

An analysis of White Privilege

by Peter Noteboom

Who this workshop is for

This workshop is designed for White people who have begun an anti-racist journey, recognize that they are privileged, and want to know more about the shape and character of their privilege. They need to take time to analyze the origins of their privilege so that they can more consciously undo racism in their personal lives and the various communities and organizations where they belong. Ideally there would be no more than 8-10 participants in the workshop though it could be used with a group as large as 20.

This workshop should be facilitated by a person comfortable with learning through dialogue. The learning tasks are designed for the learners. They can be followed in sequence, offering opportunities for critical thinking and growth at each step. The facilitator will pay attention to how the workshop unfolds, set the tasks clearly, listen for how the content resonates in the lives and experience of the learners, and facilitate dialogue: asking open questions that celebrate learning and encourages the participants to make new connections and dig deeper into their individual and collective experience.

Why we are taking time to do this work

The participants, including the facilitator, want to take a step back to examine their own white privilege, where it comes from, what it is, what the components are, and how it might be present in their lives and institutions. They need to do this so that they can be more effective in their work, live their lives with more integrity, and build a stronger multi-cultural or inter-cultural church.

When and Where

This workshop is designed for a 6-hour session; 3 hours before lunch, and 3 hours after lunch. It may be adapted and spread over a longer period of time.

The Workshop Topics and What We Want to Achieve

By the end of this workshop, you will have:

- Reviewed definitions of White Privilege and named its components
- Compared White Privilege and White Supremacy
- Analyzed White Privilege in your own institutions
- Identified two forms of White Privilege: active and embedded
- Examined the relationship between power and privilege
- Proposed next steps along the learning journey

This workshop was developed for the Deconstructing White Privilege subgroup of CEARN (Canadian Ecumenical Anti-Racism Network).

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❖ **Introduction: The Program of Learning**

A. Warm-up

What instances of (White) privilege did you notice or encounter in the past day. With a partner, tell each other your stories, then prepare “freeze frames” or human sculptures to share a snapshot of those instances with the whole group. What do you see? What is invisible?

B. Program Overview and Check-in on the Agenda

Take a moment to review “the workshop topics and what we want to achieve”. What are you really hoping to uncover during this workshop? Share some of your hopes with one another, so that you can listen for what you need to learn and help others to learn.

❖ **Privilege: What Are We Talking About?**

A. Definitions

Briefly *examine* the two definitions on privilege and White Privilege.

WIKIPEDIA DEFINITION OF PRIVILEGE

In a broader sense, “privilege” can refer to special powers or 'de facto' immunities held as a consequence of political power or wealth. Privilege of this sort may be transmitted by birth into a privileged class or achieved through individual actions.

PEGGY MCINTOSH ON WHITE PRIVILEGE

White privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious”.

Circle the main components of each definition. Discuss what you found.

B. Think, Pair, Square

Get more specific and significant: *Think* of an example or story of life importance (career, job, home, community membership, etc.) that demonstrates invisible privilege in your own lives. *Pair* with one other person, *share* that example. *Square* into a group of 4. What jumps out from your examples or stories?

C. Balance Sheet

Read the quote to the right. Now that you’ve read about unearned privilege, or unearned assets, take time to *make an inventory* of your own unearned assets by creating an “Unearned Assets Balance Sheet”.

INTERNALIZED RACIAL SUPERIORITY (IRS)

The acceptance of and acting out of a superior definition of self given is rooted in the historical designation of one’s race. Over many generations, this process of empowerment and access expresses itself as unearned privileges, access to institutional power and invisible advantages based upon race.
- *People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, New Orleans*

On your own, *list* the different types of unearned assets you have, then *name* specific examples.

What liabilities would you add?

On a balance sheet, **Equity** represents the total Assets minus the total Liabilities. What does your Equity look like?

This is hard work. Help one another to complete your own individual balance sheets.

This process can stir up feelings of anger, guilt or sadness. What do you lament?

Unearned Assets Balance Sheet

Name: *Jane Doe*

Assets: *knowing how to access systems/organizations
appearance of financial reliability*

Liabilities: *being a single parent*

Equity: _____

D. Go a little deeper.

Consider the following more detailed definition, and the four-point summary. How have you seen that sequence at work in your own lives and/or institutions?

