



Unlearning racism course

Unlearning Racism: An Introduction

Definitions

White Supremacy: Ideas which support white racism

This term is often connected to extremist, right-wing hate groups. However, in anti-racist work, this term forces people to acknowledge the belief systems underlying whiteness. Thus, white supremacy is seen as the ideology which perpetuates white racism. This ideology exists in both the overtly prescriptive form, i.e. the white supremacy that we attach to right-wing white power groups, and as the self-perpetuating cultural structure also known as whiteness.

White Privilege/White-Skin Privilege: The benefits people get because they are white.

White privilege is the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices given to people solely because they are white. Generally white people are not conscious that they receive these privileges.

White Fragility: White people's negative responses to information about racial inequality

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation,

silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviours, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.

The 'White Supremacy Pyramid'

When we refer to White Supremacy, this results in racist ideas and behaviours that impact BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour).

It is a pyramid where every brick (or foundation) depends on the ones below. If the bricks at the bottom are removed, then the whole thing comes tumbling down.



Description of the pyramid, starting from the top:

Overt White Supremacy (Socially Unacceptable)

Genocide, Violence and Calls for Violence

Lynching, hate crimes, racial slurs like the N-Word. Blackface, genocide, hate crimes, unjust police shootings or violence.

Covert White Supremacy (Socially Acceptable)

Discrimination

This can include disproportionate numbers of black people in prisons, racial profiling leading to black people being 9.5 times more likely to be stopped and searched, Facial recognition (that isn't able to properly identify darker skins). UK Hostile Environment policies (series of immigration policies/ and laws that changed citizenship in uk (leading to deportations eg. Windrush Scandal etc), linking immigration databases and other databases. Seeing POC as violent/ stupid/ unprofessional or untrustworthy because of the colour of their skin.

Veiled Racism

This can include homogenising POC (seeing all POC the same). Expecting them to speak for all POC, whilst white people can be exceptional (individuals), only speak for themselves. Thinking racialising a person as white is racist. Using coded language - 'you lot/ people' 'your kind' 'thug' or references to animal or insect/ parasite references like '..swarms of...'. Also micro-aggressions like hair touching without consent.

Minimisation/ indifference

This includes the 'not racist' or 'non racist' actions or inactions. Asking for proof, becoming uncomfortable, questioning a POC's lived experiences, 'white lives matter', denying race exists as that shuts down talking about racial inequalities, becoming defensive (upset, angry, confused, or guilty) if a POC points out that you have behaved in a racially discriminatory way.

3. Prompts for breakout room exercises

During the workshop, we will use sentence prompts to support your reflections on White Supremacy, White Privilege and White Fragility. These will be provided in the workshop, but feel free to keep these to hand, for use in the breakout room sessions.

Sentence Prompts:

Participating in White Supremacy: A time when I was racist...
How that felt for me was...
This upheld white supremacy because...

On White Privilege: My White privilege has protected me from...
My white privilege has allowed me...

On White Fragility: My white fragility showed up when...
The way I behaved was...
The emotions I felt were...

4. White Privilege

(An extract from "[White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)" first appeared in Peace and Freedom Magazine, July/August, 1989, Dr. Peggy McIntosh. 'I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group'.)

Daily effects of white privilege:

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. I can go into: a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented; a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions; a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. I can swear, or dress in second- hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. 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 oblivion.

17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my race.
19. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
20. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazines featuring people of my race.
21. 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.
22. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
23. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
24. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
25. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
26. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. [...] But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be widely accepted in a just society.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and I imagine for some others like me if we raise

our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light- skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

5. White Fragility

(An extract from chapter 13 “White Fragility” in *What does it mean to be White?* Robin DiAngelo, 2011)

When ideologies such as color blindness, meritocracy, and individualism are challenged, intense emotional reactions are common. There are many complex reasons why whites are so defensive about the suggestion that we benefit from and are complicit in a racist system. These reasons include:

- Social taboos against talking openly about race
- The racist = bad/not racist = good binary
- Fear and resentment towards people of color
- Our view of ourselves as objective individuals
- Our guilt and knowledge that there is more going on than we can or will admit
- Deep investment in a system that benefits us and that we have been conditioned to see as fair

As I have discussed throughout this book, all of these reasons serve to protect and shelter white people from an honest exploration of racism, while allowing us to live in a social environment that protects and insulates us. This insulated environment of racial privilege builds our expectations for racial comfort while at the same time it lowers our tolerance for racial stress.

