



White Privilege

| *Is there such a thing as white privilege? If so, what can we do about it?*

Introduction

If someone uses the phrase “white privilege” in a crowded room, say during coffee hour after Sunday morning worship, or over conversation before dinner with a group of friends, it is likely that the room will go quiet. The reasons for the silence will vary: some of the white folks will be cautious about speaking because they don’t want to hazard being seen as racist by saying that they certainly don’t feel privileged. Others will likely not know what is meant by the term. The persons of color in the room, having lived with the other side of privilege for most of their lives in North America, will know very well what the term means—because they have experienced its opposite side. But they also know well how to live and move in a system where they are not the “norm,” where they do not automatically receive the position of advantage simply by turning up. White privilege is experienced—on one side or the other—by virtually everyone in the United States, whether knowingly or unknowingly. However, it is seldom talked about.

Definitions

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Group of Business People on a Chart © Andres Rodriguez—Fotolia.com

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who are white in the United States. Whether we know it or not, whether we feel privileged or hard pressed, those of us who are white benefit as individuals and as a group in the present social order of our society. Many white folk would prefer to ignore or deny this reality; this is one of the reasons that racism is often defined in terms of personal prejudice. It is easier to think of racism and the tensions and inequality around issues of race as a particular kind of prejudice. That allows me (I am a white, middle-aged man) to say that since I am not prejudiced, I really don’t need to worry about racism or concern myself with working toward dismantling it.

RACISM STUDY PACK

This study is part of the Thoughtful Christian Racism Study Pack. The list below is the suggested order of the study pack, although you may study it in any order your group chooses.

- Why Is it So Difficult to Talk About Racism?
- Racism 101
- The Bible and Racism
- A History of Racism in the United States
- White Privilege
- Is Affirmative Action Still Needed?
- Do Segregated Churches Imply Racism?

Among the many definitions of racism, I find Beverly Tatum's to be the most helpful; it also provides an important component for understanding white privilege. Racism is a "system of advantage based on race."¹ In the United States, this system provides advantages, or privileges, to whites, and it operates to the disadvantage of people of color. Understanding racism as a system in which some receive advantages they have not earned or deserve based simply on the way others perceive the color of their skin contradicts basic conceptions of justice. However, it is an accurate portrayal of our cultural reality: Some are advantaged and others are disadvantaged simply because of their race.

Race (in the socially constructed definition that is at work in the United States) has to do with privilege or lack of privilege, power that is inequitably distributed, and prejudice. *Racism* is clearly related to privilege and power, but not so clearly to prejudice. Beverly Tatum argues convincingly (and I believe rightly) that prejudice and racism are not the same and that the two terms should not be used interchangeably. Racism cannot be understood simply as the result of racial prejudice. Rather, racism is a system in which some are advantaged because of their race, and others are disadvantaged for the same reason. Whites and people of color—African Americans, Latinos/Latinas, Asian Americans, Native Americans—have very different experiences in the United States because of this system of privilege based on skin color.

The Invisibility of Whiteness

Many of us white people do not think of ourselves as having a race. We are just people, members of the human race. When we think about race, we usually think of people of color. This assumption (most often made and lived out unconsciously) positions white folk as the norm; we are just normal. But this (again, consciously or not) places persons of all other races in a category other than normal. The most powerful privilege that whites have is this position as the norm. Being "normal" or "just human" allows white people to assume that they can speak for all people irrespective of race, in ways that they would not expect "raced" people, people of color, people with a specific race, to speak. As "normal," whites tend to assume for themselves the right to see their position as the natural order of things.²

The sense that whites are normal and somehow without a race is obvious in the way we speak. We tend to identify the race or ethnicity of others, but not of whites. In nearly all forms of spoken and written communication in the United States, this pattern is evident; when listing the people present at a meeting, telling a story, or describing an event, race is identified only for those who are not white. Richard Dyer: "We (whites) will speak of, say, the blackness or Chineseness of friends, neighbors, colleagues, customers, or clients, and it may be in the most genuinely friendly and accepting manner, but we don't mention the whiteness of the white people we know."³ Try listening and watching for this pattern and you will find it just about everywhere. "We've hired three new staff members: Jason, Irene, and Jackson, an African American." "There are fifteen candidates, including two Asian Americans." White people are presented as normal, not needing any identification; the assumption (usually unconscious) follows that whites are the standard. Watch for the pattern in the press and on television, and in the communication of your congregation. And listen for it in your own communication. This is an important beginning step in the personal work we (white folk) need to do. White privilege, and the power that is a constituent part of privilege, is so pervasive because it is not seen as whiteness or related to the white race, but as normal.

