

DO NOT DUPLICATE

We need to be clear that there is no such thing as giving up one's privilege to be "outside" the system. One is always *in* the system. The only question is whether one is part of the system in a way that challenges or strengthens the status quo. Privilege is not something I *take* and which I therefore have the option of *not* taking. It is something that society *gives* me, and unless I change the institutions which give it to me, they will continue to give it, and I will continue to *have* it, however noble and egalitarian my intentions.

Harry Brod, "Work Clothes and Leisure Suits: The Class Basis and Bias of the Men's Movement," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael Messner (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 280.

What is white privilege?

Privilege, particularly white or male privilege, is hard to see for those of us who were born with access to power and resources. It is very visible for those to whom privilege was not granted. Furthermore, the subject is extremely difficult to talk about because many white people don't feel powerful or as if they have privileges that others do not. It is sort of like asking fish to notice water or birds to discuss air. For those who have privileges based on race or gender or class or physical ability or sexual orientation or age, it just is—it's normal. **The Random House Dictionary (1993) defines privilege as "a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most."** In her article, "White Privilege and Male Privilege," Peggy McIntosh (1995) reminds us that those of us who are white usually believe that privileges are "conditions of daily experience...[that are] universally available to everybody." Further, she says that what we are really talking about is "unearned power conferred systematically" (pp. 82-83).

For those of us who are white, **one of our privileges is that we see ourselves as individuals, "just people," part of the human race.** Most of us are clear, however, that people with skin other than white are members of a race. The surprising thing for us is that even though we don't see ourselves as part of a racial group, people of color, generally do see us in that light.

So, given that we want to work to create a better world in which all of us can live, what can we do? The first step, of course, is to become clear about the basics of white privilege, what it is and how it works. The second step is to explore ways in which we can work against the racism of which white privilege is such a major foundation stone.

1. White privilege is an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in all of our institutions. One of the primary privileges is that of having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors are open to us that are not open to other people. For example, given the exact same financial history, white people in the United States are two to ten times more likely to get a housing loan than people of color—access to resources. Those of us who are white can count on the fact that the nation's history books will reflect our experience of history. To the contrary Native American parents, for example, know that their children will not learn about the contributions of their people.

2. All of us who are white, by race, have white privileges, although the extent to which we have them varies depending on our gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, physical ability, size and weight, etc. For example, in looking at race and gender privileges at the same time, we find that white men have greater access to power and resources than white women do. The statistics from the 1995 Glass Ceiling Commission show that while white men constitute about 43% of the work force, they hold 95% of senior management positions in American industry. Looking purely at white privilege, white women hold about 40% of the middle management positions, while Black women hold 5% and Black men hold 4%. Unless we believe that white women, or African American men and women, are inherently less capable, we have to acknowledge that our systems are treating us unequally.

3. White privilege has absolutely nothing to do with whether or not we are "good" people. We who are white can be absolute jerks and still have white privileges; people of color can be the most

wonderful individuals in the world and not have them. **Privileges are bestowed on us by the institutions with which we interact solely because of our race, not because we are deserving as individuals.** (Many rewards we get primarily because we, as individuals, worked for them: a gold medal at the Olympics because we were the best contender in swimming, an award for spelling because we spell well. While each of us is always a member of a race or races, we are sometimes granted opportunities because we, as individuals, deserve them; often we are granted them because we, as individuals, belong to one or more of the more favored groups in our society. At some colleges and universities, for example, sons and daughters of alumnae and alumni might have less good grades and high test scores than other applicants; they are accepted however, because of their parents' status as graduates of a particular school. That is an example of a privilege that the sons and daughters did nothing to earn; they were put ahead of other possible applicants who may well have had higher test scores and grades because of where their parents had gone to school.

4. While the bestowal of white privilege is not necessarily intentional and/or malicious, obviously, it is usually one or both. Historically, there are many, many examples of intentionality and/or cruelty.

