

## **Common Expressions of White Privilege and How to Counter Them**

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### **Abstract**

When facilitating workshops about the social dynamics of racism and privilege, it is important to remember that those dynamics are always in the room and can trigger responses in both the participants and the facilitators. Skilled facilitators not only recognize expressions of white privilege and counteract them, they also use these instances as an opportunity to grow the understanding of workshop participants. In this article, we will share several ways we've seen white privilege manifest itself in workshops and strategies we've used to successfully deepen, rather than shut down, the conversation. Topics covered include dominating the conversation; reframing or invalidating the experience of people of color; valuing the product over the process; believing that logic, reasoning, and linear thinking do not involve emotion; being agenda bound; and distancing oneself from other white people.

When talking about the social dynamics of oppression and privilege—whether in a workshop, classroom, or conversation with friends—one must be aware that those dynamics are always present. The ability to recognize and name privilege during a conversation *about* privilege requires knowledge, persistence, and practice.

Many of the expressions of privilege we highlight are common across multiple forms of oppression. For example, members of dominant groups (heterosexual, male, wealthy, etc.) frequently reframe and reinterpret the experiences of members of subordinate groups to fit dominant paradigms. Dominating the conversation is also a common form of male privilege and white privilege. However, the strategies shared here grew from our experiences facilitating

workshops on racism and white privilege and those are the examples we will focus on in this article.

Skilled facilitators not only recognize expressions of white privilege and counteract them; they also use these instances as an opportunity to grow understanding. This article spotlights several ways we've seen white privilege manifested in workshops and classrooms. After explaining each form of privilege, we clarify the role of the facilitator and then offer specific language we've used to counteract this form of privilege. The responses are not designed to be memorized, but rather to serve as a strategic guide in developing one's own facilitation skills. Readers will also find many of these tips helpful for individual conversations outside of a workshop setting.

### **Dominating the Conversation**

Dominating the conversation tends to happen when people are eager to process out loud what they've learned and share it with others. While processing is important to learning new information, participants need to be mindful of the impact this has on others in the room. Dominating conversations is an unconscious behavior often resulting from socialization that teaches white people that their opinions and voices are more valuable than those of people of color. This also comes from and reinforces white culture's norm of individualism. Rather than collaboratively sharing airtime and learning from one another equally, dominating the conversation reinforces hierarchies that don't allow for full participation of some members of the group.

**Facilitator Role**

The facilitator's role is to interrupt the speaker without shutting him or her down. A facilitator can do this by validating the speaker's participation so that he or she doesn't feel bad about having shared, but at the same time create space for other learners.

*Countermeasures*

"I appreciate how much you have been willing to share with us today. I'm a verbal processor, too (if that's true). I'd like/I need to give those who haven't shared the opportunity to offer their thoughts about ..."

When a participant who has dominated the conversation starts to open up and share again, a facilitator can gracefully put her or his hand up, move into close proximity and say, "Hold on Sheila, I first want to give others the opportunity to share," or, "I would like to hear from those who haven't had a chance to share yet," or, "Thank you, Sheila, for being willing to take risks and share your thoughts about ... . I'd like to hear from those who have not spoken yet." Allow wait time for others to speak. This may require sitting in silence.

**Reframing or Invalidating the Experience of People of Color**

Most people aren't aware when they invalidate a person of color's experiences. This is a classic case of impact versus intent. Their intent is good but the impact leaves the person of color not feeling heard. This usually takes the form of a white person telling a person of color that he or she is misinterpreting his or her own experiences. It might sound like, "That wasn't racism, Mr. Wilson is like that with everyone," or, "When I go shopping I'm followed, too," or, "I know Mr. Wilson pretty well and I just don't think that's what he meant."

Sue et al. (2007) define invalidating experiences as a racial microaggression or, "brief and

commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicates hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color” (p. 271). These microaggressions build on each other over time, as invalidation becomes a pattern, rather than an isolated incident.

### **Facilitator Role**

Help the white participant understand how people of color experience the world differently and create an environment where people of color can share experiences without having their interpretations reframed to fit dominant norms. Push the speaker to reflect on the person of color’s experiences.

### *Countermeasures*

“What if that was the case, as Angela describes it, how would that make you feel?”

“We interpret our experiences in different ways, and oftentimes our experiences are based on the privileges that we hold in society. For example, my husband who is dark skinned and over 6 feet 5 inches experiences the world differently than I do as a light-skinned, short woman. The purpose of the workshop today is to gain understanding of how people experience the world differently, so that we can broaden our perspectives.”

“What is your intent when you share your thoughts with Angela?” After the participant responds, validate his or her intent and have him or her explore the impact that his or her comments might have had on Angela.

Ask participants, “What is our reality based on?” Facilitators are looking for the response “past experiences.” Inform them of how past experiences don’t have to be our own in order to shape our reality. They can also be historical experiences of people who look like us, as well as

family members, friends, and community. These past experiences shape our reality and form our perceptions of how we see the world and therefore the way in which we interact with others.

