

The Problem with "I Don't See Color"

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Friday, May 12, 8:30 - 9:50am, 159 PLC (Humanities Center Conference Room)

One of the reactions to diversity trainings is "I don't need to be here -- I don't see color." In this workshop we will explore this idea, raise some concerns about it, and show how embracing this belief is not helpful to the students in your classrooms.

(Materials taken verbatim from cited sources)

I'M NOT RACIST

From *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (revised edition) (pp. 13-14) by Paul Kivel

Also available at:

<http://www.prisonactivist.org/pipermail/prisonact-list/1998-March/001365.html>

Whether it is easy or difficult to say that we're white, the phrase we often want to say next is "But I'm not racist." There are lots of ways that we have learned to phrase this denial:

- I'm not racist.
- I don't belong to the Klan.
- I have friends who are people of color.
- I don't see color, I'm color-blind.
- I do anti-racism work.
- I went to an unlearning racism workshop.

This book is not about whether you are racist or not, or whether all white people are racist or not. We are not conducting a moral inventory of ourselves, nor creating a moral standard to divide other white people from us.

To avoid being called racist we may claim that we don't notice color and don't treat people differently based on color. However, we all notice color in just about every situation we're in. It's not useful or honest for any of us to claim that we don't. It is too pervasive a construct of our society to avoid. When we say things like, "I don't see color," we are trying to maintain a self-image of impartiality and fairness (and whiteness). Some of the motivation behind the claim that we are color neutral is to establish that we don't mistreat people or discriminate against them because of their race. Ultimately, this disclaimer prevents us from taking responsibility for challenging racism because we believe that people who see color are the problem.

The only way to treat people with dignity and justice is to recognize that racism has a profound negative effect upon our lives, and therefore noticing color helps to counteract that effect. Instead of being color neutral we need to notice much more acutely and insightfully exactly the difference that color makes in the way people are treated.

RACE - THE POWER OF AN ILLUSION

Episode Three: The House We Live In

California Newsreel

<http://www.newsreel.org/transcripts/race3.htm>

NARRATOR: We want to be a colorblind society that values the content of character over the color of skin. The hope of the thousands of newcomers who arrive each year is that we already are. "I don't see color, I see people," the saying goes. But in post-Civil Rights America, is colorblindness the same as equality?

BONILLA-SILVA: The notion of colorblindness came to us from that famous "I Have A Dream" speech of Dr. Martin Luther King, where he said that the people should be judged by the content of their character and not by the color of their skin. And what has happened in the post civil rights era is that whites have assumed that we are already there, that we're in a society where color does not matter. (1:52:17)

CONLEY: On the one hand, the civil rights era officially ended inequality of opportunity, officially ended de jure legal inequality. At the same time, those civil rights triumphs did nothing to address the underlying economic and social inequalities that had already been in place. It doesn't recognize the fact that the rewards, the house, the Lexus, the, you know, the big bank account, those are not only the rewards, you know, the pot of gold at the end of the game, they're also the starting position for the next generation.

Cultural Reflections: The Use of Autobiography in the Teacher Education Classroom.

By: Curtis, A. Cheryl. *Education*, Fall98, Vol. 119 Issue 1, p28-30 + 43.

Available through the UO Library as a full-text document.

Also at: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_199810/ai_n8825518

...I am not complimented by well-intentioned people who say to me "But, Cheryl, when I look at you I don't see color. While on one hand I understand the intended sentiment of pluralism and acceptance in the comment on the other hand I am incensed by the casual denial of an essential part of who I am and I interpret the statement as insensitive and potentially racist. That attitude of denial comes from someone who has lived all of his or her life with "white skin privilege". It usually comes from someone who has lived in this society not having to experience the world in the way that I have, who probably doesn't recognize the privilege because it is such an internalized part of who they are.... "The Essay"

For the past several years I have been sharing with my Introduction to Education and Human Services class a personal cultural reflection that I now affectionately refer to as the "THE ESSAY". The essay grew out of my frustrations with some of the reactions I sensed from students after class discussion on diversity issues. I am one of a few teachers of color at a predominantly white institution and am especially conscious of student tendency to argue from a "color blind" perspective. ("But when I look at you, Dr. Curtis, I don't see color" or "When I work with students I don't see color."). Lugones (1990) argues that those from majority cultures don't see people of color or women because they think that their lens is the only one that can be used for viewing. Thus they take a "disengaged stance", one from outside the racial state (p. 50). Consequently, the mainstream doesn't really get to see itself in accurate ways either, especially as they deracialize and de-gender themselves in the process. Thus denying or disavowing awareness of privilege from racial or gender positions is a normative response. Color blind and gender blind perspectives, therefore, have very serious flaws. I tell my students that these perspectives are ones which objectify me, that define me through an identity which the mainstream has created...