- **The writing of the U.S. constitution, which in ten articles, very intentionally, confirmed the holding of Black people as slaves, as property, to insure the economically healthy growth of the nation.**
- **Our willingness to believe that our destiny was to "own" the land on which we all currently lived, even if that required forcibly removing those Native Americans who had lived here for thousands of years.**
- **Our intentional breaking apart of Black families during slavery, sending mothers one place, fathers another, and babies and children yet another. Rationally choosing to withhold from African Americans the ability to read so that they could not reproduce any of their culture or function well enough in our literate society to change their status.**
- **Removing Native American children from their homes, taking them as far as possible from anything they knew, and punishing them severely if they tried to speak in their own language.**
- **The laws that, while absurd, were passed to maintain the legal separation and inequality of whites and Blacks [Plessy v. Ferguson].**
- **The strategic, "politically expedient" decision made by many (if not most) white suffragists to align themselves with white Southern men, reassuring them that by giving the vote to women (read white women since at that time approximately 90% of the Black women lived in the South and were not, by law able to hold property and therefore to vote) instead of Black men, the continuation of white supremacy was insured.**
- **The removal of American citizens, albeit of Japanese heritage, from their homes, and taking their land and their businesses as our own.**
- **The way in which affirmative action has been used to promote opportunities for white women rather than for people of color.**

It is important to know and remember this side of American history, even though it makes us extremely uncomfortable. **It is essential to be conscious that the patterns set in history are continued today not only in the on-going systemic and systematic discrimination of people of color in housing, health care, education, and the judicial systems, but in the less obvious (to some of us) ways in which people of color are excluded from the consciousness of many white people's day-to-day experiences.** Think, for example, of how regularly you see a positive story about a Native American or a Latina/o on the front page of the newspaper you read. How long would it take you to name ten white heroes? Could you name ten women of color, other than people in sports who have made major contributions to our society? The ability to not be aware of our lack of knowledge about people of color is another privilege that is afforded only to us. All of us, including students of color, study the history of white, Western Europeans every day in our schools; unless we take a take an ethnic studies course or a course consciously designed to present the many threads of the "American experience."

5. Our privileges are bestowed prenatally. We can't not get them and we cannot give them away, no matter how much we do not want them. For example, if I walk into any drug store in the country that carries hair products, I can be sure that I will find something that was designed for my hair. Black hair products are much harder to find; often African Americans have to drive for miles to find what they need. Further, I know that when a Band-Aids box says "flesh color," it means my skin color, not that of my Asian or Latina friends. If, in an attempt to "give back" my privileges I said to the drug store clerk, "I don't want the privilege of always being able to get shampoo for my hair when my Black friend can't," the clerk would think I was absolutely nuts. Even if he agreed with me, it wouldn't change the availability of Black hair products. **What we can and must do is work daily to**

combat our privilege by bringing to consciousness, others', the system in which we are working and ours.

6. We (erroneously) believe that we do not have to take the issues of racism seriously. While people of color talk about the necessity of being able to read the white system, those of us who are white are able to live out our lives knowing very little of the experiences of people of color. **Understanding racism or whiteness is often an intellectual exercise for us, something we can work at for a period of time and then "move on," rather than being central to our survival. Further, we have the luxury of not having to have the tools to deal with racial situations without looking incompetent.**

I was working with a college at which senior administrators were trying to decide how to move forward with a diversity initiative. One of the vice presidents said, "There are many people who want diversity to fail." The conversation seemed so theoretical and removed to me. What an odd thing to say. "There are so many people who want *diversity* to fail," with the attitude of, "Well, we tried, it was an interesting experiment, now let's send all of 'them' back to the countries they came from. Too bad, it was an exciting thought." If, instead, someone had said, "I am afraid this university is going to fail within 5 years. There are so many who want it to," an action plan would be drawn up in a heartbeat and monitored hourly to get it back on track. Or would it? Is there a sense that, at the root, "We don't need to worry. We will always be there?" Obviously I am speaking hyperbolically, but I think the underlying sense is there: **for some this is life and death, a question of survival, being seen as opposed to being invisible. For others, this is an interesting intellectual exercise from which we can be basically removed.**