DEFINING “WHITE PRIVILEGE”

In studying historical examples and theories of oppression, it becomes clear that social (in)visibility is an important strategy. Early feminists make this point over and over. If men and women equally believe, for example, that women are by their very nature subordinate to men, then gender oppression seems natural, inevitable, timeless. If you can design structures of oppression which are invisible, which seem natural, they will be more effective than structures which are visible. If you can convince everyone, but especially members of the oppressed group itself, that the way things are is natural or inevitable or unavoidable, people will be less likely to challenge the way things are.

If that idea is correct, then we should expect the very idea of racialized social privilege ... to be invisible socially. We should expect that members of the dominant group, the one which has the privilege, to deny that it exists or that it could exist. Which is precisely what we white folks do (for the most part) when faced with claims by people of color that we enjoy social privilege by virtue of the social fact that we are taken to be white.

- To sum up:
- (1) white privilege should be defined carefully because it is contested;
 - (2) that contestation is itself racialized;
 - (3) which is what we should expect, since
 - (4) socially invisible structures of oppression are more effective and enduring than socially visible ones.

We define it in order to make it a problem for white people, to show that it is an unjust, historical creation. Whatever has been made by human hands can be unmade by others.

- Kendall Clark

How would you (re)define and identify the invisible dimension of the unearned assets on your balance sheets?
How is that invisible dimension itself racialized in your experience?

❖ **White Supremacy: What are we talking about?**

A. Comparing terms

When do you use, or have you heard used, the term “White Supremacy”? How does it compare with “White Privilege”?

B. White Supremacy

Review this brief definition of the term White Supremacy. How is it different from White Privilege?

White supremacy... encompasses white privilege and refers more broadly to the European domination of the planet that has left us with the racialized distributions of economic, political, and cultural power that we have today. We could call it global white supremacy.

- Charles W. Mills from “Revisionist Ontologies: Theorizing White Supremacy” in *Blackness Visible*

C. Analysis

How does this definition fit (or not fit) with your peoples’/ancestors’ histories? Your institution’s history? Your Canadian and global social justice analysis? Global North-South divides? How is White Supremacy invisible? racialized? silent? unsaid?

❖ **White Privilege in Our Own Institutions**

A. Small group project

Sketch a diagram of your office or an organizational chart. Include the positions, departments or committees where the following questions are decided:

- ↻ Who controls policy decisions?
- ↻ What are the institutional priorities as reflected in: budgets, staff time, and program emphases?
- ↻ Whose voice counts in making those decisions?
- ↻ Who evaluates staff performance?
- ↻ Whose needs are served by distribution of organizational resources?

What questions would you add to the list?

B. Practices, policies and structures

Now that you have a visual sketch, what *policies, practices* and *structures* are at work in your institution that keeps White people in a position of privilege?

Draw the connections between various departments in your institution that you see. You may use a poster sheet to document the practices, policies and structures you are able to name.

Practices reflect the types of behaviour within an organization that have been sanctioned either formally or informally.

Policies are guidelines for practices within an institution (length of maternity leave; procedure for promotion; where, how, and how to recruit). These are usually developed over time to be consistent to all those in the institution.

Structures are the formal groups (Board of Directors, Executive Director, committees, departments, regular meetings), formal practices etc. These should be known to the public and all employees in order to be transparent and help employees, clients, or students to know where decisions are made in the institution. It is important to know who is in each of these structures in order to understand the power of any one group.

C. Active and embedded structures

Once you've had the occasion to identify, list and name the practices, policies and structures, *circle* those that are "Active", and *underline* those that are "Embedded". Active ones are forces that operate out in the open. Embedded are ones that are under the surface, invisible, we sense their effects, but may not know the source.

What do you notice?

❖ **How does Power fit in this picture?**

A. Power and privilege

Read the following text, then together with a partner *summarize* what you see is the difference between power and privilege.

POWER AND PRIVILEGE

When we look at how we either benefit or lose through the institutions created in our society, it is interesting to note that we often think there are many many people who are more privileged than ourselves. Yet the fact of the matter is that most of us are more privileged than hundreds of millions of people on this Earth. It is very difficult to keep the lines clear between the issues of race and class. Racism in most societies has perpetuated an underclass who are usually people of colour (or a group that has little formal power).

