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## **WHITE IMMUNITY: WORKING THROUGH SOME OF THE PEDAGOGICAL PITFALLS OF “PRIVILEGE”**

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## **White Immunity: Working Through Some of the Pedagogical Pitfalls of “Privilege”**

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This paper engages, critiques, and develops McIntosh’s concept of White privilege. The author argues that this concept mislabels the nature of racism, and unintentionally derails racial dialogues. He then offers White immunity as a concept that helps address some of the conceptual and pedagogical limitations of “privilege.” Finally, he addresses possible misinterpretations of this new terminology to avoid some of the misapplications that have plagued “White privilege.”

“How can you say a White kid from Appalachia is ‘privileged’?” For those who have engaged in White privilege pedagogy, questions like this arise all the time. Conservative commentator Bill O’Reilly offered a similar sentiment when he said, “I didn’t experience [White privilege] when I worked in Carvel, painted houses, mowed lawns. I’m going to have to exempt myself.”<sup>2</sup> Disregarding the irony of the statement – that a wealthy White man exempting himself is the epitome of White privilege – O’Reilly points out a typical issue when White privilege discussions arise. Instead of engaging issues of racism, White people frequently search in their personal histories for narratives of struggle and then use them to downplay the significance of White privilege. While some will never own their racial privilege or meaningfully explore issues of racism, there are some important issues that persist in discussions about White privilege as I will explore in this article.

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<sup>2</sup> Link to the video Bill O’Reilly Denies the Existence of White Privilege Because He Once Worked at an Ice Cream Shop <http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/05/bill-oreilly-denies-white-privilege-video.html>

Peggy McIntosh is credited with popularizing the term White privilege, which is meant to be an analysis of the unearned assets that White people are able to accrue simply by being White (McIntosh, 1989). White privilege, in McIntosh's analysis, is generally invisible to White people, and her purpose is to make these manifestations of racism visible. Over the past 25 years, the term "White privilege" has frequently been an introduction to classroom engagement with race and racism. While there are a number of benefits to using the widely discussed and easily accessible concept, I highlight a number of pedagogical limitations, which unintentionally derail the potential of racial dialogues. Within this context, I offer the concept of "White immunity" that more accurately describes what we now label privilege, and explore how it can lead to deeper, more meaningful engagement with racism by White students and educators.

### **What is White Privilege Pedagogy?**

Philosopher Charles Mills (1997) argued that Whiteness relies on an inverted epistemology or an *epistemology of ignorance*. Epistemology of ignorance is a structured way of White people not knowing the realities of White supremacy that serves to leave this oppressive system in place. White privilege pedagogy represents a method for disrupting epistemologies of ignorance by having White people explore the unearned social benefits they receive as a result of being White (Applebaum, 2010; Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017). To assist in this process, Peggy McIntosh (1989) created a list of social privileges that she as a White woman enjoyed that People of Color do not (e.g., being assured that when her children learn history, people like them will be positively represented in the text). Additionally, she offered the metaphor that White privilege was an invisible knapsack of unearned benefits that many White people

are unaware of. The purpose of her piece was (and still is) to help White students understand the numerous ways they are racially privileged and disrupt the normality of Whiteness is their lived experiences. This becomes a form of “Racism 101” (Cabrera, Franklin, & Watson, 2017) – an area for White people to begin engaging what it mean to be White in a racist society. Despite the promise of the approach, there have been many important limitations.

### **The Pedagogical Pitfalls of Privilege**

There are some who argue that White privilege is primarily a distraction from racial justice and discussions of White supremacy (Applebaum, 2010; Lensmire et al., 2013; Leonardo, 2004). For example, Leonardo (2004) demonstrates that the discourse of White privilege individualizes racism instead of conceptualizing it as a systemic reality. Lensmire et al. (2013) offer a similar argument focusing on teacher education. They demonstrate how privilege discussions do not lead to antiracist action, and tend to dichotomize Whites into good people and bad people. The good ones are those who identify their racial privileges and the bad ones are those who deny them. Applebaum (2010) agrees that White privilege pedagogy frequently devolves into the good White/bad White binary, and she offers further critique that White privilege pedagogy, “often leads to very superficial and simplistic analysis of privilege” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 29). These simplistic critiques, in Applebaum’s analysis, lead to naïve racial solutions such as “ensuring that all people have the privileges that white people enjoy” (p. 30). Ultimately, Applebaum (2010) argued that White privilege pedagogy allows White students to ignore their active roles in the perpetuation of contemporary White

supremacy. All of these scholars call for dropping the discourse of White privilege to instead focus on the systemic nature of contemporary White supremacy.

