

# Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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## White Privilege Symposium Canada Opening Keynote

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**The Privilege Institute**

### Abstract

For the first time in history, the White Privilege Symposium was hosted outside of the United States. In the fall of 2016, Brock University hosted a two-day event composed of guest speakers and group workshops to examine the impacts of, and solutions to, racial and cultural oppression in this country. Eddie Moore Jr. and Debby Irving launched the White Privilege Symposium (WPS) in Canada with the following keynote, which captures the autobiographies and agendas of them both.

**Keywords:** White privilege; Diversity; Diagram for action; White supremacy

Dr. Eddie Moore, Jr. has pursued and achieved success in academia, business, diversity, leadership and community service. In 1996, he started America & MOORE, LLC [[www.eddiemoorejr.com](http://www.eddiemoorejr.com)] to provide comprehensive diversity, privilege and leadership trainings/workshops. Dr. Moore is recognized as one of the nation's top motivational speakers and educators especially for his work with students K-16. Dr. Moore is co-founder of the on-line journal *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege* and co-editor of *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice: 15 Stories (Stylus)* and *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys* (Corwin).

Debby Irving is a racial justice educator and writer who uses her own life to explore the everyday systemic racism that goes largely unnoticed yet perpetuates long-held racialized belief systems. *Waking Up White* functions as both a "Racism 101" for white people and a rare exposé on whiteness for people of color. By sharing her sometimes cringe-worthy struggle to understand racism and racial tensions, she offers a fresh perspective on bias, stereotypes, manners, and tolerance.

**Keynote****Eddie Moore Jr.:**

I don't know what your experience has been with this subject matter of White privilege, but at least in the United States people are not exactly waiting with arms wide open ready to give me a hug anytime soon. This is a difficult discussion, and the purpose of the White Privilege Conference and the White Privilege Symposium (WPC/WPS) is to create an atmosphere for these difficult discussions. Right now, there needs to be a stage where those people who do some Diversity 101 or 201 are ready to go to the next level. So, what we have been trying to create through the years is a space where we are going beyond Diversity 101/201. Think of it as the calculus class for diversity. Yeah, that's right: "Calculus Diversity." We are examining the essential foundational cause for why we see increasing inequalities across some key life indicators (i.e., income, wealth, education, technology, health care). It seems that while society becomes more diverse, the gaps are becoming wider and Whiter.

The bottom line is, White supremacy, White privilege, and oppression are often the root cause of these inequalities; however, we have rarely spent time in places or spaces understanding and examining these issues. You can't change a system if you don't spend time understanding its original design and purpose. That is what the WPC/WPS is designed to do. We are providing a space/place to examine White supremacy, White privilege, and oppression ideas to create the foundation that we have never completely explored.

I want to say that doing the work is about the relationship framework. I like to say, "handshake to handshake, hug to hug" because we have to build relationships to have these difficult conversations. When there are people who are courageous enough, they are often left on an island, and the other folks who are really on the paved road are the activists and the young folks who are sometimes considered not prepared enough to have this conversation. Some people learned from a framework that leaves them unprepared, and sometimes courageous conversations are the only time people can be convinced that the oppression is real.

There are folks on the streets today who every day, through music, poetry, stories, and through generations of connections, are doing the work. The essence of this work is bringing those folks together and celebrating this collaboration of academics and activists.

So officially I want to say thank you again for inviting me to Brock, and I am excited to be here, and I am very excited to be a part of the program tonight and tomorrow. My fellow speaker, Debby Irving, and I have been working on creating a tool—a way that you can bring conversations on White supremacy, White privilege, and other forms of oppression right to your dining room table. I don't know about you all, but sometimes the most difficult work I do is with the people I love the most. So that is going to be the goal here, to introduce some basic concepts about White privilege and to really present it in a way that folks can take the knowledge and present it to a fifth-grade classroom.

Part of the way that we get started in this work is by starting with the individual work. We don't advise that people start with White supremacy. Seriously, sometimes it depends on the audience you are working with—the person you are working with. Sometimes our experience has been that folks need to be led to this conversation in a way that is—for lack of a better term—gentle. So, the way I see what we need to do is that we all need to talk about the work we must do. But let me first start by saying that even though I have done this work all my career, and I am confident, and I am efficient in the work that I have done, I feel like I still have work I need to do.

