

## **Confronting the White Elephant: White Privilege in Social Services**

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White privilege to a white person is like water to a fish: How are they supposed to recognize it if it's all they know? When I started working one-on-one with clients of color, I preached that I didn't see people for their skin color; I saw them for who they were. I believed wholeheartedly that race did not make us different from one another. I believed I was a better worker because of my beliefs. Little did I know that not only was I blind to such prevalent oppression, but my work with clients was suffering. I was a member of the dominant race, and I didn't see why that mattered.

Privilege can be defined as a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people. White privilege, however, is defined as the collection of benefits based on belonging to a group perceived to be white, when the same or similar benefits are denied to members of other groups. It is the benefit of access to resources and social rewards and the power to shape the norms and values of society that white people receive, unconsciously or consciously, by virtue of their skin color (Kivel, 2002; McIntosh, 1988; Potapchuk, Leiderman, Bivens, & Major, 2005).

Understanding privilege has been an important part of my education, my client work, and my position in the world. It has made me more mindful of the way I am treated and how people consider me. It has given me a new perspective on the way the world operates. Learning how my race, gender, sexuality, language, citizenry, religion, and appearance have affected me was a difficult process. Like many others, these were just characteristics that defined who I was and I thought little about the advantages they would impart.

Many people think that privilege is earned or deserved, as if they did something special in a previous life and now they are reaping the benefits. Not many Joseph Smiths think twice about how they don't need to change their name on their résumé to be considered for a job opportunity. Not many white parents appreciate that they don't need to have a conversation with their kids about being stopped and frisked. Beginning to look at white privilege as the elephant in the room forces social service providers to understand the reality of its effect on their work with clients of different races.

### **Education**

Beyond understanding its advantages, this process has forced me beyond what I considered my "discomfort zone."

Trying to understand my benefits as a white person was only half the battle. The societal construction behind it was beyond what I was ready to comprehend: that laws, policies, and systems purposefully separated my race from others by labeling mine 'the norm.' Beyond understanding how that would benefit me, I needed to realize how it was oppressing others.

Throughout my work experience, nowhere at my workplace was my white privilege discussed. Nor was it discussed or addressed as something that is present during client work. It wasn't until my studies at Hunter College's Silberman School of Social Work that I began to acknowledge myself as a member of a dominant race.

There is no doubt that exploring and understanding white privilege is an uneasy process for a white person; it is uncomfortable and unnatural. However, this does not mean that it cannot, or should not, be done in a meaningful, informed way. Beginning to acknowledge the role that race plays in direct service work, specifically with clients of various races being serviced by white social workers, is a crucial part of the work.

Literature on addressing white privilege for social service providers is crucial to the field. With racism still intertwined into society, understanding white privilege is at the forefront of necessities in order to enhance cultural education. Hossain

(2015) describes a multicultural education course that he found imperative to include in his school curriculum and teach to his students. He found that students were resistant to accept examples of white privilege, primarily because this was a topic not often discussed with them. This is important to note; the lack of attention to how prevalent white privilege is makes talking about it even more difficult. With regard to understanding white privilege in the social service workplace, failing to acknowledge white privilege doesn't make it nonexistent; in fact, it acts as a barrier to addressing a real and relevant component of the work.

Often when attempting to discuss white privilege, the conversation inadvertently focuses on racism. "Information avoidance is a defensive response that is intended to prevent or delay receipt of information that is available yet potentially unwanted" (Sweeny, Melnyk, Miller, & Shepperd, 2010). As a white social worker, I am aware of my own feeling; often it is guilt or shame regarding white privilege. As a human being, is it a part of our natural defense to avoid these feelings.

Focusing on the direct impact it has on this specific work can hopefully lead to both training and employee policy change. While understanding and acknowledging privilege is useful to the day-to-day life of any white person in America, the clients of color we work with already know about it. They know how society works, and the undeniable privilege that their white worker gets just for appearing as they are.

### **Moving Forward**

Given the importance of understanding and acknowledging white privilege in direct client work, it's also important that we begin to think not just about the what, but what now?

How can agencies integrate race-based trainings and white privilege into their new employee orientations? It hopes to help those line staff, managers, supervisors, and CEOs to begin thinking about why this elephant has not been addressed. What is it that many of the white executives miss this concept as a crucial part of the work?

The macro, mezzo, and micro levels of the social work practice can get involved in order to make positive change. On a macro and mezzo level, white social workers across all social service agencies can confer with social workers of color to stay informed and gain insight on their perspectives. All social workers can also support social groups that fight racism and white supremacy. These groups advocate for change on institutional and policy levels that trickle down and impact our micro work. In addition, social service agencies can increase diversity in staffing at higher levels. Lastly, social service agencies can all provide adequate supervision and a safe and informed environment to support staff in conversations that focus on white privilege.

At the micro level, what can social workers do day to day to make transformative change? First, we can begin by taking action in advocating for an antiracist workplace by holding ourselves accountable for our commitment to being a social change agent. We can also advocate for change in the micro and macro systems at our workplace that perpetuate white privilege. In order to do this, however, we must first maintain an open mind to learning about white privilege and its impact on racism. We must allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the topic and change our feelings of guilt to stimulate positive change.

### **Implications for the Field**

According to the Council on Social Work Education (2015), approximately 70% of students obtaining a social work degree are white. In contrast, only 25% students obtaining the same degree identified as a person of color. Now, if the argument were that white people inadvertently perpetuate white privilege because that's the only life we know, it would be impossible to say that the social work field itself isn't also perpetuating this privilege.

After observing other white social workers' practices and reflecting on my own, the following is a list of some ways in which white social workers may be unintentionally perpetuating white privilege:

- by discussing only individual rather than structural acts of racism with clients and supervisors;
- by failing to acknowledge how systems are marginalizing and oppressing our clients of color and understanding the construction of these systems;
- by seeing our clients for their experiences with oppressive systems and not acknowledging the intention of oppressive systems, who oversees them, etc.;
- by thinking that by bringing this into the conversation, we are creating conflict (so we avoid it);
- by thinking that it's unprofessional to talk about this with clients and supervisors;
- by telling our clients how to act and what appropriate language to use in meetings/interviews because of what we consider the norm (enforcing assimilation);
- by speaking for our clients in professional situations because we think we will be better received;
- by working within agencies whose administrators and people in supervisory positions are mostly white;
- by blocking out the history of oppression and racism in the United States because it is uncomfortable to think about;
- by becoming offended and dismissive when clients talk about their experience with white privilege;
- by practicing ethnocentrism and determining all behaviors, beliefs, language, etc., of clients that are not the cultural norm for whites as "different" or "other"; and
- by assuming that just because we are social workers, we are doing good and have good intentions so we chose not to acknowledge privilege.

These suggestions for change to the field have been supported in research and literature. The list above is just a few of many changes that can challenge the perpetuation of white privilege in the field. The first steps of addressing this issue represent an increase in learning opportunities on this topic for service providers in the field.

### **Final Thoughts**

I often hear white people say, "I don't care if you're black, white, purple, or green; I see you for who you are." But there isn't such thing as purple or green people. There are white people, and there are people that are not white. It's impossible to pretend as if you will not be treated accordingly. By saying this, you are also failing to see your whiteness. This means that you don't see how society treats you differently from other people, and that's a problem. If we can be provided with adequate education and a safe place to learn about society's construction of white privilege, we can begin to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, and we may be more likely to produce transformative work.

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