7. **White privilege is the ability to make decisions that affect everyone without taking others into account. This occurs at every level, from international to individual. The particular instance described below could look simply like an oversight, "Oops, I forgot to ask other people what they thought." However, it is such classic behavior for white women that it seems important to include here. (See # 8 for another example of this privilege.)**

During a visit with an out-of-town friend, another white woman and a librarian, we began to plan a conference on racism for librarians that we named "Librarians as Colleagues: Working Together Across Racial Lines." We talked and talked, me making notes of good exercises to include, videos to use, materials that might prove helpful. It was absolutely clear that we needed a diverse committee to work with me, the facilitator, and we were very intentional as we created one that would include all voices: two white women (one Jewish), a Latina, a Chinese American woman, straight women and lesbians, and several African Americans. By the end of our conversation, I was extremely excited, and couldn't wait to contact the women on the "planning committee." At the first meeting with these women, during the introductions, I talked about my twenty-five year history of working on issues of racism and particularly my own work on what it means to be white and Southern. I then presented what my friend and I had thought up as the plan for the conference and we talked about the particulars. (In other words, **I presented my credentials as a "good white person" and then proceeded to do exactly as we had planned in the absence of any input from people of color.**) A couple of weeks later, at our second meeting, the women of color pointed out that I had fallen into the classic trap of white women: the come-be-part-of-what-we're-doing syndrome. "If you want us to work with you to truly create a conference, we will. But it means starting over, and building a plan together. If you want us to enter the planning process in the middle and add our ideas to yours, we're not interested."

8. **Being white enables me to decide whether I am going to listen to others, to hear them, or neither. As one of those in what Lisa Delpit calls "the culture of power," I also silence others without intending to or even being aware of it. Perhaps a story will help make this phenomenon clearer. A colleague of mine, an African American woman, attended a conference on the process of dialogue. Of the 45 people there, she was one of 4 who were not white. The whites there were of the intellectual elite: highly educated, bright, and for the most part, liberal people. As the meeting unfolded, it became increasingly clear that if the women of color didn't mention race, no one would. The white people were not conscious enough of the fact that race—their race—was an integral aspect of every conversation they were having. When the women of color did insert the issue into the dialogue, the white people felt accused of being "racist." In this instance, "silencing" took place when 1.) the planners were not clear that race was a working phenomenon at the conference even if no people of color had attended; 2.) the white participants didn't include the reality of others in their plan; and 3.) when the issue was raised by my colleague, she was made to feel that she was the one who was "causing trouble."**

In her article "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," (*Harvard Education Review*, Vol. 58, Number 3, August 1988) Delpit includes the profoundly disturbing comments of an African American teacher that illustrate how we silence dialogue without being aware of doing it or meaning to.

When you're talking to White people they still want it to be their way. You can try to talk to them and give them examples, but they're so headstrong, they think they know what's best for everybody, for everybody's children. They won't listen, White folks are going to do what they want to do anyway.

It's really hard. They just don't listen well. No, they listen, but they don't *hear*--you know how your mama used to say you listen to the radio, but you *hear* your mother? Well, they don't *hear* me.

So I just try to shut them out so I can hold my temper. You can only beat your head against a brick wall for so long before you draw blood. If I try to stop arguing with them I can't help myself from getting angry. Then I end up walking around praying all day "Please Lord, remove the bile I feel for these people so I can sleep tonight." It's funny, but it can become a cancer, a sore. (pp. 280-281)

As Delpit says, these are not the sentiments of one isolated person who teaches in a particularly racist school. The feelings are representative of a vast number of people of color as they interact with white people on a daily basis.