The story I usually tell that highlights how even I still have work to do is a story about my six-year-old son. One day my wife sent me a text that said, "Jackson is with his best friend and they're playing dress-up. I'll send you a picture later." So, I'm thinking, dress-up ... yeah, this is cool. I liked to dress up as a kid. He's got his Cam Newton jersey, so he might be a football player. I'm thinking maybe he will be an astronaut like Ron McNair. Maybe my wife will be creative and she will make him Frederick Douglass; she will impress me that way. My wife sends me the picture, and he is—Wonder Woman.

I wish the reaction I would have had would have been one of applause. I have been doing this work for a long time and thought that I had made progress. I have been to the right parades, I have read the right books, I have all these lists of things like that that I have done, but what this moment helped me realize was that deep down I still had so much work to do. So much stuff to do. I say it this way: "I learned my most hate in my most innocent state." So, what we say to folks is, before you get into this really tough conversation about

White supremacy and White privilege, you must get at the basic stuff that you have been stuffed with, that you have been injected with.

It's like the research says: If you look at the implicit bias research, it shows how what you make decisions based on is what you learn from ages zero to five, in your most innocent state. Birth to five acts as the foundation that leads the brain through its decision making. So even though I knew that I knew all the right words to use, even though I knew that this was not a bad thing for a kid, even though I knew that his costume choice doesn't say anything about his sexuality (and even if it did, so what?), even though I knew that this costume choice was okay, I reverted to what I had been injected with. It is important that before you decide to take on this difficult topic of White supremacy or White privilege or oppression, you do the deep individual work.

Everyone has work to do. I used to say, "If you White people could just really get it together ..." or "This work is really for White people." But the more I look at it, the way I was conditioned and the way I was trained, what I realized is there is basic diversity-level stuff right here and that everybody has work to do. Everybody has work to do. So that is the first thing: You are really looking at the work you have to do that is very deep. Okay?

To help explain this, there is an activity I do that helps give people a visual associated with the work, and it is really based on this activity that a friend of mine (Troy Cicero, of MulticultuReal Communications, Inc.) taught me called "The Formula." The activity includes basic terms: "Two plus two is what?" The audience always answers, "four." Everyone needs this addition skill. We are taught these

skills over and over and over, and we are taught this in our most innocent state. Because it is taught to us in our most innocent state, those skills become the basis that we operate from. Now some of that stuff is good; for example, my six-year-old is going through one of the cognitive processes that any human being goes through. He is learning to say "please" and "thank you." If you want something, what do you say? He says, "please," and this is repeated over and over. Now, have you ever met an adult who has forgotten how to say please and thank you? Now in 40 years some of that knowledge, that conditioning from 0 to 5, is really good. You want it to last forever.

I went to school in the Midwest, but I grew up in the South, and I learned this rhyme from a friend in the Midwest. This is a rhyme my Midwestern friends learned at six years old. I tell my audience that now what I want you to do is fill in the blank: "Eenie, meenie, miney, mo, catch a [blank] by the toe." The audience generally yells, "TIGER!" And I answer, "Yeah, that is exactly how I learned to say the rhyme. But my friends in the Midwest learned 'Eenie, Meenie, Miney, Mo, catch a N!gger by the toe.' Whoa. You feeling me? Oh, wow." That is what I say. And then I say, "Imagine that a 6-year-old learns this version of the rhyme and keeps repeating it until 16 and then until 26 and then until 46."

This is what we are talking about. First, everyone has work to do—it is that deep conditioning that we all get. Sometimes it is good stuff, sometimes not so much. So that is the first part. But the other thing is, you have to work to shape up your framework, the way you see things. You want to see things in the way that you are comfortable with, in the way that makes you happy. And the world that you are going to

be living in is going to be a very different world than the one we are used to seeing. It isn't that the answer to two plus two isn't four, it is seeing four in a different way. So, what is another way that we could express four? My audience always have several ways, such as "one plus three," "two squared," "one plus one plus one plus one," or they write it in Roman numerals, etc. I did this with a high school group, and one kid yelled out, "Not five." A high school student, and he says, "It is not five." Like the student said, and this is especially important for young people, the skills you need for today are far beyond what I got and grew up with. I learned that addition is like this, and this is the only way you are going to do it. This is what four looks like. To even think about four as "not five" was not even possible. That is the kind of mindset children and adults will be stuck in if you are not willing to begin looking at the systematic work.

