



White Privilege

“What it is and what to do about it”

<http://www.counteringracism.org/>

White Privilege Takes Two Very Different Forms

As White people we need to counter white privilege, but there are two kinds of white privilege - and they are very different - which means we need to counter them in different ways. What can be called personal or “day-to-day” white privilege needs to be extended to Black people. At the same time structural or systemic white privilege needs to be dismantled.

But “white privilege” is a loaded term. That is a natural barrier to engaging White people in countering racism. It is also very real, centuries old, and self-sustaining. So, it needs to be defined, put in perspective, and countered through actions targeted to each of the two types of white privilege.

There is some surprisingly good news. The good news is that countering white privilege has a big upside and a relatively small downside, which is limited in scope. That’s not how it feels when it’s first approached or engaged, but it becomes quite evident very rapidly, particularly in the case of personal white privilege.

The key is to see white privilege clearly and engage in targeted sustained action to counter it. White privilege is one of those cases where the shadow is much bigger and intimidating than the reality. Committing to engage not only throws light the shadow, it also naturally replaces guilt and shame with responsibility and power. It starts with awareness and education – seeing white privilege – but it needs to move rapidly to committed sustained action. Those targeted actions will be different for personal vs. structural privilege.

“Why must we always talk about race anyway? Can’t we just be human beings?”

And Professor Hunk replied – that is exactly what white privilege is, that

you can say that. Race doesn't really exist for you because it has never really been a barrier. Black folks don't have that choice."

Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie, [Americannah](#)

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Section I

White Privilege – What it is and What it isn't

"The world is a dangerous place not because of people who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."

Albert Einstein

#1 What White Privilege is

White privilege is a set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble those who dominate the power positions in our institutions. It is greater access to power and resources as well as supporting our daily quality of life. It's a built-in advantage for White people because we are White.

"White privilege is about the word white, not rich. It's having an advantage built into your life. It's not saying your life hasn't been hard; it's saying your skin color hasn't contributed to the difficulty in your life"

Emmanuel Acho, *Uncomfortable Conversations with a Black Man*

Having White privilege is not an option. We didn't ask for it. We can't get rid of it. It doesn't mean we don't have to struggle in life or don't deserve what we have achieved. We are not bad people because we have it. It's simple - We can't not get the privileges and we can't get rid of them.

Most of us go through life unaware of being White or that it matters. Privilege is hard to see for those of us who were born with it. It's obvious to others. We, as White people, all have privilege, although the extent of it varies greatly depending on multiple factors from gender to socio-economic status.

We have white privilege even if disadvantaged in other ways – gender, sexual identification, physical. We still have the privilege of race. We are not removed from the privileged group.

"White privilege" feels like an indictment. It is. An indictment is an accusation that something is very wrong. That fits white privilege and its impact. We aren't being indicted for establishing white privilege because that was done long ago. But we are being indicted for not effectively countering it and that is appropriate. We haven't effectively countered white privilege.

We inherited the challenge. We are not to blame for it. But, we have not yet successfully met the challenge. That's the challenge we face now.

“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 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 equalitarian my intentions.”

Harry Brod,

There are Two Different Forms of White Privilege

This is critical. These two forms of White privilege are profoundly different and require very different approaches.

- **Personal White Privilege** – The challenge here is to extend the advantages of personal white privilege to others (advantages “with” vs. advantages “over”). This form of privilege should be a basic human right. This is not a matter of White people giving up advantages, but rather a matter of White people fighting for others to enjoy the same advantages in daily life. (See examples of white privilege below in section II.)
- **Structural/Systemic White Privilege** – This is a challenge to “right the wrongs” that have been centuries in the making and change the structures, systems, laws, policies, and norms that fundamentally disadvantage Black people.

Systemic or structural White Privilege does advantage White people “over” Black people and White people will have to give up some advantages. However, the advantages that we will need to give up in “righting the wrongs” are surprisingly small. And the potential opportunities that open up in our organizations, governments, and communities are extraordinary. Our challenge is to take a “no fear” approach and realize those opportunities.

“Act as though what you do makes a difference. It does.”

William James

#2 What White Privilege Isn't

This is simple, but extraordinarily important:

- White privilege is *not* the suggestion that White people have never struggled or that life is not hard for White people. It just means that the struggles have not been caused by our skin color.
- And white privilege is *not* the assumption that everything a white person has accomplished is unearned or undeserved.
- White privilege is *not* about being “good” or “bad” people. It’s not about blame or shame (it is, however, about responsibility).

