse entrance to college, refuse to speak up in meetings. There are some times when turning down a job and telling the boss why can have powerful effects. The question to ask should be, is my act of renunciation likely to lead to a benefit going to a person of color, or will it affect the future actions of other people? Often such acts do more to improve the sense of self of the white person involved than to challenge the racist structures of society. Rather than focussing on individual acts of renunciation, a more fruitful approach would be to look at the ways that we can challenge the racial structures of society.

WHAT WOULD IT MEAN  
TO ACT RESPONSIBLY AROUND THE REALITY OF RACISM?

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It is a real challenge to transform our consciousness so that we can see the racial system as it is being created and recreated around us all the time. Transforming our consciousness can begin with the following:

**Read:** Inform yourself. Don't make people of color have to do all the work of educating you about race. Be ready to see ideas that are widely accepted as false. Watch out for your own resistance to learning new ideas. Take initiative, read a lot. Read novels by people of color, read sociological, political, and historical works that take racism seriously.

**Listen:** Talk to people of color about racism. Expect that there will be much hesitation and mistrust. The person of color you engage with will be likely to suspect you of wanting to enter into the discussion to have your own view of reality affirmed. Allow your world view to be disrupted by the radical otherness of a different perspective. If you ask a question, really listen for the answer.

**Be Humble:** Be open to the possibility that much of what you take for granted as the building blocks of your world view are likely to be shattered. Try to get used to being in situations where you feel oddly and unexpectedly ignorant, exposed, vulnerable, and just plain uncomfortable.

If you have a fairly deep understanding of racism and all of the subtle and not so subtle ways it manifests itself and impacts the lives of people of color, you will often find yourself seeing things your white friends and colleagues don't see. You can use this increased vision to affirm the realities of the people of color around you and to come to their side when they are targeted by racism. You can challenge the political opinions that follow from an unconsciously racist world view.

You can also work actively to undermine the political systems that perpetuate racism. Often the connection to racism is not obvious. In the recent anti-welfare discussions, race was a coded concept. The media and politicians used racist imagery and hooked into the unconscious belief of many white people that poor people are largely people of color and that they are mostly poor because they don't want to work or are abusing the system. Another false belief that politicians played on was that immigrants come to this country solely to receive benefits from our generous system. Politicians can then play on these beliefs without making any overtly racist statements. The result of this misinformation was that the most severe cuts to the welfare system were for immigrants. And yet, paradoxically, since the majority of those on welfare are white, this use of racism, hurt people of all races.

Advocating for affirmative action is an obvious way to challenge racism. Though an interesting wrinkle in this discussion is that the primary beneficiaries of

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affirmative action have been white women. In discussions of affirmative action I often point this fact out and talk about how I would not have gotten my current job without affirmative action. This has proven to be an effective strategy for challenging the racist way the discussion has been coded.

Working in your community for police accountability means challenging one of the ways that white power structures unleash unaccountable brutality on communities of color. Fighting racism can also involve working to support public schools, advocating for the rights of farm workers, for the rights of people caught up in the criminal justice system, and working to prosecute hate crimes. The ways that racism is integrated into our society are endless, and therefore so are the forms of action we can take to challenge it.

Another general approach to challenging white privilege is to use your own power well. Acknowledge your own power and privileges and use them responsibly. Many white people feel inclined to deny the reality of their own power and status. We wish we didn't have them, so we pretend that we don't. A much more effective strategy is to work to use them well. Hire and promote people of color, respond positively to their initiatives in your organizations, be a mentor. Take initiative in challenging institutionalized racism. Take action and speak up when people of color are being unfairly attacked.

### CONCLUSION

It isn't the fault of white people living today that we were born into a racist society. But, whether we like it or not, we are all living breathing parts of the racist system. When our privilege is brought to our attention, many white people respond by saying, "Maybe I have these privileges, but I didn't ask for them, so I am not responsible." We are tempted to deny responsibility because we can't see a way to act responsibly. This moral quandary accounts for much of the mental paralysis around the issue of race that we see among well meaning white people. The other alternative, of course, is to look at ways that we can act to challenge racism effectively. The best thing we can do with the reality of white privilege is to take it as an opportunity to use our privilege to dismantle the system and make the privileges of being respected, valued members of society available to all.

### Notes

I would like to thank the following people for help on this piece: Eugene Fujimoto, Jackie Reza, Jean Miller, and Carlos Davidson.

1. I realize that the use of "we" here implies that the reader is white. I do this for two strategic reasons. One reason is to mark the fact that I am white and that the analysis that follows applies to me. The other is that I am writing primarily for the purpose of helping other white people see their position with regard to racism in the United States. I realize that this positions readers who are people of color on the outside of the discussion. I only hope that the reader can see the strategic value of this creation of a self-consciously white community.



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2. While I usually go out of my way to assure people dealing with privilege that I don't want them to feel guilty, my colleague Eugene Fujimoto pointed out to me that, for those willing to really look at it, feelings of guilt can be very helpful. They can be used as diagnostic tools. Often they point to a sense of responsibility that we feel badly about because we haven't allowed ourselves to look at it clearly and directly.
3. Peggy McKintosh, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," *Independent School* (Winter 1990):31-36.
4. Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967), p. 129.
5. Steven Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: Norton, 1981).
6. These names for the different forms of racism come from: Gloria Yamato, "Something about the Subject Makes It Hard to Name," in *Feminist Frontiers IV*, ed. Laurel Richardson, Verta Taylor, and Nancy Whittier (New York: McGraw Hill, 1997), pp. 28-30.

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