[...]

White fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as

anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium. Racial stress results from an interruption of what is racially familiar. These interruptions can take a variety of forms and come from a range of sources.

The following are examples of the kinds of challenges that trigger racial stress for white people:

- Suggesting that a white person's viewpoint comes from a racialized frame of reference (challenge to objectivity)
- People of color talking directly about their racial perspectives and experiences (challenge to white taboos on talking openly about race)
- People of color choosing not to protect the racial feelings of white people in regard to race (challenge to white racial expectations and need for/entitlement to racial comfort)
- People of color not being willing to tell their stories or answer questions about their racial experiences (challenge to the expectation that people of color will serve us/do our work for us)
- A fellow white not providing agreement with one's racial perspective (challenge to white solidarity)
- Receiving feedback that one's behavior had a racist impact (challenge to white racial innocence)
- Suggesting that group membership is significant (challenge to individualism)
- An acknowledgment that access is unequal between racial groups (challenge to meritocracy)
- Being presented with a person of color in a position of leadership (challenge to white authority)
- Being presented with information about other racial groups through, for example, movies in which people of color drive the action but are not in stereotypical roles, or racial justice education (challenge to white centrality).

In a white dominant environment, each of these challenges becomes exceptional. In turn, we are often at a loss for how to respond in constructive ways, and resort to withdrawal, defensiveness, crying, arguing, minimizing, ignoring, and in other ways push back to regain our racial position and equilibrium. We have not had to build the cognitive or affective skills or develop the stamina that would allow for constructive engagement across racial divides.

White fragility may be conceptualized as a response or “condition” produced and reproduced by the continuous social and material advantages of whiteness. When disequilibrium occurs—when there is an interruption to that which is familiar and taken for granted—white fragility functions to restore equilibrium and return the resources “lost” via the challenge. Resistance towards the trigger, shutting down and/or tuning out, indulgence in emotional incapacitation such as guilt or “hurt feelings,” exiting, or a combination of these responses results. These strategies are often not conscious but rather are reflexive (automatic). Given that white people hold the social, economic and cultural capital, our strategies for maintaining our racial position or “balance” trump those of people of color.

[...]

Many of us actively working to interrupt racism continually hear complaints about the “gotcha” culture of white antiracism. There is a stereotype that we are looking for every incident we can find so we can spring out, point our fingers, and shout, “You’re a racist!” While certainly there are white people who arrogantly set themselves apart from other whites by acting in this way, in my experience of over 20 years, this is not the norm. It is far more common for sincere white people to agonize over when and how to give feedback to a fellow white person, given the ubiquity of white fragility. White fragility works to punish the person giving feedback and essentially bully them back into silence. It also maintains white solidarity—the tacit agreement that we will protect white privilege and not hold each other accountable for our racism. When the person giving the feedback is a person of color, the charge is “playing the race card” and the consequences of white fragility are much more penalizing.

Racism is the norm rather than an aberration. Feedback is key to our ability to recognize and repair our inevitable and often unaware collusion. In recognition of this, I follow these guidelines:

1. How, where, and when you give me feedback is irrelevant—it is the feedback I want and need. Understanding that it is hard to give, I will take it any way I can get it. From my position of social, cultural and institutional white power and privilege, I am perfectly safe and I can handle it. If I cannot handle it, it's on me to build my racial stamina.
2. Thank you.

The above guidelines rest on the understanding that there is no face to save and the jig is up; I know that I have blind spots and unconscious investments in white superiority. My investments are reinforced every day in mainstream society. I did not set this system up but it does unfairly benefit me and I am responsible for interrupting it. I need to work hard to recognize it myself, but I can't do it alone. This understanding leads me to gratitude when others help me.

In my workshops I often ask people of color, “How often have you given white people feedback on our unaware yet inevitable racism and did that go well for you?” Eye-rolling, head-shaking, and outright laughter follow, along with the general consensus of never. I then ask, “What would it be like if you could simply give us feedback, have us graciously receive it, reflect, and work to change the behavior?” Recently a man of color sighed and said, “It would be revolutionary.” I ask my fellow whites to consider the profundity of that response. Revolutionary that we would receive, reflect, and work to change the behavior. On the one hand it points to how difficult and fragile we are. But on the other hand, how simple taking responsibility for our racism can be.

If we can't listen to, or comprehend, the perspectives of people of color, we cannot bridge cross-racial divides.