Cornell United Religious Work

<http://www.curw.cornell.edu/stabbing.html>

This pluralism will not be achieved by a shallow type of color-blindness. When we say, "I don't see color, I just see a human being," we have ignored an essential component of a person's humanity. We cannot help but see, whenever anyone enters our line of view, color and gender. We do not want to create a culture that disregards part of a person's humanity; we want to create a culture in which ethnicity-or gender or sexual orientation or ability-is not held against that person. We cannot coordinate the multi-hued, multidimensional diversity of our community with the strategy of colorblindness. For this we need clear vision of purpose and plan.

Pride and Prejudice: Why Bias Will Always Be In Your Workplace

Date: Thursday, June 14 @ 10:19:48 EDT

Topic: Nerd World Feature Stories

<http://headlines.nerdworld.com/modules.php?name=News&file=print&sid=101>

I was always a little uneasy when a manager claimed during a racial discrimination investigation, "I don't see color. Everyone is the same to me". My first thought after many years of hearing this kind of comment was "Either this is the biggest bigot in the world, and she is faking it, or she is unaware of her biases." Which is worse? Which mindset is more damaging? I say the latter. To be unaware (or unwilling to see) our prejudices, we run the risk of acting unconsciously and harmfully toward another without rational choice. If you know you are a racist or a sexist, and you know this is not an effective (or legal) mindset in your workplace, you will strive to make decisions around this information. You will work to see this block, push it to the side, and then make the decision. "To be objective, you must first admit your are subjective" means that once admitted, you know what your issues are and can make decisions factoring-out the bias. Or be fired (or worse--sued).

Exploring White Racial Identity, Privilege, and Racism

By Elizabeth Denevi

White on White. *Independent School*, Summer2004, Vol. 63 Issue 4, p78-87

<https://edgenet.edgewood.edu/whiteprivilege/WhiteonWhiteNovReading.htm>

One of the main forms of white talk is minimization, signaling that achievement depends on personal ability and that racism is not really prevalent. Another manifestation is defensiveness disguised in disclaimers such as, "I'm not racist. I have friends who are people of color. I don't see color. I went to a workshop on white privilege."

Flip Side of Baltimore

Sociologist Finds Chico Worlds Away from Her East Coast Home

Inside Chico State

http://www.csuchico.edu/pub/inside/archive/03_10_30/01_baltimore.html

Five years into her teaching career at CSU, Chico, (Nandi SoJourn Asantewaa) Crosby is relaxed enough to voice ambivalence about her position as one of only two black women faculty members on campus. It's a role that has become trying. In fact, when students ask her what it's like being black, with the apparent assumption she can speak for all black people in America, she tells them: "What's it like being black? In sociology, I'm the person who does gender and sexuality. I'm not the race person. That's the tall white guy down the hall. He could probably better answer your questions." A response that may cause these students to rethink their assumptions about race and ethnicity.

This stance has developed out of what she perceives as the state of denial most people on campus and in Chico seem to have about race. "My students tell me things like, 'There is no race problem; I don't see color; God loves everybody; my boyfriend's black,'" Crosby says. To which she responds, "You mean you didn't notice what color I was the first time I walked into this classroom?"

20 Ways to Know You're Black in Corporate America

<http://www.littleafrica.com/20ways.html>

3. A colleague says with a broad smile, "You know, I really like you. When I see you, I don't see color. I don't think of you as black."

National School Reform Faculty

http://www.nsrffharmony.org/conv_marriott_racism.html

This section of an online discussion includes several comments on different aspects of "I don't see color".