White people, in the natural course of their lives and work, create the dominant image and interpretation of the world, set the standards, and establish the rules—and we do so in our own image, usually without realizing that we have created a system in which we will easily succeed but where others, with different images and interpretations, will easily fail. Jim Perkinson puts this rather sharply: "Whiteness exists in this country today as a color-blind fiction of innocence, publicly posturing itself as the neutral pursuit of the Dream, wishing well on all sides, intending equality, sorry for poverty, certain of the uprightness of its own vision of ascent into the gated bliss of sole proprietorship."⁴ The privilege whites have in our social system is the freedom and ability to create and pursue exclusive dreams without hindrance, without the requirement that they listen to or take account of the dreams, interpretations, and standards of people of other races.

In talking about race with white people, it is common to hear someone say, "But I don't want to be thought of

by my race, I don't want to be called 'white,' I just want to be me, to be human." Few of us have thought much about what it means to be white, and we haven't drawn the connections between belonging to the white race and the privileges that come with that belonging. We usually prefer (as we've been taught by our American culture) to think of ourselves as individuals, and we bridle a bit when someone identifies us as a member of a group. We don't like to think of ourselves as white, especially for fear that we will somehow be thought of as racist or white supremacist. We prefer to think of ourselves as color-blind, as not seeing differences. But this failure to recognize and attend to our whiteness is hardly honest or, for that matter, helpful in making known the good news that God created all peoples good, in God's own image.

The advantage that whites have over persons of other races in this society is seldom related to individual actions or achievement, as illustrated in the "Level Playing Field" exercise described below. We didn't receive our privileges personally—they are corporate and institutional, part of the social system in which we live—but they affect us personally. We can't give them back, whether we want them or not.

Examples

So what exactly is the advantage I have as a white person? First of all, whites are seen as the norm and accepted as the standard—irrespective of what you think as an individual. This means that a white person has the privilege of listening or not listening, of taking account of or not taking account of persons of other races. Whites are at the center of almost all decision making and in nearly all centers of power. They have the privilege of deciding to invite or not to invite others to the table to join in the decision making—where the agenda is usually set by the white person making the invitation. The liberals among us regularly invite persons of color to the decision table, but plans are often already well underway. Whites have the privilege of inviting others, of expecting that the invitation will be accepted, and then of going ahead with plans irrespective of who comes. Whites have the privilege of making decisions, with or without involving others, even when planning for others.

Debbie and Josefina

White privilege is part of the structure of our society, from standards and norms (that are usually unnoticed



Family in Their Backyard of Home © sonya etchison—Fotolia.com

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by white folk) to communication and human interactions and the daily details of life. Frances Kendall tells the following story in *Understanding White Privilege*.⁵ During a corporate diversity training session, she described differences in daily life experiences, but the white participants were not convinced. "During the lunch break on the second day, two people—a white woman, Debbie, and a Latina, Josefina—both went shopping. By chance, they turned up in the kitchen department at the same store and bought similar rugs. The Latina got into the check-out line first; the white woman was two people behind her in line. The Latina took out her American Express card to pay. The salesperson took the card and asked for two additional pieces of identification. After the sale was rung up, she handed the woman the sales slip and said, 'Be sure to keep this accessible because the guard will want to see it as you leave.' The Latina said, 'Thank you,' and left to come back to the training. When we resumed after lunch, the white woman raised her hand. 'Okay,' she said. 'I got it. Josefina and I both happened to go to the store . . .,' and she described the events. 'After Josefina left, it was my turn. I handed the saleswoman my American Express card, she rang up the sale, rolled the sales slip up in the rug, put it in a bag, handed it to me, and wished me a good day. She didn't ask me for any more identification, didn't warn me about the security guard, who didn't even notice as I left. I would never have believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes.'"

What We Worry About

A year or so ago, in the midst of a class I teach with two faculty colleagues on racial identity and white privilege, we paused to hear a sermon by an African American

pastor. He encouraged us to pray for the safety of our children, especially in the face of gun and police violence, and described how he prays for his own kids every night after they are asleep. The next day in class the sermon was mentioned and I told how every night I, too, stop by my sleeping daughter's room and say a prayer—but I never pray for her safety. She is white; I'm not afraid for her safety. That is white privilege.