It's Not Pie!

We have a choice. We can approach countering white privilege primarily as a win/lose - or closed pie issue - where we as White people “lose” when Black people “win.” That’s the fear driven approach and often the first experience we have when confronting white privilege. It’s a natural survival reaction that has played out through history.

We can also approach countering White privilege as a primarily win/win issue, where we expand the pie. That’s the visionary approach built on a foundation of values and courage. It’s actually the more realistic approach.

The key is to (1) acknowledge the natural fear response; (2) shift to a “win/win” posture; and (3) take action - which reinforces the “win/win” posture and decrease the impact of the closed pie reaction.

Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage.

Anais Nin

Section II

What White Privilege Looks Like

The Privilege to Not Notice. White privilege has been named and called out, but it still takes some work to see it clearly and it takes courage and commitment to take action to counter it. The first step is to see it.

#3 Personal Privilege

As White people we are more likely to move through our lives with a natural expectation that our needs will most likely be met. Black people move through the world knowing that their needs are on the margins and have little faith that they will be naturally met.

As White people we are more likely to be seen as individuals rather than stereotyped by our race, extended compassion, given the benefit of the doubt, and are less likely to be judged or defined by our mistakes.

Examples of Personal or “Daily: White Privilege

Peggy McIntosh, in *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, identified over twenty-five examples of personal or “daily” white privilege in 1989. Twelve of those examples are listed here because even half of her list provides a good picture of what personal white privilege looks like on a normal daily basis.

1. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
2. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
3. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone that can cut my hair.
4. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color to not work against the appearance of financial stability.
5. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

6. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such ignorance.
7. If a traffic officer pulls me over or the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
8. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
9. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got the job because of race.
10. I can choose public accommodations without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
11. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
12. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

How is This "Privilege"?

This list looks like a list of experiences that should be normal for everyone in America. How is this "white privilege?" A privilege is a right or benefit granted to a particular group – in this case White people. These experiences are not rights or benefits granted to Black people. The only difference is skin color. These rights and benefits are "privileges" only because they are granted to a particular group. They should be normal experiences for all.

Nothing needs to be taken from White people. These rights and benefits simply need to be extended to Black people. That is the challenge with personal white privilege. It's direct and simple, but not easy because it's "baked in" to American life.

#4 Structural/Systemic Privilege

"Every organization or community is perfectly designed to get the outcomes it gets."

That is the central principle for understanding organizations and communities. It is the principle that explains why an organization or community gets the outcomes it gets or how you can design an organization or community to get desired outcomes.

Structural or systemic White Privilege is built into our governmental, community and business organizations – laws, policies, processes, structures, practices, relationships, values, and beliefs, decision-making as well as access to resources, power, and opportunities. All of these elements come together to create and perpetuate structural

white privilege. So, these elements must be addressed to counter that white privilege in whatever sector of life it appears. Structural white privilege needs to be dismantled (vs. “extended” as with personal white privilege).

“White privilege is an absence of the consequences of racism. An absence of structural discrimination, an absence of your race being viewed as a problem first and foremost.”

Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I’m No Longer Talking to White People About Race*

Examples of Structural or Systemic White Privilege

Because white privilege has been built into the fabric of American life for centuries, it lives at a structural or systemic level in a range of domains, each of which can have a significant effect on Black people. Taken in combination, they have a profound impact. These are domains where organization or community design become critical if we are to dismantle systemic privilege – which translates to systemic lack of privilege.

- **Wealth** - lack of access to real estate, banking and finance, cross-generational transfer of wealth, etc. *Example: The average White family has eight times the wealth of the average Black Family (Federal Reserve).*
- **Healthcare** – lack of inclusion in research, culturally appropriate care, care within accessible geographic range, access to insurance, etc. *Example: Black men are 2.5 times more likely to die of colon cancer than White men because of fewer PSA screenings, are more likely to be diagnosed with later stage cancer, are less likely to have health insurance, and less likely to have access to high quality care. (Michigan Medicine – University of Michigan)*
- **Education** – equal quality, equal opportunities for desired education, culturally appropriate materials, enrollment and discipline policies, etc. *Example: 87% of White students graduated from high school vs. 71% of Black students. (American Psychological Association)*

- **Criminal Justice System** – policing, access to legal help, sentencing, prep for success on the outside, etc. *Example: In 2018 15% of the US population was Black youths, but 35% of arrests of youths were Black. (Prison Policy Initiative)*
- **Organizations** – disadvantaged in recruiting pipelines, selection, support, pay, fulltime employment, career opportunities and advancement, etc. *Example: In 2019 Black workers were twice as likely to be unemployed at almost all educational levels. (Economic Policy Institute)*

In other words, in the main domains of life Black people are seriously structurally and systemically disadvantaged. Redesigning our structures, laws, policies, systems, and practices to “right this wrong” is a tough complex challenge and will require a great deal of commitment, perseverance, and resilience.