Talk about “mental labor.” Mental labor is common among people who are targets of oppression. It is the act of having constantly to interpret someone’s actions toward one because of one’s past experiences, based on the color of one’s skin, gender, sexual orientation, etc. For example, when a person of color is asked to produce ID at the checkout stand it’s not uncommon to think, “Did he/she ask me for ID because I’m black?” It doesn’t matter whether race was tied to it or not. The fact is that the person of color is constantly faced with trying to interpret why he or she is receiving a certain type of treatment. This comes from many prior experiences of unequal treatment and stereotyping, not just the one experience at that point in time.

Some will claim that people of color have a “victim mentality” when it comes to perceived racism. Point out that a real victim mentality would be to believe that one was personally flawed so profoundly that all one’s negative racial experiences were actually due to one’s own incompetence.

### **Valuing the Product over the Process**

Valuing the product over the process happens most often when facilitated workshops on personal awareness require participants to look deep within themselves. Common statements include, “Why can’t we just move on,” or, “We keep talking about it but I need strategies,” or, “I just need to know what to do.”

By asking to move on to strategies, the participant is avoiding the difficult personal work involved in acknowledging, coming to terms with, and consciously counteracting his or her own

biases. This is like learning to dive before we learn to swim. We might put on a wonderfully graceful show in the air, but when we hit the water ... we drown.

### **Facilitator Role**

Help participants understand that there is no cookbook approach to this work. The more aware we are of our own biases, stereotypes, values, attitudes, and beliefs and the more knowledge we develop of diverse groups, the more likely we are to develop skills that help us to effectively work across cultures. People are too complex to have a one-size-fits-all approach. Keep in mind that these are usually the participants that need to do the awareness work the most.

### *Countermeasures*

“I appreciate your eagerness to learn skills to effectively work across cultures, but that can only happen when you are aware of your own biases, values, and communication styles. It is important first to increase your knowledge of the specific groups with whom you work.”

“Unfortunately, this is one of those areas where there are no easy answers. There’s no cookbook that tells us how to work with people, given the complexity of individuals and groups. However, if you are willing to do the work of looking at yourself as a racial being and increasing your knowledge of others, I guarantee it will increase your ability to effectively work across cultures.”

“As I mentioned at the beginning of this workshop, the purpose of today is to focus on increasing your awareness of ... .”

With educators, tell them up front you could give them a great lesson plan that may or may not work with their group of students or you can give them a critical lens they can use to modify and develop their own resources, based on a better understanding of their students.

“What I am hearing from you is that it is important for you to be able to leave with some strategies that you can take with you. Can you think of some things that were shared/discussed today that might help you in developing effective skills?” If they struggle, ask the other participants.

Share a story about how your own awareness has helped you to develop skills. For example, “If I’m *aware* that I tend to value eye contact and I have *knowledge* that a person with whom I’m interacting sees it as a sign of disrespect, I will not have that expectation of them, particularly if I am in a position of power (e.g., student to teacher).”

“What things are within your control? What is in your circle of influence?” Have participants draw concentric circles and identify points where they can make a difference based on their networks of friends, coworkers, and institutions.

Have a couple of skills/strategies for participants at the end or provide a resource list. We set up a table with multiple resources and mention them throughout the workshop.

Briefly emphasize how we have become a society wanting quick fixes. State that you don’t have any quick fixes but refer them to resources that will help them.

Ask them about specific strategies that they are looking for. It is much easier to help come up with strategies if you know specific situations they are dealing with.

Put it back on them. “Let’s think about this for a minute. Where do you think you can have the biggest impact in your life? What personal strengths do you bring to this work?”

Explore what they mean by “tell me what to do.” This can help to get at the complexity of this work.

### **Believing that Logic, Reasoning, and Linear Thinking Do Not Involve Emotion**

The movie *The Color of Fear* provides a useful example to illustrate this expression of privilege (Mun Wah, 1994). Victor Lewis was angry and also very logical and clear about what he was conveying. He wasn't out of control. However, for some people the anger prevents them from seeing the logic. This can be conveyed by a white person telling a person of color to calm down or, at the beginning of the day, requesting that the workshop be "safe" for them.

### **Facilitator Role**

Allow participants to express a diverse range of emotions and create a space where learning can occur with the emotion present in the room. Be aware of your own reactions to crying, yelling, and silence. Be ready to name tension and have participants reflect on their feelings.

### *Countermeasures*

"What does 'safe' mean to you?"

"What's going on in your mind at this moment, hearing Lisa express her thoughts with so much emotion?"

"How were you taught to express emotion?" You may be able to name the emotion being exhibited such as anger, but this can create defensive feelings if you identify the wrong emotion. It is better to identify the behavior, such as raising the voice, and then ask what the participant is feeling.