The next step is then really looking at systems and how systems develop over time. We grew up in a place that was designed by a small group, for a small group. You feel me? So, what we now look at are structures that are designed by White people for White people. We have all been injected with healthy stuff and not-so-healthy stuff. So, part of what we begin to look at to address some of the unhealthy stuff is how systems operate, how institutions operate. If we get a specific picture over and over and over again, and if it is presented to us in the same way for hundreds of years, then this is the picture we know. I mean if we just, say, Google "board of directors," and a sea of White men in suits and ties pops up, what does that tell us? Please understand, I am not saying they are bad people; I am not saying White people are bad, or White people are evil. I do not have a problem with White

people. That is not what I am saying. My car is white, my socks are white, my wife is White. This is not about evil bad White people or blame and shame. I am saying evil bad White supremacy. White people dominance, racist structures designed to be oppressive. You can't change something if you don't understand its design.

That's the premise that we are going to work with today. You do your individual work first, and then you should understand system design. Because if you don't understand it, it will impact you. It will change you. You are not who you think you are. It is possible that how you behave, how you think, how you parent, how you study, how you organize, how you communicate, how you are comfortable, is a limited, narrow view.

The framework I now ask you to think about—the metaphor I ask you to think about—is traffic. So, you can be the person in the car, and doing your individual work, but the traffic will impact and alter your driving, even though you are a good person individually. I know I've got some work to do, I learned some bad stuff from zero to five, and I'm going to work on that. But that is not enough. You have to understand structures. The structure will change you. The best way to think about this is traffic; it's a great metaphor for how good people do some jacked up stuff. I moved from Brooklyn, New York, to Green Bay, Wisconsin. And Brooklyn traffic—what I learned while living in New York is that Brooklyn traffic will change you. You can be a good person with a good heart, and Brooklyn traffic will make you do some stuff that you would never have thought of and your mother would not approve of. It is a great visual, just think about that, what we are asking you to think about is that it is not enough to just be good individual people,

but you must understand the structural design. Systems change people all the time. Time to think about changing the system.

### Debby Irving:

I'm going to share with you my racial autobiography. Everyone in this room has one. I'll be modeling what it can look like to examine your own. Even though I'll be looking at how my belief system got built through a racial lens, it's important to also consider your era, your religion, your gender, or sexual orientation. So, as I tell my story, just know that everybody has a story that relates to a larger story, to systems and structures that we all exist within and must navigate. So, I grew up in a town that was a suburb of Boston: Winchester. It turns out that it was a White town, though I would have never said that—even though inside it looks like this:

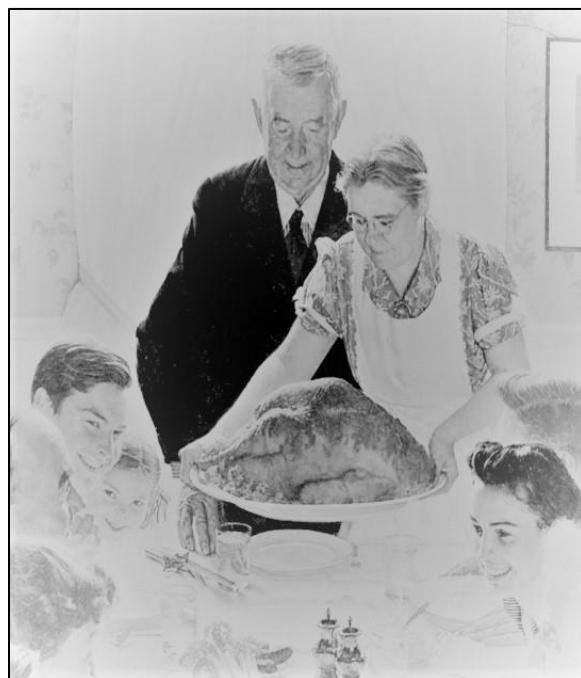


Illustration 1. *Freedom from Want*, Norman Rockwell, 1943

Illustration 2. *Going and Coming*, Norman Rockwell, 1947Illustration 3. *Jolly Postman*, Norman Rockwell, 1949

In the 1960s, my era, Norman Rockwell was charged with depicting the All-American Life in the *Saturday Evening Post*. How convenient for me that what I was being told was that the All-American Life aligned precisely with mine. Now what was happening to me that I didn't understand, was that Whiteness was being normalized for me. So that meant that I wasn't going to my parents saying, "Hey! What is going on? Where are all the other people? How come my teachers are White, the firefighters are White, the people at the bank are White, the people at the stores are White, the librarian is White, all my friends

are White, all your friends are White. What is going on?" It never occurred to me to ask that question because Whiteness was my normal.

