

Barriers to Clarity
or
**What Keeps White People from Being Able to See Our Whiteness,
and therefore, Our Privilege?**

Frances E. Kendall, Ph.D. © 2002

One of the psychological tools that we white people use to protect ourselves from seeing the impact of white privilege is to keep the pieces of our understanding about race compartmentalized.

At a workshop I was conducting, a white man said he was glad he was white and male and that he wouldn't choose to be anything else. In the next moment, he asked why we were even talking about race; it was not important—he was simply a human being. He grasped what it meant to be white and privileged, and that insight was stored in one file. In a completely different file was the insistence that race isn't important to anyone and that there is no reason to discuss it.

What tricks must we play on ourselves to hold two such contradictory pieces of information at one time? What can we do to make the connections that are essential to the understanding and therefore to the dismantling of systemic racism?

In his book, *The Racial Contract*, Charles W. Mills states that “*white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race* are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, and enslavement. And these phenomena are in no way *accidental*, but *prescribed* by the terms of the Racial Contract, which requires a certain schedule of structured blindnesses, and opacities in order to establish and maintain white polity.” (p. 19) *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, Second Edition Unabridged, defines “opacity” as “the state or quality of being opaque”; “obscurity of meaning”; and “mental dullness.”

It is May, 2002. I feel as if mental dullness has become more pervasive in the four years since I created the following list. Many well-meaning white people are suffering civil rights burnout, having been deluded into believing that racism ended in the '60s. Our national leadership is guiding us away from talking about the racial divisions in this country and acting as if these problems have been fixed.

It's not that nothing is happening. Many things are, both negative and positive (from my perspective). On the negative side: profiling of Blacks and Latinos still occurs daily; there is enormous racial disparity in medical care; poverty continues to be racialized, as does wealth; the prison industry is growing larger and wealthier as, disproportionately, black and brown men and now women live their lives in cells; University of California regent Ward Connerly is attempting to remove any mention of race from college applications. And on the positive: the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit has ruled in favor of the University of Michigan Law School's practice of building diverse law school classes; names of enslaved people have been released, enabling African Americans more easily to trace their ancestry;

more and more is being uncovered about corporations whose wealth is based, at least in part, on profits from slavery.

But our focus is being diverted. "Foreigners," particularly Arabs and Muslims, are now presented as the dangerous people to watch out for. We are constantly fed a diet of fear: "They"—the terrorists—will get us. That's what's important—not the legislation that is passed, the decisions that are made, and the people who are placed in powerful positions.

So what do we do in this time? The most important thing is to remain vigilant in the work to eliminate racism and to look for patterns in legislation and in decisions that move us backward instead of forward. We must constantly add to our knowledge and understanding of why it is in our personal and collective best interests to identify our blindnesses and work to eradicate what is at their root.

The first task is to begin to name our "blindnesses" and "opacities." The second is to take each of the blindnesses apart and build new ways of seeing, thinking, and acting.

1. **We see ourselves as individuals, not as members of a racial group.** We often don't have any sense that almost everyone else does see us as part of a racial group.
2. **In general, we have very little concept of social structures as separate from individuals, so it is hard to see ourselves both as individuals and as members of a societal group at the same time.** Being identified as white is both very personal and not personal at all—personal because white skin is part of my individual identity; not terribly personal because I am one of millions and millions of white people in the world.
3. **We pride ourselves on our rugged individualism,** which makes it harder to think we have anything in common with other white people simply because of skin color. **Being a member of a group makes us less "special."**
4. **Our understanding of racism is that it is an interpersonal problem,** with all people of all colors having prejudices and not liking each other. **There is a belief that if we could just be friends everything would be fine.**
5. **We want to see everything on the personal level so that we don't have to become conscious of the big picture.**
6. **We see being "white" as a statement about our racist behavior rather than simply as being a piece of our physical identity.** Our anxiety is that if we identify as white, we become that which we fear white people are like: racist members of the Ku Klux Klan.
7. **We fear what we have to lose by acknowledging our unearned status; we also fear our responsibility to change ourselves and our systems once we "know."**
8. **If we see ourselves as white, we have to deal with the guilt, shame, and confusion that comes up as we think of the treatment of African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Japanese Americans, and so on.**
9. **For some of us, there is extreme pain in looking at what was done to others at the hands of our ancestors in order to retain our privileged positions.** We would rather ignore it or call it something else, for example, seeing slavery as an "economic" rather than a racial issue, or viewing the taking of the West as simply our "frontier" spirit.
10. **We avoid seeing, or we cover up, patterns of behaviors in people who are like us, while we see them clearly in other groups.** A stunning example of this is seeing each of the white boys/young men who have planned and carried out multiple murders at their schools as "disturbed individuals." Had the boys/young men been of color, the pattern of "racial violence" would have been central to the story.
11. **It is easier to render "others" sub-human or non-human than it is to examine our behaviors toward them.** I will never forget a comment made by a family member during

the Viet Nam war: "Don't worry about killing all those Asians. They don't value life like we do."

