

## WHITE POWER AND PRIVILEGE

This session is on the theme of white privilege.

### GOALS AND ASSIGNMENTS FOR THIS SESSION

There are two goals for this session. The first is to learn about white power and privilege. The second goal is to gain skill and practice in seeing systemic white privilege and power.

There are two assignments for this session. The first is to explore the on line resources of Tim Wise and Peggy McIntosh.

The second assignment is to reflect on our own personal experience of white privilege.

### SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR THE SESSION

There is the story told about the wise old fish who was swimming through the water. As he swam along he encountered two young fish coming by. He turned to them and asked "How is the water?" and the young fish replied – "What water?"

Most of us who are white are like the young fish in the ocean, we don't see our whiteness. We who are white swim in the culture of whiteness and we don't see how our white skin color gives us undue privilege.

We don't see our whiteness and we don't think about being white. Anti-racism educator Robert Terry writes, "Being white means not having to think about it." Whiteness is the norm of our society. And so it is hard for us as white people to see how it is operating. People of color see it all the time.

We are not taught to see our whiteness or think about our whiteness. Moreover, there is a taboo among most whites about talking about being white or the power of white skin privilege

Is being white something we talk about with other white people? Like at a social event? Or at coffee hour at church? Or with our family around the dinner table?

Even if we wanted to talk about our whiteness we have such limited understanding of it and so few ways of describing it. There is also a feeling among some of us who are white that if we actually talk about race or our whiteness, we are acting in a racist way.

As whites when we talk about racial issues we are usually talking about people of color communities – but not the white community. Janet Helms writes in her book A Race is a Nice Thing to Have "White people are raised to be confused about their own color. While we are taught to be aware of other peoples color, polite white people do not mention color in public – especially their own."

Traditionally the studies involving race that white scholars have done in universities have been of people of color communities – but not whiteness or white identity. Only in recent years have academics begun to study white people. Dr Ruth Frankenberg first raised this as an issue back in the 1990s. So as white people we have only begun to explore the important issues regarding white identity.

So we want to take some time in this session to begin this discussion about whiteness and white privilege.

### FIRST ASSIGNMENT: REFLECTING ON THE WORK OF TIM WISE AND PEGGY MCINTOSH

Tim Wise is one of the most well known persons who describes the dynamics of white privilege. He is one of the most prolific writers and speakers on the subject of white privilege. He has given lectures to thousands of people in hundreds of settings.

I encourage you to Google Tim Wise. On the first page you will see references to two of his talks on white privilege. One is ten minutes in length. The other is fifty eight minutes. I encourage you to view at least one of these.

Dr. Peggy McIntosh has written several articles on white privilege. She says that those of us who are white are born with a knapsack which contains all kinds of goodies including educational opportunities, credit cards, blank checks, passports and so on. She compares white privilege to an “invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.”

The reality of the invisible knapsack is that if you are white you can't take it off. It will be there until the day you die or the day systemic racism is ended.

So it is not a matter of choosing whether or not to be a part of a racist system that benefits all white people. You can't simply say, “I am not going to be privileged anymore.” As long as the institutions of society are designed to provide us with privilege, we will get these privileges whether we want them or not.

Her article, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” is available on line – Google Peggy McIntosh - and can also be obtained for \$4.00 from Peggy McIntosh, Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181.

### SECOND ASSIGNMENT: REFLECTING ON OUR OWN PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF WHITE PRIVILEGE

Now we want to personalize this experience and look at how white privilege operates in each of our own personal lives.

I hope you will see this as an opportunity to develop a new skill. As white people we need to train our eyes to see in a new way. We need to go beyond our socialization as white people to look at how racism operates in our world. It takes time and practice to get past the socialization's of racism that we have experienced to look at the world through a new lens.

Below is a short list of examples of how White People receive power and privilege on a daily basis. Please study this list and then see if you can add to it.

- As a white person I can find positive role models depicted on TV, in the newspaper, and celebrated as heroes in most of our national holidays.
- I can attend college or professional school and find most professors look like me and talk like me, and most of the curriculum reflects my culture, history and background.
- I can shop in most stores and not be followed by a security guard on suspicion that I might be shoplifting.

- I can be late for a meeting without it being attributed to my race.
- I can easily find artists' depictions of God, Jesus, and other biblical figures that match my skin color and facial characteristics.
- I can shop for a house without having to worry that the realtor might not show me all available houses in my price range.
- No one thinks I got my job because of racial quotas.

After you have read the list we hope you will take the time to list the white privileges that you are aware of in your own personal life. We want to encourage each person to start each example is to use the phrase. "One way I personally experience white power and privilege is." This helps us own this kind of privilege.

After you have worked on your list ask yourself: How well do you think you did with this exercise? If it was difficult, why was it difficult?