Whiteness—meaning both people with white skin and having all the behaviors that Dr. Moore suggested—can change a person's behavior. That was happening in my life. So, in the 1960s in Winchester, Massachusetts, I did get information from the outside world, but it looked like this:

Photo 1. Cast photo of the Anderson family by ABC Television ©, *Father Knows Best*, 1962

So, if Whiteness is being normalized in that last slide, what else is being normalized in here? Right, heteronormativity—one man, one woman who are married. What else? Patriarchy, yes, father—not mother, not children—knows best. Anyone notice their teeth? Maybe they've had some dental work? So, there are class implications going on here. What's their mood like? They're happy. So, happiness, optimism, is the “right” way of

being. This image looks just like my family, my neighbors. So again, this is all being normalized for me. And I will tell you that my parents had a happy marriage. They were married for 50-plus years. And in the 1960s my father gave my mother a weekly allowance. I thought, "Wow. That's so nice of him!" It didn't feel patronizing. The shaping of things that are normal, and yet are extremely inequitable, do not require malice or evil. These are inherited social patterns.

Another pattern I was born into in my White bubble was that it was taboo to talk about some things. I'm very curious to know if you have a phrase that goes like this: "In polite company, never discuss politics or religion." No one even had to say, "Don't discuss sex or race," because those were so obviously rude to talk about, but how could you even begin to discuss race if you couldn't discuss politics or religion? They're foundational to racism. On the other hand, what I did hear about all the time was this narrative about the "level playing field." I don't know if that's here. Okay, so with, the idea of the "level playing field" is that anyone can make it. Right? What do you have to do to make it? Just work hard and pull yourself up by the bootstraps. Do you have the term "bootstraps" here, too? In America, we're working for the American dream. So, in my White bubble, I had so much evidence that that narrative was true. I was surrounded by neighbors who had a story that went something like this: "My great grandparents came to America with two cents in their pocket, couldn't speak a word of English. They were treated like dirt. Look at them now." These families had come from Ireland, Poland, Greece, Russia, and so for me this was all aligning with my belief system, with my world. And so, when I thought about race, which was this rude thing to talk about, I never thought of

anybody other than black- and brown-skinned people. White had just been normal in my childhood, not a race. So, when I thought about race as a problem, I thought a lot about wanting to study them, fix them. "Them" being something separate from me.

I was on diversity committees for 25 years before someone asked me to focus in on myself, my racial history, the history of the White race. And I noticed that it had never even occurred to me that all the imagery and rhetoric that I had been given my entire life was White centric. Not just in my neighborhood, but everywhere I looked. Some people say, "Debby, but I didn't grow up anything like you." "I wasn't wealthy." "I lived in a diverse neighborhood." Or, "I'm younger and things are so different now." That may be true, but then I would say, "Aren't we all exposed to these ideas? In fact, aren't we all exposed to these ideas still every day?"

I think about the faces of white men I saw every time I reached for a coin or a dollar bill. This is just one small example of how images of who was and was not most valued in U.S. society saturated my life. The entire construction of race and wealth was so invisible to me, even though I actually looked at it every day, that if you had shown me a photograph of my hometown, Winchester, and said "Look at the racism in this photo," I would've said, "(a) you're crazy, and (b) it's comments like that that are the problem. Why are you stirring the pot like that?"

What I couldn't see, what I hadn't been taught, was that there had been hundreds of years of policy in the United States that had restricted who could live where, who could be educated where, who could get money through the lending system and at what rate, who had access to all the

food, who had access to transportation, who got Social Security benefits, who got land, who got access to the GI Bill, and so on. And that all of that had been an institutional and structural unrolling that diverted resources disproportionately to White people. And once I understood that, a lot like it says on the program cover, the unlearning and the relearning process, I understood how being White had allowed me to develop a distorted world view.

Once I started to re-understand the world I had been born into, I came to understand that these neighborhoods that are pictured are two ends of a stick.



Image 1. Pictorial imagery for reflection of White centricity



Image 2. Pictorial imagery for reflection of White centricity

The neighborhood on the top got the long end of the stick (Image 1), and the one on the bottom got the short end of the stick (Image 2). You can't have a short end without a long end. My advantage was at the expense of those in neighborhoods like the one on the bottom. Where once I would have looked at the top one and said those people are smarter, worked harder, and are

better at managing money, I would have looked at people living in neighborhoods like the lower one and imagined them inferior. I now see that those two worlds were created by a single set of policies, and that one policy can simultaneously advantage one group while disadvantaging another, and that in the United States of America the only systematically advantaged race has ever been the White race.

