

Identifying White Race Privilege

Jenny Tannoch-Bland

This paper was originally published in *Bringing Australia Together: The Structure and Experience of Racism in Australia*, The Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action, Woolloongabba, Qld, 1998, pp.33-38.

White people's race privilege in this country is based on past acts - all white Australians live here because of past actions of murder, massacres, poisoning, torture, dispossession, internment, enslavement and genocide. These acts were committed against Indigenous people on the basis of race - they were racist acts. Australians are having the native title debate now because of these past racist acts. But through talking about white race privilege, I want to suggest that racism in the present is confounding the native title debate.

White race privilege is invisible, unearned, denied, systemic, undesirable, and confers dominance. I'd like to approach a definition obliquely, by talking about racism generally. Anecdotal evidence tells me that there is nowadays hardly a family gathering where we don't hear someone proclaiming 'I'm not a racist'. What they usually mean is 'I am not motivated by race hatred to taunt, maim or murder.' What these people understand by racism is race hatred. They do not feel hatred in their hearts, and we as a society no longer condone race hatred.

These defensive proclamations are prevalent now because many other people understand racism to be something more complex than race hatred. Most of these people, when they talk about racism, are talking about racial oppression - the systemic or systematic oppression of one race by another. Seeing the situation in terms of racial oppression focuses attention on the oppressed. Thus in Australia there is a racial focus on Indigenous people. Racism is seen as a problem for Indigenous people - but not for white Australians.

By seeing racism in terms of racial oppression we locate it with Indigenous people. It is not our problem -- not the problem of white Australians. It exists in the system outside us, impacting on others but not on us, not on white Australians. This means that we white Australians tend to see racism as causing Aboriginal disadvantage. The Siamese twin of Aboriginal disadvantage is white advantage. Logically we can't have one without the other. But we don't connect white advantage - unearned advantage - with racism. We don't think of racism in terms of our white race privilege. We think our lives are not affected by racism. But we benefit from it. Through white advantage, through unearned race privilege, through not experiencing race disadvantage, our lives are affected by racism.

It is just that we are not conscious of it. It is invisible to us, but not to Indigenous people because, on a daily basis, our race privilege affects them. Thus far we know two points about our white race privilege: it is invisible to us and unearned. I will list some of the benefits, largely unrecognised, that we white people accrue from the system of racism. These are benefits that I did not earn but that I have been made to feel are mine by birth, and are normal. The Aboriginal women with whom I come in contact cannot count on most of these benefits.^[1]

1. I can, without material loss, choose to be surrounded by people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people who oppress me on the basis of race.
3. I can be reasonably confident that in most workplaces my race will be in the majority, and in any case that I will not feel isolated as the only, often token, member of my race.

4. I can rent or purchase housing in any area which I can afford.
5. I expect that neighbours will be neutral or friendly to me.
6. If my white neighbours disturb the peace (statistically most neighbours in Australia are white), I can act confidently, requesting them to desist, without fear of being responded to on the basis of race.
7. In Queensland I can go to any public hospital and not have my recuperation hindered by my frustration that such infrastructure was funded from wages stolen from my people (perhaps my own parents, siblings or myself), who are still waiting for the balance to be released by the Queensland Government.
8. When I watch TV and read the papers I see people of my race widely and positively represented.
9. When I am told about Australia's history or about 'civilisation', I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.
10. I can rest assured that at school my children are given learning materials that confirm the existence and importance of their race.^[ii]
11. I could, as an unmarried mother in the 1970s, admit myself to a Queensland hospital to have a baby confident that the child would not be taken from me because of my race.
12. I can send my children to school in unironed uniforms without it reflecting on my race.
13. I can let my children travel to and from school by bus confident they will not be harassed because of the colour of their skin.
14. I do not have to travel in taxis to avoid racial harassment on public transport.
15. As a woman I can venture into public spaces alone, fairly confident I will not be harassed.
16. I do not have to fear that male members of my family could be put in a cell instead of an emergency ward.
17. If I am depressed, I can go to a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist who shares my basic cultural assumptions and psychic worldview, and who will not explain that I must change my belief and value system, forfeit my cultural identity, in order to exist in this society without a high level of pain.
18. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to the voices of Indigenous people.
19. I suffer no consequence of ignoring the perspectives of people not of my race.
20. As an academic, I can, without penalty, be blissfully ignorant of any culture but mine.
21. As a postgraduate student, I do not have to educate my supervisor about his race privilege before he can begin to interact with me on a professional basis.
22. I can find the writings of my race well represented in any bookshop, and makeup suiting my skin colour in any chemist.
23. I can get 'flesh' colour bandages which more or less match the colour of my skin.
24. I know my skin colour will not work against the appearance that I am financially reliable.
25. I know my skin colour will not work against me or my children in court.
26. I did not have to educate my children about systemic racism for their own protection.
27. My children don't come home from school filled with the pain of experiencing white race privilege every day.
28. My main worries about my children do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
29. I can talk with my mouth full, swear, wear body piercings, shop at Lifeline, or not answer letters - without these actions being seen as a reflection on the bad manners, bad morals, poverty, illiteracy or laziness of my race.
30. I can dress down or be drunk in public without reinforcing negative stereotypes of my race.
31. When I speak in public my race is not on trial.
32. Through my achievements I am not called a credit to my race.
33. Nobody asks me to speak for all the people of my racial group.
34. When I ask to talk to 'the person in charge' I usually face a person of my race.

