

An Analysis of “White Privilege and White Guilt”

Simone Kirwan
Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba

Introduction

In the recent sociological literature, there is increasing interest in ‘white privilege’ and ‘white guilt’. Both these concepts have affected me personally and professionally. Thus, when I began reading about white privilege, I became very interested in this idea. However, I was not completely satisfied with the work I was reading because it pertains to how whites or mainstream peoples gain privilege within a North American context. Clearly, as a reasonably well-educated, middle class person who happens to be female and who is also considered to be ‘of colour’ or of ‘visible minority status’, this has not been my experience. I then pondered the reactions of many middle class, mainstream (read: white) people that I have met who strive to be sensitive to the plight of others, politically correct and culturally sensitive, and who profess to being colour-blind, racially tolerant, and/or aware of issues of marginalization and privilege. In countless encounters that I have had with these people over many years, I think I have found well-meaning people to be clumsy, awkward, and sometimes expressing guilt or shame for the ‘supposed’ privilege and status that their skin colour affords them and the historical oppression against the ‘coloured people’ perpetuated by their putative ancestors. Thus, with this experience, I want to focus on the idea of white guilt but I wish to balance it with that of white privilege.

White Privilege and White Guilt

In order to truly understand the meaning of a sociological concept, one must first provide an operational definition of it. This helps to eliminate confusion and helps keep people on the same page, so to speak. In order to determine the meaning of white

privilege, I sought out the work of Peggy McIntosh, author of “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” (1988). In this piece, McIntosh (1988) describes white privilege as “those conditions which [she] think[s] ...*attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege* than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location” (p. 178). In other words, white privilege is an innate collection of favoured benefits or circumstances which are not earned, that have been granted to white people, who are often considered to be ‘the mainstream’ in Canada and the U.S. Thus, one is born into white privilege based on the colour of one’s skin and for no other apparent reason. This is sometimes termed *ascribed* status, that is, a standing that is innately assigned or attributed to an individual, and it can be contrasted with *achieved* status, which is a position that has been earned or deserved based on actions of the individual.

White privilege may be contrasted with the notion of white guilt. According to Shelby Steele (2006), who wrote *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era*, white guilt is:

the *vacuum of moral authority* that comes from simply *knowing* that one’s race is associated with racism. Whites (and American institutions [and Canadian institutions, too]) must acknowledge historical racism to show themselves redeemed of it (p. 24).

Thus, some white people who are apprised of their experiences of white privilege may feel badly about the intrinsic benefits they perceive that they obtain simply because they are ‘white’, and, to compensate for this, they are overly sensitive, extremely aware, or excessively tolerant toward non-whites. I, therefore, understand white guilt to be a phenomenon that although real, may not be the most effective way to counterbalance the

historical effects of racism perpetuated by the mainstream against those deemed to be 'coloured'.

Historical Perspectives on White Privilege and White Guilt

In searching for the historical roots of white privilege, I found that the notion of white privilege can be traced back to the work of W.E.B. DuBois. Dubois was an African American writer and scholar, who wrote in his book *Black Reconstruction: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860-1880*:

[i]t must be remembered that the white group of laborers, while they received a low wage, were compensated in part by a sort of public and psychological wage. They were given public deference and titles of courtesy because they were white. They were admitted freely with all classes of white people to public functions, public parks, and the best schools. The police were drawn from their ranks, and the courts, dependent on their votes, treated them with such leniency as to encourage lawlessness. Their vote selected public officials, and while this had small effect upon the economic situation, it had great effect upon their personal treatment and the deference shown them. White schoolhouses were the best in the community, and conspicuously placed, and they cost anywhere from twice to ten times as much per capita as the colored schools. The newspapers specialized on news that flattered the poor whites and almost utterly ignored the Negro except in crime and ridicule.

On the other hand, in the same way, the Negro was subject to public insult; was afraid of mobs; was liable to the jibes of children and the unreasoning fears of white women; and was compelled almost continuously to submit to various badges of inferiority. The result of this was that the wages of both classes could be kept low, the whites fearing to be supplanted by Negro labor, the Negroes always being threatened by the substitution of white labor (pp. 700-701).

Clearly, DuBois shows that white privilege existed even between the poor whites and poor blacks. John Garvey and Noel Ignatiev (1996) two outspoken advocates of white privilege state that:

[r]ace is inscribed in every issue of the day; indeed politics in the U.S. consists of a dispute over how to deal with the ‘violent’ black male and the ‘immoral’ black female. From the other side, every challenge to the prerogatives of whiteness is a call for the abolition of the ‘white race’... [in order] to focus on whiteness and the struggle to abolish the white race from within (p. 2).