The saddest element is that the individuals that the Black and Native American educators speak of...are seldom aware that the dialogue has been silenced. Most likely the white educators believe that their colleagues of color did, in the end, agree with their logic. After all, they stopped disagreeing, didn't they? (p. 281)

9. White privilege allows us not to see race in ourselves and to be angry at those who do.

I was asked to address a meeting of white women and women of color called together to create strategies for addressing social justice issues. Each of the women had been working for years in her own community on a range of issues from health care to school reform. **As I spoke about the work that is required for white women and women of color to work together authentically, the white women became nervous and then resistant. Why was race always such an issue for women of color? What did I mean when I said it was essential for white women to be conscious of how being white affects every hour of their lives, just as women of color are? They were all professionals, some said, why did it matter what color they were? The silencing of dialogue here occurred because the white women didn't see the race of the women in the room as an issue.** It did not occur to them that their daily experience was particularly different from that of the African Americans, Latinas, and Asian Americans in the room. Had I not been asked to raise the issue, the responsibility of doing so would have been left to the women of color, as it far too frequently is.

10. Believing that race is "N.M.I.—Not My Issue" and being a member of one or more groups that also experience systemic discrimination, we use the privilege of emotionally and psychologically removing ourselves from the "white" group, which we see as composed either of demonically racist people who spout epithets and wear white robes or of white, straight, healthy males. For those of us who are white, and are also women, and/or are gay or lesbian, our experience of being excluded from the mainstream blinds us to the fact that we still benefit from our skin color. By seeing ourselves as removed from the privileged group we are all the more blind to our silencing of people of color.

11. As white people, we have privilege and ability to discount the worth of individuals of color, her or his comments and behaviors, and to alter her or his future, based on our assessments. One of the most frightening aspects of this privilege is that we are able to do enormous damage even with a glib or off-hand comment such as "I just don't think she's a good fit for our organization." Promotions have been denied on the basis of just such a comment. **There are many ways in which our comments are given inflated worth because of the privilege we hold. For example:**

- **Seeing those most impacted by racism, as wounded or victims and somehow, then, as defective.** Identifying a member of an oppressed group as *wounded* is patronizing, particularly when called that by someone with privilege.
- **"Mis-hearing" the comments of people of color so that their words are less important, not understood or fully appreciated, and thereby heightening our sense of superiority.**
- **Rephrasing or translating for others, as if they cannot speak for themselves, without appearing rude to others like us.**
- **Being granted the ability, by others like us, to take up most of the airtime without saying much of substance.**

- **Suggesting that people of color need to "lighten up,"** to not take things so seriously.
- **Saying, or insinuating, that as a woman (or a gay person or a working class person, etc.) you know what the person of color is going through.** "I know just how you feel. When the children in the playground made fun of me because I was fat..." (N.B. I am not suggesting that race is the only cause of pain and discrimination. I am pointing out one of the ways in which white people suggest that someone's experience can't be any worse than we ourselves have experienced or can understand.)
- **Asking why people of color always focus on the negative,** as if life *can't* be that bad. A similar way of discounting someone's experience is to say, "You always focus on race. I remember at two meetings last year..."
- **Commenting, "I know we have a ways to go, but things have gotten better."** [Read, "Stop whining. What do you want from me, anyway? Didn't we fix everything in the 60s?" Or, "I know what your reality is better than you do."]

12. Those of us who are white have the privilege of always seeing and keeping ourselves central, never marginal. For some years now, writers of color have been discussing the experience of living in the margins while white people are living in the center. In one of her early books, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1984) bell hooks defines that state:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body...Living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. (p. ix.)

Another element of this privilege is the ability to see white people as normal and all others as different-from-normal. In describing heterosexuals' privilege, Allan G. Johnson also identifies a white privilege.

They have the privilege of being able to assume acceptance as "normal" members of society...liv[ing] in a world full of cultural images that confer a sense of legitimacy and social desirability...

(*The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997, p. 149.)