The Level Playing Field

Each time we teach this class we use an exercise called the "Level Playing Field."⁶ Participants stand side by side in a large room or open field, an arm's distance or so from each other, and hold hands. The leader then reads a series of statements which include instructions for taking one step forward or one step back. Here are some examples:

- If your parents spoke English as a first language, take one step forward.
- If you were raised in a community where the vast majority of police, politicians, and government workers were *not* of your race, take one step back.
- If you have ever wondered if you were chosen to serve on session or a church committee because of your race, take one step back.
- If you can easily find hair-care products, skin-care products, and Band-Aids to suit your skin color and hair, move one space forward.

The line soon becomes ragged as some participants move forward, others move back, and the held hands come apart. After thirty or so statements and steps taken forward or back, one group of participants (likely only whites) will be far forward and another (likely only persons of color) will be far back. The leader then allows for a time of observation and debriefing, identifying who ended up where, how it felt to let go of hands and move ahead or back. Discoveries are then shared. First of all, none of the statements (and consequent movements forward and back) are about an individual's achievements or choices, but about family and social circumstances. Many have to do with multigenerational realities and the effects that privilege and oppression have on subsequent generations. The exercise makes it clear that we are not on a level playing field and that the realities of history and privilege for some continue to impact lives and access to opportunities.

Numbers

The evidence of the privilege enjoyed by white Americans is set out unmistakably in the statistical records of our common life. If anyone asks, "How can you claim that white Americans are privileged?" the answer is easy: "Look at the numbers."

Every year, the National Urban League publishes the Equality Index,⁷ comparing the conditions of black and white Americans using a comprehensive set of variables, including health, education, economics, social justice, and civic engagement. The beginning point is a line from the original Constitution of the United States that counted African Americans as three-fifths of a person for purposes of taxation and state representation—or .60, using whites as the standard 1.0. (The Constitution was corrected by the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868.) Just to be clear: When the index, based on the many variables of well-being, is lower than 1.0, it indicates that black Americans are not doing as well as whites in the area being measured. For 2007, the index was .73, essentially the same as it has been for the several years that I've been tracking these data.

There is a wealth of information in this index, as the data are broken into many different categories so that each might be analyzed separately. In brief, black Americans are at .76 in relation to white Americans with regard to health, a figure based on the reality that white Americans live longer than blacks, that black women were five times more likely to die in childbirth than whites (in 2005), and that under the age of one, black children are more than twice as likely to die as white children. In the economic category, the index stands at .57, based on the fact that more than twice as many black Americans live below the poverty line than whites and the unemployment rate for black Americans is more than twice that of whites (these numbers are for 2007).

In *The Hidden Cost of Being African American*, Thomas Shapiro explains that the true disparity in the economic well-being between black and white Americans is not found primarily in the fact that the average black family earns 64 cents for every dollar earned by the average white family. Rather, it has to do with the way that wealth is passed from generation to generation; the net worth of the average white family is \$81,000, compared to \$8,000 for the average black family. The traditional argument is that the difference in wealth has to do with

disparities in education, job, and income—but when middle-class families with equivalent education, jobs, and incomes are compared, the black family still owns only 26 cents of wealth for every dollar of wealth owned by their white counterpart.⁸

Conclusion

These are simple, brief snapshots. The full picture requires careful, critical comparisons of education opportunities, rates of arrest and incarceration, and many others. In nearly every comparison, white Americans have significant advantages. It has been rightly noted that race is the single most accurate predictor of well-being in the United States. Unless we believe that whites are somehow inherently more able or deserving than persons of color (which I do not believe), it is clear from the statistical data that white Americans are privileged in a way that is not true for persons of color.

About the Writer

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For More Information

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Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Mikulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2007).

Gary R. Howard, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2006).

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Karyn D. McKinney, *Being White: Stories of Race and Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Race: The Power of an Illusion (a three-part documentary on race), directed by Christine Herbes-Sommers (PBS/California Newsreel, 2003), is one of the best introductions to the issue of race in science, history, and society. An online companion is available at http://www.pbs.org/race/000_General/000_00-Home.htm. Highly recommended!

Tim Wise, *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* (Brooklyn, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2007).

Endnotes

1. Beverly Daniel Tatum, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 7; David T. Wellman, *Portraits of White Racism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 27–62.

2. Richard Dyer, “The Matter of Whiteness” in *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, 3rd ed., ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2008), 9–14; Michael K. Brown et al., *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 64.

3. *Ibid.*, 10.

4. James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 14.

5. Frances E. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 61–62.

6. With thanks to Unzu Lee, program associate for Presbyterian Women, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

7. Rondel Thompson and Sophia Parker, “The National Urban League Equality Index” in *The State of Black America 2007* (New York: National Urban League, 2007), 17–58.

8. Thomas Shapiro, *The Hidden Cost of Being African American* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).