Thus, the desire to rid the world of white privilege is evident, both in the distant and recent past. For my purposes, I argue that although Canada is obviously different from the USA, it too has had historical cases of white privilege and racism. Examples of this include the Chinese Canadians who worked to build the CPR and were not recognized at the time for their contributions, the Japanese-Canadian internment camps which during the Second World War confined people of Japanese descent, driving them out of their homes and forcibly removing their right to property, and the numerous traumas that were imposed on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples.

Of course, not everyone who was non-white has suffered terrible trauma, loss of status, or threat as a result of racism and prejudice. However, non-white people were often undervalued and not deemed to be equal to whites until recently. In fact, recently there has been a movement of Caucasian peoples to assuage their feelings of guilt due to the innate privileges believed to be associated with being white. This is the idea of white guilt.

In searching for historical perspectives on white guilt, I discovered the work of Roberts (2008), who argues that:

[t]he topics of racism, slavery, and colonialism are the subjects in which most white students are made to feel a sense of guilt and most black students a sense of victimhood. ... [Moreover, t]he subject of the transatlantic slave trade is constantly used to reinforce white guilt and promote a sense of historical injustice and victim status among blacks (p. 26).

Thus, Roberts says that Caucasian students, and probably Caucasians, in general, are made to feel guilty about the history perpetrated by whites against blacks and people of African descent. Consequently, whites are victimized by people who use this historical perspective. Even students who have had no ancestors who perpetuated any harm to blacks (for example, students from very low socioeconomic status) are made to feel guilt about what whites, in general, have done. In this respect, Grooms (2009), notes that:

[i]n an 1856 letter to his wife Mary Custis Lee, Robert E. Lee called slavery “a moral and political evil.” Yet he concluded that black slaves were immeasurably better off here than in Africa, morally, socially and physically.

The fact is large numbers of free Negroes owned black slaves; in fact, in numbers disproportionate to their representation in society at large. In 1860 only a small minority of whites owned slaves. According to the U.S. census report for that last year before the Civil War, there were nearly 27 million whites in the country.

Some eight million of them lived in the slaveholding states.

Clearly, Grooms informs his readers about two important facts: 1) Some Americans of European descent felt badly about the slave trade of African peoples to the new world, and even publically said so, and 2) In the 1860s, there were some free blacks who owned black slaves.

By looking at these two perspectives which point to history where Africans were forcibly taken from their homes and transported to North and South America as slaves, one is tempted to believe that white guilt has resulted from educated people feeling badly about what happened in the past and from the legacies of slavery, racism, and prejudice have left on black people, especially in the United States. However, upon further reflection, it appears that white supremacy is implicit here, since Groom's article appears on the website of David Duke (who is, incidentally, a notorious white supremacist). Therefore, one must look critically at this viewpoint. As well, in digging deeper to the driving force of Roberts' article, one is immediately struck that it was published in *Identity: Magazine of the British National Party*, a magazine that was published by a right-wing political organization dedicated to eliminating immigration to Britain. Accordingly, The British National Party argues that multiculturalism is contrary to the indigenous population (again, read: white).

In summarizing these two positions, it is evident that guilt is a phenomenon that existed in the more recent past, and continues to exist today. As the world becomes smaller due to globalization, increasingly more people in our world are realizing that inequity exists due to a multitude of factors. However, white guilt is just one type of guilt and perhaps not even the most pronounced kind of guilt. Perhaps, as a corollary, the ancestors of those black American slave owners should feel black guilt.

Sociological Background on White Privilege and White Guilt

In seeking out some of the sociological background of the concepts of white guilt and privilege, and being a novice to the discipline of Sociology, these ideas to fall into the category of intergroup relationships which in turn, stem from Social Identity Theory. According to Taylor and Moghaddam (1994), social identity theory:

assumes that individuals are motivated to achieve a positive ‘social identity’, defined as ‘that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his [or her] knowledge of his [or her] membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership’ (Tajfel, 1978a, p. 63). This desire will prompt individuals to make social comparisons between the in-group and out-groups, with the ultimate aim to achieve both a *positive* and *distinct* position for the in-group. Thus, the explanation provided by social identity theory rests on psychological processes, such as identification, social comparison, and psychological distinctiveness (p. 61).