35. When I address an audience, I usually look out at a sea of familiarity - faces of my race.
36. If I declare that something is a racial issue, or that it is not a racial issue, I am granted credibility because of my race.
37. I can choose whether or not to be concerned about racism.
38. I can talk about racism without being seen as self-interested or angry.
39. I can be outspoken without being seen as not knowing my racial place.
40. My size, posture, and body odour are not seen as a reflection on my race.
41. When I win a job or a scholarship, I am not suspected of doing so because of my race rather than my merit.
42. When things go badly in my life, I need not interrogate each episode for its racial overtones.
43. From among the people of my race, I can choose from a wide range of professional role models.
44. When I am late, my lateness isn't taken as a reflection of my race.
45. When I need legal or medical help, my race does not work against me.
46. I can arrange my life so that I never have to experience feelings of rejection based on race.
47. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my race.

These are just 47 conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted, that I thought were universal, available to all in this égalitarian Australian society. The fact that Indigenous people do not experience these conditions means that they are not universal; they are the features of white race privilege.

Some privileges allow me to feel at home in the world - to feel comfortable, not an outsider, to feel confident. They are what everybody ought to have in a just society. There are two problems:

1. We don't all have them, and
2. There are some that nobody should have.

Problem 1: Because we don't all have them, some of them protect me, allowing me to escape penalties or dangers that others suffer. I escape fear, anxiety, insult, injury, being treated as a trespasser in my own land, a sense of not being welcome in this society, not being real. I don't have to worry about suspicion, within my group, that I am sucking up to the dominators - or alternatively drawing too much unwanted attention to my group through my outspokenness. I don't have to be angry about not having what everybody ought to have.

Problem 2: The privileges nobody should have. My licence to be blissfully ignorant bespeaks unequal power. I can freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to Indigenous cultures, histories and sensitivities. At the same time an Indigenous person, to get a position in the institution in which I work, must be more thoroughly versed than I am in my culture.

These undesirable privileges confer power without conferring moral strength. Race privilege works to overempower us, conferring dominance - permission to control on the basis of race. It gives licence to one group to be oppressors. The amount of licence varies - right here on the banks of the Brisbane River it gave members of our group licence to be mass murderers.

Now, white race privilege still gives us a licence - we can be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, destructive, insensitive, patronising, paternalistic. We can exercise that licence how we choose. If we are enlightened, we can even try not to exercise it, but it remains.

Through the news media, the curriculum, TV, the economic system, daily life - I receive signals that my people count and that Indigenous people seem to be trying -- though not very successfully -- to be like

us. The dominant culture, my culture, has a tepid tolerance to allowing Indigenous voices to make a noise. While my racial group is made confident, comfortable and oblivious, the corollary is that other groups are made unconfident, uncomfortable and alienated. As a result of overempowerment, members of our group can seem foolish, ridiculous, infantile, or dangerous by contrast to Indigenous people who have lived survivors' lives to become strong through not having all these unearned advantages, and who daily contend with our blind arrogance.

Our arrogance is damaging us. Most parents know that unearned privilege is not good for a child's development. We are damaged by being led to believe we are better than others when we are not, by being kept ignorant of all but the white histories cleaned up, distorted, and taught in our schools, by learning not to make waves, by being encouraged to live in fear of Indigenous people. Significantly, by having unearned advantage which stunts our development, distorts our humanity and degrades us, we are damaged spiritually, intellectually, emotionally and morally, with enormous social consequences.

Our white race privilege is part of a system. It is difficult for us to see our privilege and then to keep it in focus, precisely because it is encoded in invisible systems conferring racial dominance on our group from birth. One of the most valuable lessons of history is that privilege systems can be challenged and changed. England dispensed with the feudal system. America abolished slavery. Women, even Indigenous women, are admitted to universities.

Criticising the system won't be enough to change it. To redesign social systems, we need first to recognise their vast hidden dimensions. We need to focus on the silences and denials surrounding privilege. We must use these to expose white race privilege in our daily lives, in our social fabric and in our political systems -- and significantly to expose the role of white race privilege in the native title debate.

What we collectively need to understand is that racism is fundamental to Australian society. Racism is embedded in our history, our institutions, our policies, our way of life, our psyches. It is through exposing white race privilege to one another that we can begin to unpack and unlearn racism.

This paper is a direct result of my relationship with Aileen Moreton-Robinson, a traditional owner from Quandamooka (Moreton Bay). Her insights have informed the moral, intellectual, spiritual and thus daily lives of white women with whom she is working. Because of Aileen's courage in confronting race privilege, these women have come to understand that the blindness of white Australia to white race privilege is a major impediment to Reconciliation, to which they are committed.

[i] This list and the following commentary are based on the now classic 1988 work of American academic, Peggy McIntosh, 'White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies', reprinted in *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*, eds Margaret L. Anderson and Patricia Hill Collins, Wordsworth Publishing, Ca, 1992.

[ii] My son, nieces and nephews who range in age from 4 to 22 are all 'my children'.