## **CLOSING THOUGHTS**

### BECOMING MORE AWARE OF OUR POWER AND PRIVILEGE

One of the key things I think is important is how unaware we are of our white power and privilege. It is just so much a part of our lives we don't even have to think about it.

People of Color know us, in many ways, far better than we know ourselves. Generally they are fully aware of our white privilege and power, and of our denial of that we have this privilege and power. We can learn a lot from People of Color about our white power and privilege.

### WE HAVE PRIVILEGE BECAUSE WE HAVE POWER

White power and privilege are inextricably tied together. We receive so much white privilege because we have access to so much power in our society.

### THE SYSTEM AUTOMATICALLY PROVIDES PRIVILEGE AND POWER TO THOSE OF US WHO ARE WHITE

We need to be aware of the fact that the institutions of our society are designed to automatically provide and preserve white power and privilege. We don't have to ask for it, it is automatically given to us.

I would like to refer you to the last paragraph of the exercise page on white privilege, referring to the "invisible knapsack" of white privilege. This is in reference to an article written by Peggy McIntosh.

Peggy McIntosh says that those of us who are white are born with a knapsack which contains all kinds of goodies including educational opportunities, credit cards, blank checks, passports and so on.

The reality of the invisible knapsack is that if you are white you can't take it off. It will be there until the day you die or the day systemic racism is ended.

You can't simply say, "I am not going to be privileged anymore." As long as the institutions are designed this way, they will give you privileges whether you want them or not.

So it is not a matter of choosing whether or not to be a part of a racist system that benefits all white people. If you are white power and privilege is given to you whether you want it or not. Just think back to the white man, John Cunin in the film.

### A PART OF US LIKES HAVING WHITE POWER AND PRIVILEGE

But there is another level of this that I would ask us as white people to take a look at today. Consciously or unconsciously we accept this special treatment. I know there is a part of me that does. There is a part of us that loves our white power and privilege. Otherwise there would be a lot more effort to end it.

### THE NEED FOR NEW DISCIPLINES

With all these factors in mind I hope those of us who are white will realize that we need to discipline ourselves to see the world through a new lens.

Some of you have become aware – through doing this exercise- of how difficult it is for us who are white to be aware of our white power and privilege. We need to practice and become disciplines in developing this awareness.

At first, it is only when we are with people of color that we can see and feel the difference in the ways we are treated.

But hopefully, over time, we will reach a point we become instinctively aware of how the system is working on our behalf and how we receive undue power and privilege in our system by virtue of our skin color even when people of color are not present.

More than this I hope we will see the importance of using the privilege that we have to make change and to actually dismantle the systems that provide those of us who are white with undue power and privilege. Again, the issue is not whether we have great privilege because of our whiteness. The issue is how we will use the privilege of whiteness to work for justice. We will have more to say about this when we discuss how to develop a positive white identity.

## **AN EXCERPT FROM “EXPLAINING WHITE PRIVILEGE” BY TIM WISE**

I would like to address some of the more glaring, and yet reasonable, misunderstandings that many seem to have about the subject of white privilege. That many white folks don't take well to the term is an understatement, and quite understandable. For those of us in the dominant group, the notion that we may receive certain advantages generally not received by others is a jarring, some times maddening concept. And if we don't understand what the term means, and what those who use it mean as they deploy it, our misunderstandings can generate anger and heat, where really, none is called for. So let me take the opportunity to explain what I mean by white privilege.

Though we are used to thinking of privilege as a mere monetary issue, it is more than that. Yes, there are rich black and brown folks, but even they are subject to racial profiling and stereotyping (especially because those that encounter them often don't know they're rich and so view them as decidedly not), as well as bias in mortgage lending, and unequal treatment in schools.

So, for instance, even the children of well-off black families are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than the children of poor whites, and this is true despite the fact that there is no statistically significant difference in the rates of serious school rule infractions between white kids or black kids that could justify the disparity (according to fourteen different studies examined by Russ Skiba at Indian University).

As for poor whites, though they certainly are suffering economically, this doesn't mean they lack privilege. I grew up in a very modest apartment, and economically was far from privileged. Yet I received better treatment in school (placement in advanced track classes even when I wasn't a good student) better treatment from law enforcement officers and indeed more job opportunities because of connections I was able to take advantage of, that were pretty much unavailable to the folks of color I knew growing up. Likewise, low income whites everywhere are able to clean up, go for a job interview and be seen as just another white person, whereas a person of color, even who isn't low-income, has to wonder whether or not they might trip some negative stereotype about their group when they go for an interview or sit in the classroom answering questions from the teacher. Oh, and not to put too fine a point on it, but even low-income whites are more likely to own their own home than middle income black families, thanks to past advantages in housing and asset accumulations, which has allowed those whites to receive a small piece of property from their families.