12. **We are keenly aware of the privileges that others get that we do not, because of socioeconomic class** or membership in another target group such as gays, women, etc. **When comparing ourselves with other groups we generally compare up, not down.** In other words, we are very conscious of what others have that we don't. We are much less likely to focus on the ways in which we have more unearned privileges than others. **Often white women say, "It is not about white privilege, it is about male privilege," ignoring the access to power and resources that they have that women of color do not, based on white skin-color privilege.** Other typical comments: "I don't *feel* privileged. Lots of Black people have more than my family did when I was young;" "I never think of myself as white, I just think of myself as working class;" or "I'm not white, I'm gay."
13. **We do not see ourselves as part of the white group because we have worked for civil rights and are on the "right" side.** "I'm not the enemy. It's all those other white people out there. I'm a *good* white person." It is almost as if we could work ourselves out of that part of our identity by doing good deeds.
14. **We want to believe that we have achieved what we have based on our own individual merits.** "I was hired (admitted, honored, awarded) because I am good at what I do, not because of the color of my skin." **We are rarely conscious of how our race opens door for us on a daily basis.**
15. **We don't want to be "labeled" or boxed-in as white. We feel it limits our abilities to be who we are and do what we want as individuals.** To acknowledge that even *that* is a privilege others do not have pushes us to explore how racism impacts our lives every day, and we are resistant to doing that.
16. **We truly believe that everyone can get the hair care products (greeting cards, crayons, Band-Aids, etc.) that they need anywhere they go.** The dual privilege is that a) we never have to be conscious of the fact that "flesh tone" is our tone or that b) others have to go out of their way to find services, products, and so on that fill their needs. (Because companies are getting more savvy, availability of greeting cards and crayons has gotten better.) **Our comment, when someone apprises us of the lengths they have to go to for everyday needs is, "Well, I just never thought of it that way."**
17. **Our families were poor, or were recent immigrants, and we are very conscious that they had to struggle for everything they got.** Some white people see themselves primarily as members of ethnic groups that *have* been oppressed in this country (Italian, Irish, Polish, and so on). **There is an unspoken belief that, "If we can make it, you can. It just takes a little hard work."**
18. **We don't want to and/or can't see ourselves as "the enemy" or "the oppressor."** It is very difficult to accept that we, as individuals who have never purposefully done anything to hurt anyone, could be hated or feared. Again, if we see ourselves and people like us only as individuals, we can't imagine people of color being hurt by us.
19. **For some it feels unpatriotic, even anti-American, to question the ways in which our systems intentionally provide some people with privileges while excluding others from equal rights.** We could look at incidents from the framing of the U.S. Constitution and the ten articles that kept slavery in place, to placing Japanese in concentration camps, to creating laws regulating who could vote, to the more subtle interpretations of the Constitution that make affirmative action unconstitutional because it "discriminates against white people." Instead, we rationalize these acts as necessary for the health and strength of "our" nation.
20. **Because we are the systemic power holders in the U.S., we are able to frame everything (behaviors, history, news, international analysis, and so on) from our perspective. In so doing, we keep ourselves central so that we are able to avoid any other perspective.**
21. **Acts of violence, particularly those perpetrated by African Americans, Asians, and Latinos/Hispanics against individual white people, have lessened our sense of**

physical safety. There is a feeling that “the people who carry out crimes have power. I am powerless.” Even the *threat* of violence by people of color, fed by the media, increases our fears and eats away at our willingness to see another’s reality.

22. **There is a sense among white people that what we have *rightfully* had is being eroded.** “Our time is coming” is a cry of white men in the ‘90s, as if it had not always been their time.
23. **There is an atmosphere of “That was then, this is now. Blacks are getting all of the jobs, whether they are qualified or not. Racism ended with slavery.”**
24. **Many of us who are white would like to believe that we can go forward, forget and forgive the “past,” and not do bad things in the future.**
25. **There is little that teaches us that, as White people, we have privileges. Instead, we are told that we don’t have anything we don’t deserve.** The media, particularly, highlights whites as being *victims* of people of color—through affirmative action, violence, government programs, set-asides.
26. **Some white people feel that when one or two people of color make it “to the top,” any privileges we might have had, as whites, are erased.**
27. **We consistently focus on individual, isolated incidents rather than looking at patterns of exclusion or blaming.** For example, in exploring why there are no American-born tenured professors of color at a specific college, the senior administrators describe how each person of color who has taught at the institution has not *really* been qualified to be tenured. **The question that should have been raised was (and continues to be): Are we scrutinizing the people of color differently from the white people who are coming up for tenure? Do people of color have an equal opportunity to be mediocre?**
28. **Many well-meaning, committed white people are not able to sit with the pain and anger of people of color. We feel powerless to do anything about it, and don’t want to face the fact that we are benefiting from our whiteness at the expense of our colleagues of color.**
29. **We move back and forth between race being a biological phenomenon and a social construct. We set the argument up as a heads-we-win-tails-we-win situation. If race is biology, then we are powerless to change what has been ordained (the Bell Curve argument). If race is a social construct, then all we have to do is not “act” white and the construct will fall apart.**

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