Thus, issues of discord often arise when groups do not share similar viewpoints, and conflict may arise when some groups collectively feel as though they are treated

differently (better or worse) than other groups. This may be especially the case when one group has power or control over other groups. Therefore, the more powerful or dominant group may participate in overt expressions of their dominion such as touting racist ideologies and in more subtle manners such as allowing expressions of privilege to continue. In turn, the advantaged group may consequently feel badly for their participation in subjugating the less powerful group or groups which may result in collective feelings of shame or guilt. In this way, it can be seen that privilege and guilt are connected. Thus, the concepts of white privilege and white guilt are related, and I will now examine these two concepts as they relate to my own life experiences, observations, and work as a teacher.

Personal Experiences and Observations of White Privilege and White Guilt

In my experiences as a child of mixed racial background ('black' and 'white'), growing up in Yellowknife, Barbados, and Winnipeg, I cannot recollect any time when I felt that I was not being treated similarly to my classmates and friends, white, black, and others. Growing up in Yellowknife, I had friends and classmates of Caucasian, Dene, Inuit, African, South East Asian, and Asian backgrounds. Granted, those considered white were the largest ethnic group in my circles, although the First Nations children were a close second. Although I was very much a part of an ethnic minority because there were very few black people in Yellowknife, I can honestly say that I do not recall situations where I was excluded because of my skin colour. If anything, it was Dene children who were considered to be of the lowest status. Issues of stereotyping abounded in the community; it was a common perception that the natives were alcoholics, as they

were the group of people who sat outside the post office drinking Lysol, vanilla extract, and mouthwash. In fact, I recall discussing this issue with my father and asking him why the Natives were always drunk and ‘misbehaving’. His response was that if I were able to go inside any of the town’s many bars, I would see just as many white people getting drunk and ‘misbehaving’, too. Essentially, my father did not allow me to judge the Native people differently from other people and they were not the only people to participate in this type of behaviour.

This conversation made me wonder about what else was going on behind the scene or beyond my experiences, and has made me ask many questions. My sister, Sheryl, who befriended many ‘tough’ looking black teenaged boys, reports she had been in shopping malls where security guards followed her and her friends around. This was never my experience, however. But, during my years of living in Japan and South Korea, I expected to experience more racism than I had experienced in Barbados, Antigua, or Canada but I honestly cannot recall people treating me any differently than they treated other foreigners. If anything, when people found out that I was Canadian, and not American, their attitudes toward me seemed to change and I was often welcomed more than I expected. I also attribute some of this to my attempting to learn the languages, cultures, and traditions of these people so that I would cause as little offense as possible.

So, in terms of white guilt, I have personally never experienced someone telling me that they feel guilty because of slavery or how black people have been treated. However, I remember hearing a friend express her feelings of guilt in learning about residential schools and how terribly Aboriginal peoples have been treated by the Canadian government, even though none of her ancestors were responsible for that

terrible behaviour.. I also recall an instance when I was a teenager and our family went to Grand Forks and Fargo. In the parking lot near a liquor store, an unknown gentleman approached my father and began to tell him how sorry he was for all of the terrible things that whites had done to blacks. In fact, this man actually hugged my father at the end of this brief conversation. Clearly, these are two examples of what I think is white guilt, and perhaps some of it is misplaced.

Educational Experiences and Observations of White Privilege and White Guilt

As a student, I spent my first eight years in public schools in Yellowknife and the last five years in a private school in Winnipeg. As an adolescent, I had classmates and friends from many different ethnicities and cultural backgrounds and I think I was valued by my peer group and other acquaintances. In various courses, I remember studying war, terrorism, racism, slavery, and civil rights, and I often wondered how people could treat others so poorly and why equality was not a given in our world. I was always touched when I heard about human suffering and I viewed people such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Mother Teresa as extraordinary humans who were role models for all people no matter their ethnic or cultural background. In fact, I continue to hold these values, and I try to bring them to bear on my world as a teacher.

