

Showing Up White

by

Jessica Pettitt

This summer, I served in a number of leadership roles at different camps, institutes, and retreats and have come face to face with a startling realization. I came to realize that as a White person doing social justice work, even one with a firm understanding of the issues, I *show up* in an oppressive way as a result of my racial privilege. The further I looked at this issue, the more I found it to be true, even when surrounded by those who know me and my work and validate that I 'get it'. To some this might sound obvious, but I realized that my Whiteness can make a person of color challenge their correct thinking, to the point of feeling ignorant when I present an idea, blindly making a mistake! This observation rocked me to the core and I decided to do something about it.

As I pulled together a program for ACPA's Tools for Social Justice Conference entitled *Doing White Privilege Work*, I wanted to provide a space to talk to folks about how Whiteness *shows up* when facilitating social justice workshops, discussions, and activities. I turned in the program and mapped out an agenda for the time allotted once I knew the program was accepted. I decided to develop a list, bulleted preferred, of ways that White social justice trainers *show up White*, while working. I stared at a blank screen for a while, came up with one funny example (using Comic Sans font) and then drew a blank again. My Social Justice voice started reminding me that it is supposed to be hard for me to come up with this list, as it is a list of my privileged oblivion. The voice, then reminded me that I didn't want to 'use' people of color to educate me on this topic either. Finally, I turned to something I am very good at, judging other White people!

I thought of less skilled social justice trainers I have suffered through and started coming up with several statements to get my list started. I then perused my resources and emailed the list to a number of listservs, re-read Peggy McIntosh's article for inspiration, and flipped through the orange Teaching and blue Readings books on my bookshelves. I was nervous about sending out my project. I gave people permission to write me back individually rather than having a *public* discussion for fear of filling up people's in-boxes. I was challenged on this, thankfully, and a public

discussion began. At this time, I noticed that I was using third person and decided to use first person. This is for the readers benefit, but also for my own; I needed to embrace that I do these things and do them often.

I received one email from a person who self-identified as an Asian, male who challenged my attacking "White Folks" and then shared a number of stories about White people that served as mentors throughout his life. Two other people who identified themselves as Black men, questioned if I was targeting White people with this program and if I actually thought anyone would show up. They encouraged me to pick a new topic as they "would hate to see me waste my time and speak to an empty room." I decided that I was on to something. I continually updated the list and sent it out to the listservs again and again to continue conversation. I then decided to draw the line and ask folks to share it far and wide.

As you read the list, I ask that you remember one thing from my experience, and that is the idea that the journey is as important as the destination. Making this list or writing this article doesn't make me a 'better' or 'good' White person. In fact it is White privilege, that some people will honor and respect my words or work more for having written something "vulnerable" by "exposing" a personal truth. This experience offered me opportunities to learn that I didn't have previously. It also reminded me that when I needed to learn more about this area, I relied on communities and resources to teach me about myself, so that I could use my understanding to have authentic conversation with others. That, after all, is what social justice is about.

Showing Up White

In hopes of assisting White folks in understanding how we may show up White while facilitating a workshop or just in daily life the following list has been compiled for your review. The list is in no particular order or ranking.

- I am more comfortable with this information being presented in a bulleted list that demonstrates exactly what I need to do to "fix" this problem
- I struggled developing this list and have lots of books to refer to as well as a number of listserv communities to solicit assistance

- If challenged, I tend to cite personal experiences or list off research, statistics, or literature reviews to further enforce my point to "overpower" or "win" a debate instead of hearing another experience
- I may be oblivious to oppressive experiences or the hurtful or negative impact of comments made during my own workshop by myself or other participants.
- I want to "fix" difficulties in the conversation during the session in a timely manner, rather than sit with them
- I feel the need to know all the answers or control the direction of the conversation within my comfort zone
- Using my subordinated identities to justify that I "get it" or that I am not part of an oppressive group
- I look to people of color for affirmation, acceptance, and/or approval
- I use examples of one dimensional identities (specifically Black/White) throughout training or discussion
- I fill silence with my own voice rather in fear that silence will be perceived as ignorance or incompetence
- It is important to me to start and/or end "on time" and to stay "true" to the agenda
- I state "Perfectly Logical Explanations" when confronted by my own privilege or mistakes/errors
- I don't have to worry about being perceived as experienced enough to be facilitating a workshop or being seen as "in charge"
- I claim understanding because I have a(n) (insert subordinated group here) friend, partner, family member, etc., or have taken a class, read a book, seen a movie on the subject
- My clothing options, mannerisms, language choices can be much more variable without affecting the perceptions of my leadership or skill
- I can be late, forget, or make a mistake, etc., without much ramification
- I don't feel the need to share resources, food, supplies, etc., with others
- I can cut in line, break rules, be exempt from rules
- People of my race invent new language, holidays, label historical time periods, write history, develop policy, etc.
- I go to educational workshops to meet the "good White person" standard