Additionally, the metaphor of the knapsack is problematic because it leads to the mistaken impression that White people have the ability to move beyond their racial privileges (Applebaum, 2010; Lensmire et al., 2013). Rather, White people do not have the option of rejecting their racial privileges the way people can take off a backpack (Leonardo, 2004). Thus, discussions of privilege can frequently lead to unproductive declarations by White people such as, “I have given up my racial privilege and am no longer racist.” Given the omnipresent nature of contemporary, systemic racism, it is not possible for White people to exist in the absence of their White privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994/2015).

Related to the misapplication of the knapsack metaphor, discussions of privilege frequently develop into a type of racial confession. Within this paradigm, White people acknowledge ways in which they are racially privileged, but with no link to racial justice actions (Lensmire et al., 2013). This confession may be cathartic for White students coming to terms with race, but it does little if confession is an end as opposed to a means to the end of racial justice praxis. Given these limitations of White privilege conceptually and pedagogically, I offer White immunity.

### **Toward White Immunity**

Privilege is frequently misinterpreted to imply a semi-charmed life, or at least a comfortable one. The examples of White privilege McIntosh (1989) generated include:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

These describe the basic standards for human decency (i.e., no one should be targeted because of their race). Within this context, I argue that the term privilege unintentionally derails conversations about race by mislabeling the nature of this dynamic. Instead of elevating White people, systemic racism makes *humane treatment* an elusive goal for People of Color (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Thus, it is not as much that Whites are raised (or privileged) by racism, but rather, that People of Color are precluded from equitable treatment. It is for this reason that comedian Paul Mooney continually refers to Whiteness as “the complexion of protection for the collection.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, I argue that racial justice educators should start using “White immunity” to more accurately engage and describe what has been known as White privilege. White immunity means that People of Color have not historically, and are not contemporarily, guaranteed their rights, justice, and equitable social treatment; however, White people are because they have protection from this disparate treatment. While White immunity can be interpreted as an individual experience (e.g., “I have immunity”), I believe it is important to understand the history that has led to this contemporary reality. As Paulo Freire (2000) reminds, “Looking at the past must only be a means of understanding more clearly what and who [we] are so that [we] can more wisely build the future” (p. 84). Within this context, historically situating the formation of Whiteness is critical in framing White

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<sup>3</sup> Link to the video Completion for the Protection [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPPf\\_Xsq42g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPPf_Xsq42g)

immunity so that learning from the past can serve as a call for informed, collective, anti-oppressive action.

### **Historically Situating Whiteness and White Immunity**

When Europeans came to the United States, they were known primarily by their country of origin and the label “White” did not exist (Allen, 1997). When Bacon’s Rebellion occurred, the ruling elite in the colonies realized the potential for working class Europeans and Blacks to overthrow the established social order (MacMullan, 2009). Therefore, they began to give poor people of European descent modest incorporation into the existing racial structure (e.g., on slave patrols), and this began to form the category White. While this did not give them any meaningful upward mobility, it did reify their position above Blacks and Native Americans in society, resulting in what DuBois (1935) referred to as the “public and psychological wages of Whiteness.” That is, they may be poor but at least they were not Black or Native.

This elevation through racial degradation was core to the formation of Whiteness. That is, at the center of Whiteness was the demeaning of People of Color (Roediger, 1991). The legal system was also an additional component in defining the contours of Whiteness, but in a relatively unique way. There were many laws passed that explicitly denied rights to People of Color (specifically Blacks and Native Americans), such as gun ownership, property ownership, and the right to intermarry (Allen, 1997; Haney-López, 2006; MacMullan, 2009). The explicit denial of rights to those deemed non-White created a system of definition through negation (MacMullan, 2009). That is, it began to define Whiteness by denying rights to People of Color. Those unaffected by these laws by default became White because they still had all of their “inalienable” rights

intact. This is also part of the reason that White is frequently framed in the U.S. as the norm of humanity and civilization (Haney-López, 2006; Roediger, 1991).

Thus, the elevation or privileging of White people occurred by the denial of rights and opportunities to People of Color (Allen, 1997; Ignatiev, 1995). This again is why I argue that White immunity is more accurate descriptor than White privilege. It demonstrates how those who would become White had a type of insulation, a social inoculation to the disparate treatment that was structured for People of Color. Yes, this did give them more economic opportunities (privilege), but it only came through the denial of rights and opportunities to People of Color (Allen, 1997; Haney-López, 2006; MacMullan, 2009).

The combination of these historical events led to the creation of a U.S. system of White supremacy, which was much more than simply the aggregate of anti-minority beliefs (Allen, 1997; Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Leonardo, 2004). Rather, it was a self-perpetuating system of racial oppression. Some then ask, “But didn’t the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent elimination of legally-sanctioned racial discrimination end this system?” The short answer is “no.” In Omi and Winant’s (1994/2015) *Racial Formation*, they describe how *de jure* racism (e.g., Jim Crow) became *de facto* (i.e., hegemonic). For example, legalized segregation may have ended, but we still live in a heavily segregated society. This form of systemic racism is more malleable and adaptable, but it is simply a contemporary manifestation of the systemic of White supremacy upon which this country was founded (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Omi & Winant, 1994/2015). Regardless, it still grants racial immunity to White people and marginalizes

People of Color. In the absence of this link to the systemic, racism is misunderstood as an individual defect (i.e., there are good/not racist Whites, and bad/racist Whites).