For the last five years, I have been a public elementary school teacher in Winnipeg. Interestingly, the school division where I worked was quite unique because the students were mostly white and middle-class, and there were few teachers that were not white and middle-class themselves. Of course, there were a few students whose families were recent immigrants to Canada, but these children made up a very small

minority. As a teacher, I noticed an interesting trend: all of the students of African descent were somehow placed in my classroom. Several well-meaning colleagues said on more than a few occasions that this was good for these students because I could then be a good role model for them. Obviously, my objective was to be a good role model for all of the children, irrespective of their colour or gender! Issues of race and ethnicity came up quite frequently during these five years – mainly from my students who heard stories and saw pictures of my family and learned about my experiences teaching in Asia. In fact, I encouraged my students to ask questions and I always tried to answer them as honestly as possible. Once, an eight-year-old boy corrected me for saying that I was black: by informing me that I was ‘African-American.’ I explained that that the term did not really apply to me since I am Canadian, and do not come from Africa. He then said that he had discussed this with his parents, and I could tell that they were trying to teach him more respectful language to use when talking about people of African descent, since they may have thought that the term ‘black’ was no longer politically correct. It was an interesting conversation as we danced around these various politically loaded words and phrases.

When I was in my second year of teaching, children from three families of refugees from the Sudan came to our school. This was very exciting for us, and I remember several students commenting that these new students were “much blacker than me” and accordingly, we discussed the appropriate ways of talking about people’s skin colour. Even by Grade Three, I heard students say repeatedly that they should be nice to people whose skin colour was different. At the same time, I heard many questionable comments from teachers in the staff room about our new students including the fact that

their families did not understand what was ‘appropriate’ food for lunchtime and these faculty members thought the Sudanese food ‘smelled funny’ and ‘looked strange.’ In retrospect, these were the same adults who stuck their noses into my pepperpot soup (a Caribbean stew made of spinach leaves, okra, and pieces of salted pork or beef) and wondered ‘what in the world was this green soup?’ I also had to explain that giving the families free passes to the local swimming pool might not be such a good idea since the girls had beautiful braids (hair extensions) which were likely to be ruined by the chlorinated water in the swimming pools. I then gave an impromptu mini lesson on black hair and the numerous chemicals, hair products and hours that girls would spend on ‘having their hair done.’ At this point, a coworker exclaimed “Oh, that must be what all of those strange hair creams and sprays are in the shampoo section of Superstore.” Clearly, these examples highlight the norms of reference both for the children and adults had about people who were different from them. In both instances, the individuals regarded their own shampoos, foods, and skin colours as being normal. For me, this again suggests white privilege, the failure to recognize that what another does is normal to them and not necessarily bizarre or aberrant. But, the black students may be responding in a similar way. I wonder if any of the girls went home and told funny stories about what the white people did or ate.

As a teacher who has worked in Japan, South Korea, and Winnipeg, my career has always been in settings where I am a racial minority. However, I do not think that this has been to my disadvantage. In many ways, perhaps it has been advantageous. Should I feel guilty if it has been an advantage? Over the past twenty years, Canadian policy has been directed at improving the situation of minority people by affirmative

action programs to ensure that they are employed and promoted fairly, with the hopes of correcting historic wrongs where such people were undervalued and underemployed. In other words, our country is trying to quell the feelings of white guilt where job preference to able-bodied, males or European-descent was granted before coloured minorities. As such, being a woman of ‘visible minority’ status has perhaps worked to my advantage, since it may have helped my employers to find someone who is qualified for the job, does good work, and improves their image as an ‘equal opportunity employer.’ However, I am confident in my abilities, recognizing that I am a good teacher, and that I work hard for the benefit of my students. Do I believe that affirmative action programs are beneficial and will help to rectify past injustices? I have mixed feeling about this. On one hand, I think that historically underprivileged groups such as females, aboriginals, people with disabilities, and visible minorities should be given opportunities, but only if they are qualified and only if they are competent. However, I think that lower SES people should also be included in these programs because they, too, are not on equal footing with those in ‘the majority’ (white, middle-class or upper-class males). On the other hand, I do not think that someone deserves something (a job, a scholarship, etc), just because their group, but not necessarily them, has been denied access to these rewards in the past. Clearly, people should be judged on their merit, behaviour, and abilities, and not because of their group membership. For me, this is epitomized by the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who dreams of a world where people “will not be judged by the colo[u]r of their skin but by the content of their character.” This is a principle of equality that I adhere to. However, since our world is not always fair,

equality and opportunities for all do not always exist, although Canada is perhaps one of the fairest countries in the world.

It seems very tempting to say that white privilege is a bad thing and should be eliminated, which in turn would render white guilt unnecessary. However, life is not that simple. The issues of white privilege and white guilt are very popular yes, and certainly politically correct now. In my opinion, if attitudes are to change, exposure to new ideas and information are the vehicle for this change. And, who in Canada is more open to new ideas and information than schoolchildren? Thus, we, as teachers, have the responsibility to promote this new way of thinking for them. We need to break with these established ideas.