Section III.

How We Meet the Challenge – Actions to Counter White Privilege

Countering white privilege requires an awareness of our current reality combined with focused actions to change that reality. That applies to both our personal or daily white privilege as well as our structural or systemic white privilege. Those are two different challenges, but they both require aware committed action that is sustained.

*“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before
starting to improve the world.”*

Anne Frank

Personal Responsibility

Whether intentional or not, we, as white people, participate in white privilege. The patterns set in history continue today. We are either part of the problem or part of the

solution. There is no middle or neutral ground. Inaction reinforces white privilege because white privilege is self-sustaining.

#5 What We Can do About Countering Personal White Privilege

(Extending the Privilege to Others)

Changing the story of personal white privilege is primarily a matter of ensuring that others have the same conditions of privilege. It's not about "giving up" advantages. It's about ensuring that others have the same basic conditions that we have as White people on a day-to-day basis.

Awareness of Personal "Daily" Privilege

We have to see it to deal with it. We need to see it in action and understand the impact on us as White people and particularly the impact on Black people. Daily privilege is relatively easy to see if we are self-aware and have the empathy to put ourselves in others' realities.

For example, what's it like for me to go into a store, be a stranger walking in another neighborhood, interact with the police, see people that look like me when I Google cartoons about almost anything, etc. And what would it be like if I were Black? The difference is dramatic.

Five Steps to Effective Sustained Actions

What can I do to extend the personal privileges I have to others? And what qualities and characteristics will I call on in order to do that effectively? Keep it simple for countering personal white privilege. Countering structural white privilege is much more complex by its nature.

- 1. Become increasingly aware of white privilege.** There are dozens of examples of how white privilege shows up in the literature on the internet. These examples combine with our own enhanced awareness of what we see in our daily lives.

Becoming aware of all the ways that the lack of personal privilege affects people who are not white makes it much easier to get off the sidelines and stop being a bystander.

2. **Identify specific actions.** If we think about the different scenarios we encounter as we go through our daily lives, it is not hard to identify actions that we could take in different situations to ensure that others enjoy the basic privileges we are granted as White people.

*“Start where you are with what you have., knowing that
what you have is plenty enough.”*

Booker T. Washington

3. **Act.** Just start. Take the first steps. Start small, but start. Don’t get stuck preparing and don’t wait for everything to be just right before venturing out.
4. **“Hold the course.”** This is not a sprint and there will be frustrations and setbacks along the way. Because of all the natural unknown we will need to “learn the way” and that means increasing awareness and competence. The best way is frequent informal check-ins - what we have to celebrate (including interim steps); what we have learned so far; and what we want to keep doing, start doing or stop doing.
5. **Connect with others.** The more connected we are, the better. That can be with individuals or groups or organizations. It can be with White people and/or with people of color. It can be formal or informal.

One reason that new or deepened connections are important is that we can lose some of our current connections if we challenge norms. That is just an unhappy possibility when countering racism, but that is not a given and the range of potential new relationships is broad.

“Courage is the commitment to begin with no guarantee of success.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

#6 What We Can do to Counter Systemic/Structural White Privilege (*Changing the Built-in Balance of Privilege*)

This is a more complex challenge than countering personal white privilege. The topics are more complex and we must address them in collaboration with others. It is a very different path. It's about "righting the wrongs" of systemic privilege. However, despite its complexity it is also a very straightforward challenge with a few key steps.

1. **Choose an organization or a topic.** Choose an organization(s) that is engaged in work that counters systemic/structural white privilege. Or choose a topic - such as closing the racial wealth gap or education reform. The point is to focus efforts.

If things don't work out with an initial organization or topic, try different options. Structural white privilege is a complex challenge, so the best path may not be obvious at the beginning.