"Which emotions were you allowed to express or taught not to express?"

Tie in how stereotypes often interfere with our ability to appropriately assess our reactions to different emotions. For example, a common stereotype for African American men is that they are aggressive or dangerous. Frequently whites, particularly white women, become

very uncomfortable, even fearful, when they are in the presence of an African American male expressing how he feels. Help white participants explore where they have received messages about African American males. This can help them to assess the validity of their fear while affirming the very real anger many African Americans feel about racism.

Whenever possible, bring it to the here and now; what's happening in the room at this very moment.

### **Being Agenda Bound**

When we conduct workshops on privilege and oppression, we are looking for opportunities to deepen and broaden people's perspectives. There is no one activity or prompt that is guaranteed to move everyone. Therefore, when an opportunity arises, the skilled facilitator can recognize something important is happening and abandon some planned activities. Educators call this a "teachable moment." It may happen in the form of heightened emotions, engaged dialogue in small groups, or a critical question being raised.

Similar to valuing product over process, being agenda bound may relieve members of dominant groups from the duty to closely examine themselves, because some may try to use the posted agenda as an avoidance strategy. This is when participants want to focus on the agenda and move forward in a linear fashion. It's okay to get off track as long as you are still moving in the direction of your goals for the workshop. Make sure you identify your goals prior to beginning so you can make thoughtful decisions as issues come up.

### **Facilitator Role**

Take the conversation to deeper levels of learning. This may mean that you have to be flexible by moving away from the schedule of the day. Assess and see what is working best for the entire group, not one individual. There is a risk here of catering to the person who has the least

understanding going into the workshop. Because you want to help everyone grow their understanding, it is also important to be conscious of time spent “reeducating” one person.

### *Countermeasures*

State in the beginning of the workshop, “The agenda is a tool to guide us in the direction in which we are going. If something else takes us to the outcome that I am trying to help you achieve today, I may facilitate us down a different path than was originally planned.”

“I know that this is not something that everyone feels comfortable with, depending on his or her learning styles, but I am going to ask you to trust that you will get what I have planned for you to receive today, regardless of whether or not we cover everything on the agenda.”

“When something like this comes up, we’re going to sit in the fire and wrestle with it. Sometimes it’s important to stay with the here and now.”

### **Whites Distancing Themselves from Other Whites**

This often occurs in the form of white people criticizing other white people for comments they make. There is a sense of superiority in the tone. It feels as though they are saying, “You don’t understand what I have come to understand about these issues.” Underneath there can be shame, guilt, and embarrassment about one’s own whiteness that comes off as aggression towards other whites who are early in their development of racial cognizance.

### **Facilitator Role**

Unpack the issues between white people. Keep in mind that the goal is not to shame people into understanding, but rather to guide them from where they are to new understanding. We don’t want to lose our allies but rather help them to better understand their behavior so they can be more effective in their work.

*Countermeasures*

Point out the behavior that you see occurring: “Michelle, I noticed that you have responded negatively three times to the comments of other white people in the room. Did you notice that as well? Where do you think that’s coming from?”

“I see you as someone committed to this work. Throughout this workshop you have been engaged and willing to take risks. So, I’m going to trust that you can engage on a deeper level. I’ve noticed that (point out the behavior).”

Start out with a sincere compliment or something positive you’ve noticed. Try to get to the deeper issue that may be occurring (e.g., embarrassment, shame, or disassociation that means “I don’t want people to see me as someone like you.”)

If the participant struggles with responding, name what you think is going on. For example, “In most of the ethnic and racial identity development models, they mention a person experiencing shame and embarrassment towards his or her own ethnic group. Do you think this might be something that is occurring for you today?” (Ponterotto & Pedersen, 1993; Sue & Sue, 2003).

Normalize these feelings. Suggest that what’s important is that participants identify what they are experiencing and work towards alleviating those feelings. While they are normal to have, it’s not a good place to stay. Feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment become barriers to our growth and the growth of others.

When closing the conversation, acknowledge the difficulty of the work and praise everyone, observers and participants, in their willingness to stay with it.

Praise the person you assisted in going deeper by identifying his or her strengths in handling the conversation. “Michael, this was very difficult work. Many people would have shut down but you didn’t. Good work! How are you feeling right now about what just occurred?”

### **Conclusion**

By identifying and counteracting expressions of white privilege in workshops, all participants come to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural dynamics. This builds our skills so we can engage in more authentic conversations about what is being communicated through what is not being said, as well as what is spoken. Because of the nature of white privilege, even the most skilled facilitators will still have participants who shut down or walk out of the room. The goal is not to make everyone feel comfortable; it is to allow people the space to experience the discomfort that comes from realizing the world is not as they had thought, while not using oppressive tools of shame and guilt to try to force new learning. These strategies help us bridge racial divides and create cross-cultural connections.

### **Notes**

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