I continually struggle with the proper terminology to use when describing systemic racism in relation to White immunity. Usually, White supremacy is the most accurate and appropriate, but pedagogically, this term can make students shutdown. It frequently engenders images of neo-Nazis and Klan members, and therefore, gives the mistaken impression that racism is a problem of these elements of society (i.e., “NOT me!”). Generally, I approach these situations by assessing the developmental stage of the students in my classes. If they are racially unaware, I begin with systemic racism, offer its historical development (Omi & Winant, 1994/2015), and lead to White supremacy. If they are more racially advanced, I can usually begin with White supremacy as long as I clarify what I am talking about (i.e., it is more than White supremacists). Within this context, I think some further clarification on White immunity is warranted so that the concept is properly used in practice.

### **Avoiding Some Pedagogical Pitfalls of Privilege**

I understand that no one can account for every misinterpretation or misapplication of their concepts; however, there are some areas that I would like to proactively address so readers have a more accurate understanding of what I mean by *White immunity*. First, White immunity is not about White people or recentering Whiteness in racial discussions. Rather, understanding the ways that White people are immune from disparate racial treatment should be a segue into exploring the racial oppression and pain People of Color experience on a daily basis. If White immunity

begins and ends with a discussion of White people, it is a useless conversation and devolves into a form of White narcissism (Matias, 2016).

Additionally, I am sensitive to the critiques lodged by Leonardo (2004) and Lensmire et al. (2013) that individualizing anti-racism overlooks the central issue: White supremacy. A pitfall of White immunity is that it can still fit into this individualized paradigm. Part of the problem with McIntosh's (1989) piece was that the acknowledgement of systemic racial oppression was almost an afterthought, subsumed by the list of privileges and the personal narrative. Therefore, I have a responsibility to learn from this mistake and be explicit: White immunity is a product of the historical development and contemporary manifestation of White supremacy.

Additionally, White immunity cannot simply be solved by granting it to People of Color. This is similar to the critique lodged by Applebaum (2010) against White privilege pedagogy whereby we cannot simply give White privilege to People of Color. This is not a possible or even a laudable goal. Rather, White immunity is the product of White supremacy. Therefore, for White immunity to end, White supremacy also has to end. It is very important to understand this reality because unlike McIntosh's "knapsack" metaphor, one cannot remove White immunity.

Finally, examinations of White immunity that end without action are a form of racial navel gazing. White immunity necessarily means that People of Color are suffering the negative impacts of contemporary White supremacy. Applebaum (2010) argues that White people, even if they are not consciously aware of it, are continually supporting and recreating this system of racial oppression. Charles Mills made a similar argument in *The Racial Contract* where he offered, "All whites are *beneficiaries* of the

[Racial] Contract, though some whites are not *signatories*" (Mills, 1997, p. 11, italics original). Within this context, White people benefit from contemporary White supremacy, and therefore, they have a social responsibility to collectively eliminate it. Discussing White immunity as a form of social confession will do nothing to change the material conditions of systemic racism (Lensmire et al., 2013). Rather, it is dialogue leading to critical, collective, racial justice action that will. Discussions of White immunity that are not linked to action, therefore, become a form of White narcissism that only serve to make White people feel better about their racial selves but do nothing to support People of Color (Matias, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

White privilege is colloquially known, even if it is routinely misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misapplied. Within this context, White immunity becomes an important component of racial justice education. First, educators need to be upfront that "White privilege" misidentifies the problem and White immunity is a more accurate description. Second, within these discussions educators need to make an explicit connection between White immunity to the systemic reality of contemporary White supremacy. Third, educators need to be able to describe the nature of this systemic reality while centering the human suffering it causes People of Color. Fourth, educators need to link this reality to White responsibility, and highlight how inaction only serves to reify contemporary White supremacy.

Working through the semantics of racial terminologies, as an exercise by itself, will do little to transform the material conditions and ideologies of White supremacy. Additionally, perfect terminologies do not exist. The meaning of words are constantly

challenged, reframed, contested, and redefined. Even with this understanding, there are some terminologies that are more accurate than others at explaining and defining contemporary racial issues. White privilege has been valuable at beginning racial conversations, but has also become a form of White narcissism (Lensmire et al., 2013; Matias, 2016). White immunity partially corrects this issue, offering educators an additional tool for their antiracist toolboxes. Ultimately, the efficacy of the terminology lies in the skilled hands of the racial justice educators and their ability to use the tools at hand to engage, challenge, and develop White students' racial awareness while linking it to their responsibility for engaging in racial justice praxis.

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