We express this privilege in many ways:

- **We use ourselves and our experiences as the referent for everyone.** "I'm not followed around in the store by a guard. What makes you think you are?"
- **We reinsert ourselves into the conversation if we feel it has drifted to focus on a person of color or an issue of others' race.** "I don't really think the issue is race as much as it is class."
- **We bring a critical mass with us wherever we go.** Even if I am the only white person in a room of university administrators of color, I know that most of the others in the nation's schools look, relatively speaking, like me.
- **We believe that we have an automatic right to be heard when we speak** because most leaders in most organizations look like us. (Obviously, this privilege in particular is significantly altered, *though not eliminated*, by the intersections of socioeconomic class, gender, sexual orientation, and so on.)
- **As a racial group, we have the privilege to not have to think before we speak.** If what we say is upsetting to others, our thoughtlessness, rudeness, anger, and so on, are attributed to us as individuals rather than as members of our race, as is the case for others. "I can't believe Bill was such a jerk in the meeting today" as opposed to "Julio shouldn't have spoken to Bill like that. Latinos are so passionate, they just don't think before they speak."
- **We use the pain and experience of being deprived in our lives to a) keep us central and b) lessen our responsibility for the privileges we have received as white people.** The pain and sense of being less-than, often based on reality, may emanate both from our personal life experiences—my father died when I was four—and our membership in societal groups for which privileges are systemically withheld—being poor or Jewish or gay or deaf. In our minds, **this sense of otherness somehow lessens or removes our responsibility for our receiving or colluding in systemic white privilege.** For example, I often hear "I don't have white privilege because I'm working class." White working class people do not have the same *socioeconomic* privileges as white upper-middle class people. They are given the same skin-color privileges while class privileges are being withheld.
- **Even when the conversation is not about us, we shift the focus back to us.** A classic example of this is white women crying during conversations about racism, and women of color having to put their pain aside to help the white women who are crying. (African

Americans and gays and lesbians, in particular, are expected to take responsibility for other people's responses to and discomfort with them.)

- **We use our white privilege to define the parameters of "appropriate" conversation and communication, keeping our culture, manners, and language central. We do this by:**
 - **Requesting "a safe" place to explore, talk about race and racism.** This is often translated as being "safe" from hearing the anger and pain of people of color as well as being able to say "racist" things without being held accountable for them.
 - **Establishing the rules for "standard" English and holding others to our rules.**
 - **Setting up informal rules for communicating in the organization and then failing to share those rules with people who are different from us.**
 - **Creating institutions that run by our culture's rules but acting as if the rules are universally held.**

13. The privilege of writing and teaching history only from the perspective of the colonizer has such profound implications that it is difficult to fathom. As white people we carry the stories we were taught as if they were/are truths, often failing to question and discrediting those who do. There are many embedded privileges here:

- **We are able to live in the absence of historical context. It is almost as if we are not forgetting our history, but actually acting as if it never happened. Or if it did, it has nothing to do with us today.** For most of us who are white, our picture of the United States, both past and present, is sanitized to leave out or downplay any atrocities we might have committed. Our sort of Disneyland version of history is that we (our white ancestors) came here, had a hard time travelling west, finally conquered those terrible savages and settled our country, just like we were supposed to do—Manifest Destiny.
- **We are taught that we are the only ones in the picture.** If there were others, they obviously weren't worth mentioning. An example of this is the white crosses at the Little Bighorn Battlefield indicating where the white men died, as if no Native Americans were killed there.
- **We are able to grow up without our racial supremacy being questioned.** It is so taken for granted, such a foundation of all that we know, that we are able to be unconscious of it even though it permeates every aspect of our lives. Charles W. Mills describes this phenomenon in his book *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997):
...white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are...psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way accidental, but prescribed by the terms of the Racial Contract; which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity. (p. 19)
- **While we are deprived of the skills of critical thinking by being given such a rudimentary view of our heritage, our ignorance is not held against us.** We are taught very little complicated history to have to sort through, think about, question, and so we have few opportunities to have to learn to grapple with complexities.
 - **We end up with simplistic sentiments like, "America love it or leave it," because we have only been taught fragments of information.** We're told that George Washington couldn't tell a lie, but we aren't told that he owned African people who were enslaved, or that he most likely has descendents by those slaves. We don't often have to wrestle with the fact that one of the biggest fights in framing the Constitution was over maintaining slavery.
- **We have the privilege of determining how historical characters and events will be remembered or not.** From Viet Nam, to the Japanese internment, to the Alamo, to the Filipino-American War, to training the assassins at Fort Benning, GA, who killed nuns and priests in El Salvador, and so on. **We retain an extremely tight hold on what is and is not told and how information is presented. We do this as a culture and we do it as individuals.**
- **We control what others know about their own histories by presenting only parts of a story.** Because we all go to the same schools, if you will, everyone, regardless of our color, is told the "white" story. Japanese Americans are told that their families' internment was purely a safety precaution, just as white children are told. Native American students see Walt Disney's "Davy Crockett" along side their white schoolmates, learning that their great grandmothers were "squaws" and their ancestors were "savages." We all learn the "tomahawk chop" during baseball season. **None of us sees a whole picture of our nation that includes the vast contributions of those who are not white. All of us are given a skewed picture of reality. This is part of what Charles Mills is writing about in *The Racial Contract*.**

- **We are able, almost always, to forget that everything that happens in our lives occurs in the context of white supremacy.** We are admitted to college, hired for jobs, given or denied loans, cared for by the medical profession, and walk down the street as white people, always in the context of white supremacy. **In other words, part of the reason that doors open for us is our unearned racial privilege.** But we act, and often believe, that we have earned everything we get. **We then generalize from our perceived experience of deserving the opportunities we receive to thinking that if a person of color doesn't get a job or a loan, it's because she or he didn't earn it.**
- **Our privilege deludes us into thinking that people of all colors come to the table having been dealt the same hand of cards.** We act as if there are no remnants of slavery that affect African Americans today, that the Japanese didn't have to give up their land, or that the Latinos weren't brought back into *their* country to do stoop labor.
- **Believing that people basically get what they deserve, or feeling helpless to do anything about another group's pain, our privilege allows us to disconnect ourselves from any reality of people of color that makes us uncomfortable.** So we have kind, good people who, because of race and class privilege, are so removed that they don't *have* to see or experience others. Without that personal experience, they have no understanding, motivation or impetus to address others' lives or experiences.

14. We have the privilege of being able to determine inclusion or exclusion (of ourselves and others) in a group.

- **We can include or exclude at our whim.** "She would be great here, but her research doesn't focus enough on Latin America." And moments later, "She would add a lot to our department, but she is just so...Chicana!"
- **As a white woman I have the capability, if I don't want to be aligned with other whites, to move back into my gender and commiserate with other women about men.**
- **We are able to slip in and out of conversations about race without being questioned about our loyalty or called an Uncle Tom or a Banana.**
- **We can speak up about racism without being seen as self-serving. In fact, we can even see ourselves as good at it and pat ourselves mentally on the back.**
- **Based on our white privilege, we expect and often receive, appreciation for showing up at "their" functions, e.g., the Multicultural Fair, the NAACP annual fundraising event, the Asian Women Warriors awards celebration, as if they don't really pertain to me. If we aren't thanked profusely by people of color, we give up because we feel unappreciated.**

15. We have the privilege of having our race serve as a financial asset for us.

- **We are the beneficiaries of a system that was set up by people like us for people like us so that we can control the critical financial aspects of our lives more than people of color are able to.** There is much research that shows that race, when isolated as a variable, overrides the variables of class and gender in impacting institution's financial decisions.
- **I am able to count on my race as a financial asset, if I have nothing else to offer as collateral.** (For more about this see Harris, Cheryl I. "Whiteness as Property." *Harvard Law Review*, 1993, Vol. 106.)