

Well Meaning White People: What Will It Take to Move Us to Act?

Well-Meaning White People:
What Will Move Us to Act?

Frances E. Kendall, Ph.D.
NCORE, 2010

Definitions of Privilege

American Heritage Dictionary Definition

❖ "...a right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person beyond the advantages of most."

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Two Types of Privilege

1. “Unearned entitlements”: things that *all* people should have but are restricted to certain groups.

These “unearned entitlements” then become “unearned advantage,” giving the dominant a competitive edge.

Allan Johnson, p. 25

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Two Types of Privilege

2. “Conferred dominance”: the power of one group over another. It manifests itself systemically, whites dominant over people of color, men over women, heterosexuals over GLBT folks, Christians over people of other religions, people who are physically able-bodied over those who are not, and so on.

Allan Johnson, p. 26.

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Privilege, cont'd

❖ Individuals within the dominant groups are able to use their conferred dominance personally, and often do so without being aware of it.

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Privilege, cont'd

❖ “When it comes to privilege...it doesn't really matter who we really are. What matters is who other people *think* we are, which is to say, the social categories they put us in.”

Allan Johnson, p. 35

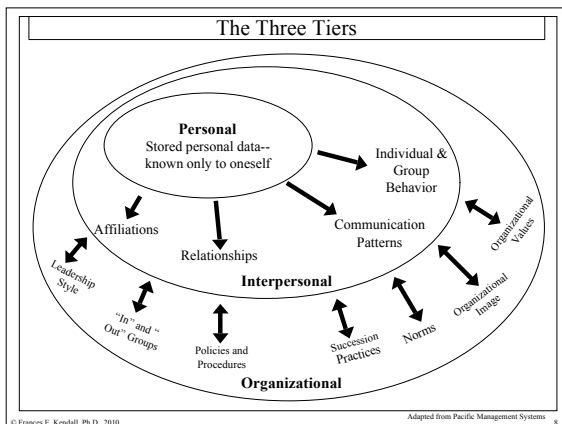
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Privilege, cont'd

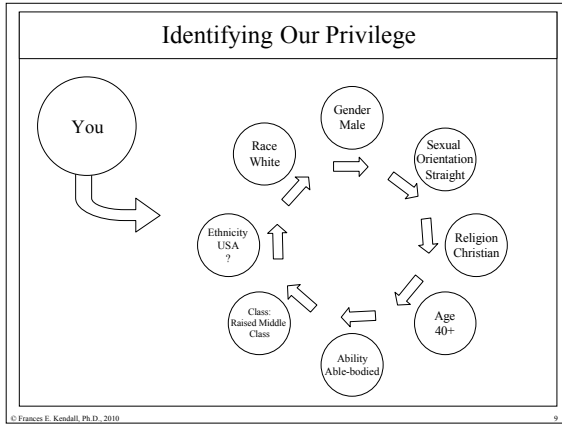
❖ Privileges provide disproportional access to resources, to the ability to influence, and to power. Privileges are given by systems to individuals on the basis of position and/or identity, whether we want them or not.

❖ Privileges are granted because a group and its members are deemed more “worthy” than other groups.

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Well-Meaning White People (WMWP)

- ❖ The greatest candidates for WMWPs are racial liberals and racial progressives.
- ❖ For change agents, they are our worst problem and greatest possibility.

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Well-Meaning White People

“Liberal and progressive whites, despite their good intentions, are neither well-informed about the historical and cultural impact of racism on Blacks [and other people of color] nor clear about what is racist. It is not surprising that as a group, white progressives do not stand up and demand racial equality.”

Trepagnier, p. 44

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Well-Meaning White People

In *Talking Back*, bell hooks writes “When liberal whites fail to understand how they can and/or do embody white-supremacist values and beliefs even though they may not embrace racism as prejudice or domination (especially domination that involves coercive control), they cannot recognize the ways their actions support and affirm the very structure of racist domination and oppression that they profess to wish to see eradicated.” (p.113)

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Well-Meaning White People

❖ *“To be rid of racism, a white woman may indeed have to do some introspecting, remembering and verbalizing of feelings, but the self-knowledge which she might achieve by this work would necessarily produce profound change, and there are many reasons why many white women may not want to change. White women’s efforts to gain self-knowledge are easily undermined by the desire not to live out the consequences of getting it...”*
“White Woman Feminist,” p. 2

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Well-Meaning White People--FEK

❖ WMWPs are very concerned about being seen as and seeing themselves as good people.