The Linguistics of Color-Blind Racism: How to Talk Nasty about Blacks without Sounding "Racist"

by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva

http://www.nd.edu/~rmcveigh/reap/Bonilla_linguistics.pdf

Models of White Identity Development (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993)

Ponterotto, J. & Pedersen, P. (1993). *Preventing prejudice: A guide for counselors and educators*. Multicultural Aspects on Counseling Series 2. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Racist inclinations associated with Identity Stages	Helms (1992)	Hardiman (1982)	Ponterotto (1988)	Sabnani, Ponterotto & Borodovsky (1991)
Racially unaware, exhibiting subtle racism	Contact	Lack of social consciousness	Pre-Exposure	Pre-Exposure/ Pre-Contact
Confused state, exhibiting subtle racism	Disintegration		Exposure	Conflict
	Reintegration	Acceptance	Zealot/ Defensive	
Racially sensitive, exhibiting subtle racism	Pseudo-Independence	Resistance		Pro-Minority/ Antiracism
Racist Identity	Immersion/ Emersion	Redefinition		Retreat into White Culture
Non-Racist Identity	Autonomy	Internalization	Integration	Redefinition and Integration

Helms, J. (1992). *A race is a nice thing to have*. Topeka, KS: Content Communications.

Hardiman, R. (1982). White identity development: A process oriented model for describing the racial consciousness of White Americans. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 43, 104A. (University Microfilms no. 82-10330)

Ponterotto, J. (1988). Racial consciousness development among white counselor trainees: A stage model. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 16, pp. 146-156.

Sabnani, H., Ponterotto, J., & Borodovsky, L. (1991). White racial identity development and cross-cultural counselor training: A stage model. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 19, pp. 76-102.

Integration of White Identity Models

(Sabnani, Ponterotto, & Borodovsky, 1991 as cited in Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993)

Sabnani, H., Ponterotto, J., & Borodovsky, L. (1991). White racial identity development and cross-cultural counselor training: A stage model. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 19, pp. 76-102.

Ponterotto, J. & Pedersen, P. (1993). *Preventing prejudice: A guide for counselors and educators*. Multicultural Aspects on Counseling Series 2. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Integrated models of Hardiman, Helms, and Ponterotto

Stage 1—Pre-Exposure/Pre-Contact

White persons in the Pre-Exposure/Pre-Contact stage are unaware of social expectations and roles with regard to race and are generally oblivious to cultural/racial issues. They have not yet begun to explore their own racial identity, nor have they given thought to their roles as White people in an oppressive society. At this point there is also an unconscious identification with whiteness and an unquestioned acceptance of stereotypes about minority groups.

Stage 2—Conflict

Stage 2 centers on the construct of conflict over developing race-relations knowledge. At this point there is an expansion of knowledge about racial matters that is facilitated by interactions with members of minority groups or by information gathered elsewhere. This newly discovered information challenges individuals to acknowledge their whiteness and examine their own cultural values. The central feature of this stage is conflict between wanting to conform to majority norms (i.e., peer pressure from White acquaintances) and wishing to uphold humanistic, nonracist values. Key affective components of the Conflict stage are confusion, guilt, anger, and depression.

Stage 3—Pro-Minority/Antiracism

White people often have one of two reactions to the emotional outcomes central to Stage 2. The first response is a strong pro-minority stance. Whites in Stage 3 experience self-focused anger and guilt over their previous conformity to White socialization as well as anger directed outward toward the White culture in general.

Stage 4—Retreat into White Culture

Stage 4 is marked by the second of two extremes as a response to the Conflict stage. Whereas some Whites deal with Stage 2 conflict by identifying with minorities, others deal with it by retreating from situations that would stimulate such conflict. This latter response is characterized by a behavioral and attitudinal retreat from interracial contact back into the comfort, security, and familiarity of same-race contacts. White people in the previous Stage 3 are often challenged on their pro-minority views by White peers who sense a racial disloyalty or betrayal. Moreover, these Whites may be confronted by minority peers who question their newfound supportive attitudes. As a result of peer pressure and minority group rejection, some White people feel life would just be easier and less complicated if they retreat into the "White world." Stage 4, therefore, is characterized by an over-identification with whiteness and by a defensiveness about White culture.

Stage 5—Redefinition and Integration

All three models posit a point where White people come to redefine what it means to be White in today's society. There is a transition to a more balanced and healthy racial identity. Whites acknowledge their responsibility for maintaining racism while at the same time identifying with a White identity that is nonracist and healthy. They see good and bad in their own group as they do in other groups. Energy is now devoted to nonracial issues and there is an interest in fighting all forms of oppression. Whites at this final stage are flexible and open with regard to culture-learning activities, both from their own racial group and other groups.