### Eddie Moore Jr.:

As we close out this session, the idea is to get you thinking about not only the individual work but also the structural design, especially the structure designed by White people, for White people. If you are not conscious of that, even as a good person, you will reproduce structural disparities. What we are seeing today is not only existing inequalities, but widening inequalities. If you want to take a look, and check in about your systemic impact and how the system impacts on you, you need to think about who you are to understand how you are impacted. These are just identifiers right here (age, race, gender, etc.), but if you want to get to specifics you can think about behaviors, your attitude, your learning, your teaching, your parenting, leadership decisions, relationships, awareness. The impacts and influences range from educational gaps, statistical gaps, and other life indicators. In fact, there are now studies that show health care gaps, including situations and studies where doctors give very different medical diagnoses to White people and Black people with the same symptoms. I am not talking about White supremacists, that is not what we are talking about here. It is important to understand that this is about good people who are doing destructive stuff. That is the fundamental principle of what we are trying to understand. It is not just about the people

you wish were in the room, it is about us, those of us who are committed, are interested, and who want to do the work. There is still so much work for us to do.

What we have shared with you are just some of the things Debby and I talk about, but there are also other things we would like to share. We are always happy to share the presentation with you in its entirety, including some of the great video footage in the presentation. One thing included in the presentation is a cartoon from a U.S. newspaper talking about Flint, Michigan. I don't know if you all know that story, but it is the story of basically a decision made by people with power to send poison to kids, specifically kids of Color. Kids in 2015 were poisoned by political leaders. In my mind, what I think about is: Where did these political leaders go to high school? Middle school? In reality, many of them were my best friends. I am certain at this moment you are asking yourself, "What is he talking about?" That good people we know, with good hearts, poisoned kids. This is what we are talking about, the leadership stuff we are talking about. Leadership positions by good people.

We have created this rubric to help people who are interested in making the behavior changes shared in this session. In this rubric, you can identify a specific behavior like "the way I teach," and take it from this exercise. What we have been trying to do is give you a sense of how it works in its entirety. It is important that you understand that this is not just for the sake of conversation, it is given to you for the sake of action. This is our diagram for action:

(The Rubric) Whiteness/White Supremacy (Privilege): See It. Feel It. Interrupt It.

1. Name the behavior/policy/attitude.
2. What does it look like?
3. Who's involved?
4. How does it manifest?
5. What is its impact on individual student achievement?
6. For students of Color?
7. For White students?
8. What is its impact on the school community?
9. What are some ways it could be interrupted?

Individually you must understand where you are, and systematically you must understand where you are. For example, you might be a banker, a lawyer; you might be a teacher. But it is where you are in your understanding of, and your perpetuation of, the system that matters. This picture is a visual for action right here. What needs to be recognized is that no matter where you are structurally, you are also in an institution designed to do the opposite of what you are trying to do. An example would be our universities that are so filled with college diversity initiatives created on the premise of segregation. We have to ask: Why are we trying to bring inclusion to a place that was designed for segregation? It is extremely important to understand that.

Debby and I have also collaborated on what we call the "21-Day Action Plan." When talking with people, I have always said that we need to be doing something 365 days a year—24/7. That, however, seems to be daunting to so many, especially those just starting to work in structural change. Therefore, instead of 365 days, we came up with the 21-Day Action Plan because research shows that if you do something for 21 days in a row, it becomes a habit. That is the foundation of the Plan. The Plan consists

of big categories, things you can look at on the Internet, actions you can take, also things you can interrupt, or how to use it within your institution as a way to generate dialogue. Sometimes I will use the Plan to repair or uplift those impacted by White supremacy.

Debby's book *Waking Up White* (2016), as well as a book I co-edited, *Everyday White People Confront Racial and Social Injustice: 15 Stories* (2015), are in the Plan. There are times White people need to be in "affinity" spaces. Sometimes I feel White people are taught/trained by people of Color, in fact, I think that White people were taught/trained by people of Color too much for the work around diversity. The *Everyday White People* book was designed to create some role models for White people. It contains the stories of 15 White people who have been doing the work of social justice for 25, 30 years, or more, and they are still alive and still doing the work. Debby's book is great for those who are educators, teachers, and White women more specifically, because I feel there is a special role, a unique role, an important role, that White women must play. The thing I love about Debby's book is that in each chapter it gives you something to do—an action item. It's got action items at the end of each. And then, of course, there is the White Privilege Conference (WPC), something we do every year. Everyone is welcome, and I encourage everybody to come to the WPC. Thank you all for coming and we look forward to further opportunities to engage in doing the work—together.