❖ There are visible elements of (white) privilege in the behaviors of well-meaning white people:

- The ease and arrogance with which one can say, “Race is N.M.I.—Not My Issue.”
- The assumption that “we” are a post-racial society and that “we” really don’t have anything to worry about.
- “We can teach everybody’s children.”

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Well Meaning White People: What Will It Take to Move Us to Act?

Various Explanations for Why Well-Meaning White People Are Who They Are--Silent Racism

- ❖ Silent racism
 - For most white people, “racists” are those who openly hate people of color and other targeted people; those in the “not racist” category are people who try to ignore racial differences.
 - Most white people believe that “racist” acts are intentional, mean, and hateful; they overlook everyday acts of racism because
 1. they are often oblivious to the actions and
 2. they believe the behaviors don’t count as racist because they are unintentional.

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont’d)

- ❖ Silent racism (cont’d)
 - Trepagnier suggests moving away from the binary classification of “racist” and “not racist” to a continuum of “less racist” to “more racist.”
 - By doing so, it makes it clear that all white people are at least somewhat racist and steers us away from focusing on intent to focusing on behavior and the impact of that behavior.
 - Silent racism is the racism that is built into the fabric of society. “...it does its damage unobserved and...inhabits the minds of well-meaning whites.” (Trepagnier, p.6)

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont’d)

- ❖ Silent racism (cont’d)
 - Silent racism presents itself in stereotypical images— images of African Americans and other people of color as *less*: less smart, less ambitious, less honest, less trustworthy, and more dangerous than whites.
 - Silent racism also presents itself in assumptions of white superiority and “images, attitudes, fictions, and notions that link to and buttress systemic racism...” (Feagin, quoted in Trepagnier, p. 6)

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ **Silent racism (cont'd)**
“I absolutely do not rule out the possibility that African Americans are, on average, genetically predisposed to be less intelligent. I could also obviously be convinced that by controlling for the right variables, we would see that they are, in fact, as intelligent as white people under the same circumstances... In conclusion, I think it is bad science to disagree with a conclusion in your heart, and then try (unsuccessfully, so far at least) to find data that will confirm what you want to be true.”

Email from a third year Harvard Law Student, April 2010

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ **Silent racism (cont'd)**

- Silent racism is unspoken, often unknown, and yet many decisions are made through this lens.
- For example, historical decisions from the assumption of Manifest Destiny (1840s) to installing the National Guard on the US-Mexico border (2009/2010).

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ **Silent racism (cont'd)**
Based on a conversation with a white male stranger on a plane, well-meaning white people:

- Carry perceptions that everything is fine.
- Are most interested in their own worlds.
- Train themselves not to read the news because some of it is so upsetting.
- “In short, I don’t know. Aside from financially supporting various causes, I don’t do much.”

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Various Explanations for Why Well Meaning White People Are Who They Are--Bystanders

❖ Bystanders

- Bystanders are people “who are neither perpetrators or victims.”
(Staub, Ervin. *The Psychology of Good and Evil: Why Children, Adults, and Groups Help and Harm Others*, p.3)
- Bystanders are present in a situation and make a choice about how to respond.
- Staub believes there are *passive* bystanders and *active* bystanders.

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Passive Bystanders

Passive bystanders remain passive, in part, because they:

- Feel alienated from the victims and/or
- Feel little connection to the victims, to race, or to racism.
 - “What do you think needs to happen in order for racism to end?” “Racism has no connection to my life.”
 - “Have you ever done or said something racist?” “I can’t think of anything. I’m sure there must be something, but I can’t think of anything. It didn’t hit me.” (Trepagnier, p. 50.)

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Passive Bystanders (Cont'd)

- Identify with or feel loyal to the perpetrators.
- Fear a range of repercussions of intervening or interrupting.
- Fear being seen as racist which then keeps them from talking about or finding out any thing about racism.
 - “I would rather be called an asshole than be called racist.”
 - “Call me anything, call my mother anything, but don’t call me a racist.”