Framework of Multicultural Education

(Ortiz, A., & Rhoads, R. (2000). Deconstructing whiteness as part of a multicultural educational framework: From theory to practice. *Journal of College Student Development*, 41 (1), 81-93.)

	Step 1 Understanding Culture	Step 2 Learning About Other Cultures	Step 3 Recognizing and Deconstructing White Culture	Step 4 Recognizing the Legitimacy of Other Cultures	Step 5 Developing a Multicultural Outlook
Cognitive Goal	To develop a complex understanding of culture (culture shapes people's lives and people shape culture).	To develop a more advanced understanding of diverse cultures.	To develop an understanding of how White culture has been universalized as the norm and to begin to question its privileged position.	To recognize that culture other than one's own is just as valued to another individual.	To recognize that cultures within a given society shape each other and that the inclusion of all cultures requires the reconstruction of U.S. society.
Beginning Problem Statement	I see culture as something a society creates.	I know that differences between cultural groups exist but the differences are only superficial.	I see culture as something that some have, but others do not.	I understand that there are many cultures, but we should agree on a common culture.	I value living in a society that is multicultural.
Ending Problem Statement	Culture is something I create but that also creates me.	I understand that many cultural groups exist within the U.S. and each reflects deeply held norms, values, beliefs, and traditions.	I see culture as something that all people have.	I see that many diverse cultures can coexist including my own and that this is a good thing.	I can work to make society an equitable place for people of all cultural backgrounds because our vitality is intricately tied to one another's.
Activity	Understanding Culture-Observing and critically analyzing everyday events.	Exploring Cultures-Attending cultural events and reflecting on their meaning as well as dialoguing with culturally diverse others.	Analyzing White Culture-Learning to recognize White culture and to begin to challenge its normalization.	The impact of Culture-Students identifying aspects of own cultures that play important roles in their lives and sharing these with other students.	Multiculturalism leads to Action-Discovering how institutions shape the ways in which culture is expressed.

Assumptions

1. Culture is a misunderstood construct, but one that is key for helping students understand diversity and confront their own racism.
2. Students in general and White students in particular have a difficult time identifying their own cultural connections.
3. Cultural diversity is a fact of life and efforts to build a common culture inevitably privilege the dominant culture.
4. Multiculturalism is a valued and desired view for students to develop.

Should and Can a White, Heterosexual, Middle-Class Man Teach Students about Social Inequality and Oppression? One Person's Experience and Reflections (Gerschick, 1995)

- We need to confront the expectation that traditionally oppressed people should teach classes about inequality and oppression. This expectation places an undue burden on these instructors for several reasons.
- (O)ppression is not solely the problem of oppressed people; it is a white problem, too. White instructors, especially white males, need to show more initiative in this area to reinforce the idea that oppression is everyone's problem and that we are all responsible for eradicating it.
- We thus have an opportunity to become role models for other white students and instructors who are trying to understand, take responsibility, and challenge their privileged positions.
- (M)y personal characteristics tended to lessen some white students' resistance to discussing these issues. In this regard, my viewpoint was seen as less threatening and was less easily dismissed by them.
- (T)eaching a course on oppression provides white faculty, especially white men, an opportunity to grow as instructors and as people.

Why Don't Dominant Groups See Privilege as a Problem? (Johnson, 2001)

- They don't know privilege exists in the first place. They're oblivious.
- They don't have to. Privilege insulates them from its consequences.
- They think privilege is just a personal problem. Individuals get what they deserve.
- They want to hang on to their privilege.
- They are prejudiced.
- They're afraid...of blame, of guilt, of rejection by their own group if they acknowledge privilege, of loss.

What Strategies Do People with Privilege Use to Get Themselves Off the Hook? (Johnson, 2001)

- Deny and minimize.
- Blame the victim.
- Call it something else.
- Claim everyone prefers the status quo.
- Claim that if it's not intended, it doesn't count.
- Profess to be "one of the good ones."
- Claim the status of victim by being "sick and tired" of hearing about privilege, power, and discrimination.

Retaining Benefits, Avoiding Responsibility--A list of tactics to avoid responsibility (Kivel, 2002)

Denial--Today we are using the tactic of denial when we say, "It's a level playing field," "Discrimination is a thing of the past," or "This is a land of equal opportunity."

Minimization--Today we continue to minimize racism by saying, "Personal achievement mostly depends on personal ability," "Racism isn't prevalent anymore," or (about slavery) "There were a lot of kind slave owners."