- I don't make public physical contact with others of any gender that I am with whom I am not in a romantic relationship
- I focus on tasks, outcomes, or objectives, over emotions or relationships
- I overcompensate members of subordinated groups for their work, input, ideas, or participation
- I can set up for a presentation in advance without a chaperone or someone assuming I work for the hotel and asking for my assistance
- I am not questioned by staff as to why I am in the room alone or accused of stealing or potentially stealing equipment or supplies
- I can use my power to name the reality of people of color
- I can establish what is normal or accepted within any circumstance
- I can choose to be silent when it comes to race with no questions asked
- I can claim symbolic ethnicity -the power to claim one's ethnicity only when convenient
- I can claim my ancestors' historical oppression during a finite period in history as a means of conveying complete understanding of what it means for people of color to experience daily acts of injustice
- I can choose to ignore the race or color of my friends
- I can choose to never have to answer for behaviors associated with my race
- I can deny an inequality of chances between people of color and White people to succeed in just about every arena
- I never have to answer the question, "Why are you here?"
- I am given the benefit of the doubt without having to prove my value or experience
- I find it difficult if not impossible to just say "I don't know"
- I try to control the conversation through establishing ground rules that are designed to make dominant group members feel "safe" and "comfortable" engaging in conversations about "difficult topics"
- I feel a need to over-intellectualize topics or keep discussion on a calm/rational level rather than engaging the feelings or emotional experiences of participants
- I feel the need to justify the diversity activities I choose to do and how I choose to do them during a workshop
- I see people of my race in managerial positions more often than servers, bellhops, or valets. I am rarely served by people of my own race.

- I can be more assertive, aggressive, confrontational, controversial, funny, and blunt in my presentations, comments, and conversations both on and off the clock
- I can study other races with ease and focus on "them" without reflection or focus on Whiteness or "us"
- Crying, guilt, defensiveness, anger, frustration, denial, avoidance, dismissal, disgust of self, are common reactions of mine, as are romanticizing, sympathizing, objectification of other
- It is easy for me to sympathize (not empathize) with subordinate groups and say "I wish everyone was equal" but never verbalize or acknowledge that I have benefited from White privilege
- Where a person of color may have an easier time coming up with this list, I will not face judgment or disdain from other White folks for having written it
- People who disagree with me can do so without getting personal
- I am rarely if ever called "exceptional" or "articulate" in feedback as I do not defy race based stereotypes
- When doing Social Justice work, I will not be accused of or dismissed for having a race based agenda
- I get more credit than colleagues of color for my "diversity" work
- Doing Social Justice work like tracking observations is not a survival skill
- My professional opportunities are perceived to be based on merit instead of the result of Affirmation Action
- I experience less rejection based on my race
- Figurative language, metaphors, examples, and interactive games are written in my language and from my experience
- I don't have to go to Symbols in word to find the correct letters and accents to spell my name and may not ever have to learn how to do this
- I describe my home and have areas that I visit described using a scale of "safety" based on how many acts of violence occur and if I can walk around at night without concern
- I am oblivious to the misappropriated indigenous names and language used as symbolic compensation for land that was stolen, genocide, and other crimes against Native people
- I employ "umbrella" terms such as Native, Hispanic, Black, Asian, Biracial, etc., to represent other racial groups with little or no regard

for the diversity within each group or the preferred terms and labels created within these groups

- If I identify as a bi/multiracial person I may be afforded White privilege which personally benefits me, but also alienates me from communities of color
- When I am confronted with my privilege and become emotional, I look to people of color to "rescue" me or comfort me
- I am afraid to admit I made a mistake, because I am afraid of being labeled a bad person
- I may ask others to refrain from getting emotional because it makes me uncomfortable
- If I work on oppression issues related to women's rights or LGBTQ inclusion, I feel pressure to "get it" in areas of oppression like race, class, ability, etc.
- I demand being perceived as right, good, and judged on my individual merits rather than my perceived group affiliation
- I correct or inform other White folks on their lack of acknowledgment of their privileged status to gain social power over them or to show them how "with it," intelligent, compassionate, or socially conscious I am
- I am disappointed if at the end of a training, I am not verbally thanked for the training by participants and event contact

Resources-

- ACPA's Commission for Social Justice Educators Listserv
- Social Justice Training Institute Alumni Listserv
- Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals Listserv
- National Speaker's Association Diversity Education Group Listserv
- Peggy McIntosh's *White Privilege and Male Privilege: A personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies*
- Maurianne Adams, Lee Ann Bell, and Pat Griffin's *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, Second Edition*
- Maurianne Adams, Warren J. Blemenfield, Rosie Castañeda, Heather W. Hackman, Madeline L. Peters, Ximena Zúñiga's *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology of Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*

Showing Up White was compiled by Jessica Pettitt, October 2007.

Thank you to Jennifer Frost and Henry Schneiderman for your editing assistance.