- Power is about the possibility of deciding.
- Privilege is reflected in the fact of getting private education and inherited wealth.
- Power is involved in deciding that crime prevention requires more money for law enforcement and drug wars rather than for schools and jobs.
- Privilege is about reaping the benefits.
- Power is involved in deciding that universal health care is "too expensive" or that it will 'limit my choices'.
- Privilege is reflected in the fact that being born white gives one a far greater chance of survival than most people in the world.
- Power involves defining the parameters of the discussion.

It is here, at the intersection of power and privilege, that racism is most clearly revealed: the capacity to make and enforce decisions and to have access to resources. When power and privilege combine in an institution uncritically on the issue of racism, the institution makes and enforces decisions in favour of the dominant norms. One group decides whose fear of whom makes sense, is legitimate, and deserves compensation. It is those who have access to resources who have the privilege of living with their stereotypes and prejudices safely affirmed by the judicial system.

- from *Training for Transformation, Book 4*

B. Daily experience of power and privilege.

Extend the list of Power and Privilege examples. *Compose* a list that applies to your institution and work setting.

FEELING POWERLESS? FORMAL AND INFORMAL POWER

In looking at power and privilege, we do not assume either that power is always bad or that privilege is always chosen. A white infant is born to live with white skin privileges without exercising either choice or power.

There are very few people in most societies who experience themselves as having power. Even many people who hold powerful positions experience those positions in relation to others who are more powerful and are thus able to significantly affect their work for good or ill. Because this is true, it is easy, especially for white people, to confuse power and privilege. I do not feel personally powerful; therefore the notion of ‘white privilege’ does not apply to me.

Privilege has little to do with individual power, but is integrally connected to access to structural power. Consider again some of the issues raised with the example of white skin privilege of a new-born white infant who, of course, has exercised no individual power. However, the institutional structures which affect the well-being of the infant are numerous: housing, education, job opportunities, health insurance – to name only a few.

But how do we do this when so few people experience themselves as powerful? The first step, as we know from the popular education approach of developing critical consciousness, is to learn to analyse the problem and address the power dynamics. Who controls policy decisions? What are the institutional priorities, as reflected in budgets, staff time, and program emphases? Whose voice counts in making those decisions? Who evaluates staff performance? Whose needs are served by distribution of organizational resources?

In many situations there is both a formal or ‘official’ power structure, and informal relationships affect decision-making in an indirect and, often unacknowledged way. In order to analyse the power in an organization accurately, it is essential to look at both formal and informal power distributions in the institution. For example, it is often the case that people who think they have power in an organization realize how little they really have when they attempt to make changes and encounter resistance within the informal power relationships. On the other hand, those who have little apparent power are sometimes able to exercise their influence beyond the boundaries of their status within the formal power structures.

- from *Training for Transformation*, Book 4

What power do you have to influence answers to the questions listed above?

Share examples/stories of how either through formal or informal power you’ve changed or tried to change how privilege works and is maintained.

Read the quote on the right. Identify signs or acts of White privilege that you have seen recently. How did you/could you challenge this?

MY WHITE PROBLEM ~ AND OURS

Attunement is a condition of antiracist work. One of its substantive tasks, at least for White people, is public opposition to White expressions of racial bigotry and prejudice, which are ultimately signs and enactments of White privilege. Recognizing those signs and enactments without going on to oppose them is nothing more than an empty, private gesture.

- Kendall Clark

❖ **Conclusions**

A. What did you learn?

What became visible today that was previously invisible for you? Or what gained a sharper profile?

B. What happens next?

jot down a short wish list of what you need to do next, both for your own learning and action, and for the group you belong to. We’ll hear all your ideas, commitments and promises in the large group!

References and for further reading:

Anne Hope and Sally Timmel. *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers*, Books 1-4 (London: Practical Action Publishing, 1996, 2000, 2002).

Charles W. Mills. *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Cornell University Press, 1998).

For God so loved the people of the world: Racial Justice Week resource, (CEARN, 2006); and *From Chains to Freedom: Journeying Toward Reconciliation* (CEARN, 2007). Both resources available as a free download from www.wicc.org/resources/Racial_Justice/index.html.

Kendall Clark’s blogsite at <http://whiteprivilege.com>.

The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, New Orleans: website at <http://www.pisab.org/>