Blame--Today we blame people of color for racism by saying, "Look at the way they act," "If they weren't so angry..." or "They are immoral, lazy, dumb, or unambitious."

Redefinition--Today we redefine racism as a mutual problem by saying, "This country is just a big melting pot," "Anybody can be prejudiced," or "People of color attack white people too."

It was unintentional--Today we continue to claim racism is unintentional by saying, "Discrimination may happen, but most people are well intentioned." "She probably didn't mean it like that." "It was only a joke."

It's over now--Today we claim racism is all over by saying, "Slavery was over a long time ago." "The days of land grabbing are long gone." "That was before the civil rights era." "There aren't any Indians left."

It's only a few people--Today we continue to use this tactic when we say, "Housing and job discrimination are the result of a few bigoted people." "The Far Right is behind the scapegoating of immigrants." "It's only neo-Nazis and Skinheads who do that sort of thing."

Counterattack--Some white people are counterattacking today by saying, "Political correctness rules the universities." "We just want our rights too." "They want special status." "They're taking away our jobs."

Competing victimization --Some of the things we say when we claim to be victims include: "White males have rights too." "I have it just as bad as anybody." "White people are under attack."

Some Final Thoughts on Privilege (Kimmel, 2002)

It's difficult and often unpleasant to acknowledge that all the good things that have happened to you are not simply the result of your hard work and talent and motivation but the result of something over which you had no power.

This realization, in turn, often leaves us feeling powerless, impotent. We can become mired in guilt. Some people argue that guilt is a negative emotion, and that we shouldn't have to feel guilty for the things that happened generations--even centuries--ago.

Yet guilt may be an appropriate, even necessary feeling--for a while...If our guilt does not freeze us in abjection, it can motivate us to transform the circumstances that made us feel guilty in the first place, to make connections between our experiences and others' and to become and remain accountable to the struggles for equality and justice around the world. Guilt can politicize us. (Perhaps that's why we often resist it?)...

Examining our privilege may be uncomfortable at first, but it can also be energizing, motivating, and engaging...

Examining those arenas in which we are privileged as well as those arenas in which we are not privileged will enable us to understand our society more fully, and engage us in the long historical process of change.

SELECTED WEB RESOURCES

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack by Peggy McIntosh

<http://seamonkey.ed.asu.edu/~mcisaac/emc598ge/Unpacking.html>

Classic article on the topic of white privilege. This excerpted essay is reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of "Independent School."

Vision, Privilege, and the Limits of Tolerance by Cris Cullinan

<http://www.eastern.edu/publications/emme/1999spring/cullinan.html>

Article by Cris Cullinan of the University of Oregon. From the "Electronic Magazine of Multicultural Education," Vol. 1, No. 2, September 1999.

Understanding White Privilege by Frances E. Kendall

http://www.alumni.berkeley.edu/Students/Leadership/Online_LRC/Diversity_Center/Understanding_White_Priveledge.asp

Article by a leading educator in the area of privilege.

Membership Has Its Privileges by Tim Wise

http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/16_04/Memb164.shtml

Article by Tim Wise. From "Rethinking Schools Online: An Urban Education Resource," Volume 16 No. 4-Summer 2002.

The Benefits of Being White Exercise by Paul Kivel

<http://www.starhawk.org/activism/benefits-white.html>

Exercise on white privilege that could be used in a classroom setting.

Teaching About Whiteness by Gregory Jay

<http://www.uwm.edu/~gjay/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>

Suggestions for teaching about whiteness from a professor at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Includes discussion questions and suggested activities.

More Thoughts on Why the System of White Privilege is Wrong by Robert Jensen

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whitefolo.htm>

Follow-up essay to "White Privilege Shapes the U.S." From "The Capitol Times," Vol. 2 No. 42, Austin, Texas, Published September 16, 1999

How We Are White By Gary Howard from the Southern Poverty Law Journal, "Teaching Tolerance"

<http://www.enidlee.com/white.htm>

Essay from the author of the book We Can't Teach What We Don't Know.

White Like Me by Ellen Barry

http://www.bostonphoenix.com/alt1/archive/styles/97/07/10/WHITE_LIKE_ME.html

First of an eight-part series of essays on what it means to be white. Includes links to the subsequent articles.

BOOKS & ARTICLES

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