In making this suggestion, I am not proposing that new curricula be developed to bring white or higher SES (white, black, or other) privilege to light in order to eliminate guilt. No, I think that teachers must first examine themselves and their own worldviews. And, then I suggest that we incorporate issues of multiple viewpoints into our lessons and classroom activities. This is not to say that we necessarily take a liberal, politically correct, stance on these things, which is likely to 'whitewash' the truth and hide behind convoluted jargon and the fear of offending others. Instead, we have to learn, listen, and ask questions, instead of just accepting the status quo. And, we must be prepared to move outside of our own comfort zones and explore our beliefs, acknowledge our own prejudices, and recognize our narrow views of people from different races. This is easy to say, but obviously difficult to do. In doing this difficult self-inquiry, we will be able to be more honest, better teachers and better human beings too.

Not only should teachers look at themselves, they need to explain challenging subjects and topics to their students in ways that they can understand. This may be easier in the senior grades where students' thinking is more highly developed. But, with younger children, teaching them at their levels must also be done with more awareness and understanding. For example, when teaching students, even those in the early years, one is able to point out inequality and truth. For example, in the Grade Five Social Studies Curriculum, when teaching about First Peoples and the impact of European contact, a teacher could talk about how Aboriginal peoples had their own systems of government, education, and religious beliefs and practices. In essence, the Europeans were not doing them a favour by imposing all of their culture on the people of the 'new world'. However, I encourage teachers to also note that the Aboriginal cultures were not beacons of perfection either, for there were issues of territoriality, dominance of one group over another, as there was evidence of war and of inhumane treatment, prior to the arrival of the 'White Man'.

Moreover, whenever issues to war, ethnic cleansing, genocide, slavery, and other atrocities come up in the curriculum or the news, especially for students in middle and high school, I think that teachers must take a balanced approach in discussing them with their students. In this way, teachers should take care to demonstrate that heinous crimes have been perpetrated by groups against others throughout history. I would continue to teach that people treat each other badly, but that if the world is to improve, we need to strive for equality, fairness, and sharing with others. Perhaps, this is evidence of my naïveté and my work with younger children, but I think that if students are taught that nefarious acts of aggression is something that we as human beings have in common,

perhaps they will see the necessity for this to change as we strive to make the world a better place for all members of the human race.

I also believe that we need to look for increasing similarities between groups of people and we need to stop focusing on their differences. This is not to say that difference, ethnic background, skin colour, race, language, SES, etc, should not be recognized. In truth, these attributes are part of the identity of people. But, I think that we must continually accept that people are both individuals and members of ethnic and racial groups. We need to steer clear of gross generalizations and we need to acknowledge that prejudice, racism, and stereotyping exist within us all. Consequently, white privilege, exists in Canada and needs to be acknowledged, but so does black privilege. With that said, teachers and, in fact, citizens need to move forward and try to provide opportunities for all students to have access to high quality education. Additionally, teachers need to champion the cause of those who have actually themselves suffered, because of poor parenting, poverty, and/or other life circumstances. And, those who feel guilty about their positions of privilege, white, black, or other, should do something positive for those with less than they have and they should challenge the old norms and old ways of doing things.

Conclusion

The acknowledgement of white privilege and the subsequent admission of white guilt are phenomena that abound in our increasingly politically correct Canadian society. In writing this essay, I reflected on my own experiences both as a person who is deemed to be a minority and as a person deeply involved in the educational world. Although I can

say unabashedly that both white privilege and white guilt probably exist, it is still challenging to provide ways of moving beyond these rough and awkward concepts to understand subtle and complex social relations. As human beings, we are territorial and power-seeking, and we probably wish to control ourselves and our environments. I believe that often we fear change and we fear the loss of power and the accompanying status that it brings. Also, I think that most people, no matter their colour, gender, or SES, feel badly for those who experience racism, discrimination, and poverty. However, I think that we may want circumstances to change only if this does not compromise our own well-being, wealth, and position. Finally, these issues may seem too complex to resolve, but if we, as teachers, are determined to make the lives of our students better, we must acknowledge our relative positions of power and wealth. We must be mindful and we must strive to make the small changes that start the wheels moving in an effort to eradicate privilege and guilt for both whites and other people.

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