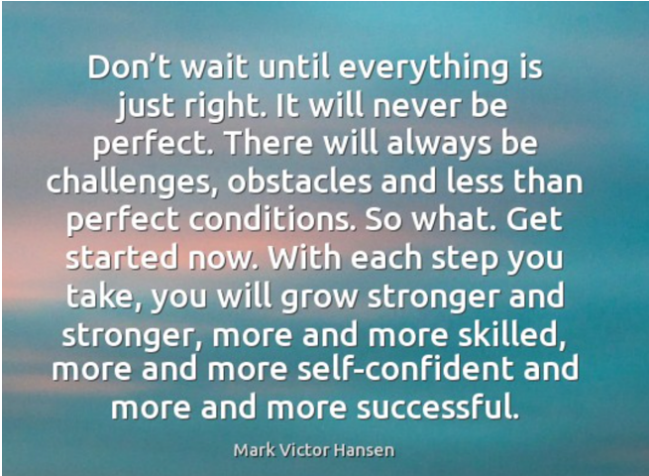
2. **Choose your actions and the value you want to add.** This can be tricky because the most effective actions and the greatest value-add may not be immediately evident. It may take some exploration to zero in on the value you want to add and how to add it. One major pitfall to avoid is selling yourself short. You are adding your value to the work of others, so you don't have to solve the problem on your own and it takes a lot of different capabilities to make a difference. You will have a place.

"I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something.

And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can Do"

Edward Everett Hale

3. **Act.** Just start. Take the first steps. Start small, but start. You may need to do some preparation to play the role you want to play, but don't get stuck preparing and don't wait for everything to be just right before venturing out.



Don't wait until everything is just right. It will never be perfect. There will always be challenges, obstacles and less than perfect conditions. So what. Get started now. With each step you take, you will grow stronger and stronger, more and more skilled, more and more self-confident and more and more successful.

Mark Victor Hansen

4. **“Hold the course.”** This is not a sprint and there will be frustrations and setbacks along the way. With complex challenges such as this there is always the need to “learn the way.” Frequent informal check-ins can not only help stay on track, but also generate energy. As with individual efforts, they can focus on what there is to celebrate (including interim steps); what has been learned so far (lots of possibilities); and what to keep doing, start doing or stop doing.

#7 The Pitfalls

There are lots of potential pitfalls, but four stand out as particularly common and problematic. Fortunately, they can all be dealt with.

Pitfall #1: Denial – This is a natural and almost inescapable pitfall. It’s a natural human reaction to the challenge to counter White privilege. Part of the problem is the use of “White.” A part of white privilege is “white” being “normal” or the standard. We are not used to being labeled by our race, as “White.” So, dealing with “White” privilege can be a jolt and off-putting. It feels like an indictment (it is to some degree because we haven’t dealt with it yet – and indictments always feel bad and offputting).

It’s best confronted simply by drawing strength from a sense of responsibility vs. guilt and by beginning to act. Acting out of a sense of responsibility and purpose can rapidly diminish this pitfall.

Pitfalls #2: “Who am I to...” This is a big pitfall only if we make ourselves small. We don’t need to be an expert. We don’t need to win every battle. We just need to get in the game, act, learn, and grow. We just need to confront this pitfall and focus on who we are and what we bring to the challenge.

Pitfall #3: Not connecting with others or losing connections. This can be a big pitfall in either form. Countering White privilege and racism in general is best done with others. Connections with other individuals or organizations matter. There is also the danger that we will lose some relationships if we act to counter White privilege and others become uncomfortable with that. Unfortunately, that’s a natural risk and it highlights the importance of forming new relationships or deepening current ones.

Relationships with organizations or groups can be challenging because relationships are always about “fit” and it can take some work to find the right “fit.” Approaching this much like a job search is helpful – searching out the right organization and/or group and presenting them with a “resume” to make yourself immediately “knowable” is a good approach.

Pitfall #4: Becoming discouraged vs. holding the course. If we are acting outside of our white comfort zones and taking on one of the major issues of the age, we are going to get tired and worn down at times. We are also going to experience the inevitable setbacks and frustrations of such a challenge. We can rely on a clear and compelling vision of the desired state we are pursuing for both direction and energy. Having a support network and sources of renewal is important as is a focus on becoming more and more resilient. Fortunately, support, renewal and resilience are all assets that can create a strong foundation for life in general.

“Let no one be discouraged by the belief that there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills – against misery and ignorance, injustice,

***and violence. Few will have the greatness to bend history itself;
but each of us can work to change a small portion of events,
and in the total of all those acts will be written the
history of this generation.***

***It is from the numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that
human history is shaped. Each time a man or a woman
stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others,
or strikes out against injustice, he or she sends a tiny ripple
of hope, and crossing each other from a million different
centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which
can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”***

Robert Francis Kennedy, speech at Day of Affirmation,
University of Capetown, South Africa