The point is, privilege is as much a psychological matter as a material one. Whites have the luxury of not having to worry that our race is going to mark us negatively when looking for work, going to school, shopping, looking for a place to live, or driving for that matter; things that folks of color can't take for granted.

Let me share an analogy at this point.

Taking this out of the racial context for a minute: imagine persons who are able bodied, as opposed to those with disabilities. If I were to say that able-bodied persons have certain advantages, certain privilege if you will, which disabled persons do not, who would argue the point? I imagine that no one would. It's too obvious, right? To be disabled is to face numerous obstacles. And although many persons with disabilities overcome those obstacles this fact doesn't take away from the fact that they exist. Likewise, that persons with disabilities can and do overcome obstacles everyday, doesn't deny that those of us who

are able-bodied have an edge. We have one less thing to think and worry about as we enter a building, go to a workplace, or just try and navigate the contours of daily life.

That is all that I am saying about white privilege on balance, it pays to be a member of the dominant racial group. It doesn't mean a white person will get everything they want in life, or win every competition, but it does mean that there are general advantages that they receive.

For instance, studies have found that job applicants with white sounding names are 50% more likely to receive a call back for a job interview than applicants with black-sounding names, even when all job-related qualifications and credentials are the same.

Other studies have found that white men with a criminal record are more likely to get a call-back or an interview than black male job applicants who don't have one, even when all requisite qualifications, demeanor, and communication styles are the same.

Others have found that white women are far more likely than black women to be hired for work through temporary agencies, even when the black women have more experience and are more qualified.

Evidence from housing markets has found that there are about two million cases of race-based discrimination against people of color every year in the United States. That's not just bad for folks of color; the flip side is that there are, as a result, millions more places I can live as a white person.

Or consider criminal justice. Although data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration indicates that whites are equally or more likely than blacks or Latinos to use drugs, it is people of color (blacks and Latinos mostly) who comprise about 90% of the persons incarcerated for a drug possession offense. Despite the fact that white men are more likely to be caught with drugs in our car (on those occasions when we are searched), black men remain about four times more likely than white men to be searched in the first place, according to Justice Department findings. That's privilege for the dominant group.

That's the point: privilege is the flip side of discrimination. If people of color face discrimination, in housing, employment, and elsewhere, then the rest of us are receiving a de facto subsidy, a privilege, an advantage in those realms of daily life. There can be no down without an up, in other words.

None of this means that white folks don't face challenges. Of course we do, and some of them (based on class, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, or other factors) are systemic and institutionalized. But on balance, we can take for granted that we will receive a leg-up on those persons of color with whom we share a nation.

And no, affirmative action doesn't change any of this.

Despite white fears to the contrary, even with affirmative action in place (which, contrary to popular belief does not allow quotas or formal set-asides except in those rare cases where blatant discrimination has been proven) whites hold ninety percent of the management level jobs in this country, receive about ninety four percent of government contract dollars, and hold ninety percent of tenured faculty positions on college campuses. And, in spite of affirmative action programs, whites are more likely than members of any other

racial group to be admitted to their college of first choice. And according to a study released last year, for every student of color who received even the slightest consideration for an affirmative action program in college, there are two whites who failed to meet normal qualification requirements at the same school, but who got in anyway because of parental influence, alumni status, or because other favors were done.

Furthermore, although white students often think that so-called minority scholarships are a substantial drain on financial aid resources that would otherwise be available to them nothing could be further from the truth. According to a national study by the General Accounting Office, less than four percent of scholarship money in the U.S. is represented by awards that consider race as a factor at all, while only 0.25 percent (that's one quarter of one percent for the math challenged) of all undergrad scholarship dollars come from awards that are restricted to persons of color alone. What's more, the idea that large numbers of students of color receive the benefits of race-based scholarship is lunacy of the highest order. In truth, only 3.5 percent of college students of color receive any scholarship even partly based on race, suggesting that such programs remain a pathetically small piece of the financial aid picture in this country, irrespective of what a gaggle of reactionary white folks might believe.

In other words, despite the notion that somehow we have attained an equal opportunity, or color blind society, the fact is, we are far from an equitable nation. People of color continue to face obstacles based solely on color, and whites continue to reap benefits from the same. None of this makes whites bad people, and none of it means we should feel guilty or beat ourselves up. But it does mean we need to figure out how we are going to be accountable for our unearned advantages. One way is by fighting for a society in which those privilege will no longer exist, and in which we will be able to stand on our own two feet, without the artificial crutch of racial advantage to prop us up. We need to commit to fighting for racial equity and challenging injustice at every turn, not only because it harms others, but because it diminishes us as well (even as it pays dividends), and because it squanders the promise of fairness and equity to which we claim to adhere as Americans.

[This ends the article from Tim Wise; available in full here: <http://www.timwise.org/2008/09/explaining-white-privilege-or-your-defense-mechanism-is-showing/>]