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

- ❖ **Passive Bystanders (Cont'd)**
 - Fear connecting to people who have been identified as outsiders.
 - “The silent racism in well-meaning white people’s minds would tend to support the white belief that blacks in some way deserve discrimination.” (Trepagnier, p.49)
 - Once bystanders choose to remain passive, they are likely to continue that pattern.

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

- ❖ **Bystanders**
 - Staub believes moral courage is required to shift from passive bystander to active bystander.

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

- ❖ **Active Bystanders**
 - *Active bystanders* are those people who choose to interrupt a situation.
 - Making the shift from passive to active bystander is most difficult in situations in which there is a power differential, e.g., student to professor, employee to manager, woman to man.

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Bystanders, regardless of what they choose to do, affect a situation.

- "...bystanders, by virtue of being present during a racist incident, align either with the target of discrimination by interrupting the discrimination or with the perpetrator by remaining passive." (Trepagnier, p. 49.)
- If they are passive, the racism is supported and the bystander has colluded with and supported the racist actor.
- If they act, there is a shift of power in the situation from the racist actor to the target group.
- "You can't be neutral on a moving train." Howard Zinn

❖ Note: Bystander behavior can be personal, interpersonal, and organizational.

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Various Explanations for Why Well Meaning White People Are Who They Are--Colorblind

❖ Colorblind

"Those who...argue for a return to a color-blind America that never was, who would have us believe that their opposition to affirmative action is rooted in a desire for fairness and equality are engaged in justification, rationalization and downright prevarication. They are colorblind alright--blind to the consequences of being the wrong color in America today."

Julian Bond, 1998
Enhancing Minority Attainment Conference

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Colorblind (cont'd)

The national belief in the possibility of being colorblind is embedded in US culture and history. For example, in dissenting in the Plessy v. Ferguson case (1896), Justice John Harlan wrote:

- "The white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time if it remains true to its great heritage and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty. But in view of the Constitution, in the eye of the law, there is in this country no superior, dominant, ruling class of citizens. There is no caste here. Our Constitution is colorblind and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens."

From *Colorblind Racism*, p. 115

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Eduardo Bonilla-Silva: 4 frames of the concept of color-blind racism:

- *Abstract liberalism*—mistaking “Everyone should be treated equally” with reverse discrimination and special treatment.
- *Naturalization*—segregation is natural. “People like to be around people who are like them.”

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Why WMWP Are Who They Are (Cont'd)

❖ Four frames of color-blind racism (cont'd):

- *Cultural racism*—blaming racial inequality on the cultures of people of color: “It’s part of Black people’s culture not to mow their lawns, so our neighborhood is a wreck.” “English is the language of America. If ‘they’ can’t learn English, ‘they’ shouldn’t be here.” “I really like Mei Ping, but Asians just don’t make good managers; I don’t think we should promote her.” “She grew up in a ‘culture of poverty.’ Of course she’s not going to succeed in a middle class school.
- *Minimization of racism*—Said to the highest ranking African American man on a university campus the day after Obama’s election: “Well, now youall can’t whine any more about how hard things are.”

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Characteristics of WMWPs

❖ Confusing not seeing race and not naming race with not having a reaction.

❖ “*I do see color but it has nothing to do with my judgment of a person, its character that I look at!*”
Blog on Anderson Cooper AC 360, 5/19/10

❖ When someone says, “I don’t see race,” they have reduced the world to everyone being the same. That takes away history, nuance, and experience.

❖ If I truly don’t see race, am I treating people who are racially “other” as though they are all the same? In my head I then make them *like me* so I don’t have to see them at all. I am able to keep myself central and comfortable.

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Characteristics of WMWPs

❖ “For white people...racial denial tends to engender a profoundly invested disingenuousness, an innocence that amounts to the transgressive refusal to know.”

Seeing a Colorblind Future, p. 27.

❖ “A man with whom I used to work once told me that I made too much of my race. ‘After all,’ he said, ‘I don’t even think of you as black’...Later he confided to me that he wished the school could find more blacks like me. I felt myself slip in and out of shadow, as I became nonblack for the purposes of inclusion and black for the purposes of exclusion.”

The Alchemy of Race and Rights, p. 9.

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