



The Benefits of Being White: An Exercise

by Paul Kivel

I FIND IT A CONSTANT EFFORT TO NOTICE that people of color don't share many of the economic and other benefits I enjoy from being white. This exercise helps white people understand how racism works in our favor, and on many different levels. The exercise is for all white participants, or for mixed groups in which the white people participate and the people of color observe. Since white privilege—the specific kinds of economic, social, and political advantages that white people gain at the expense of people of color—is generally invisible, this exercise helps those of us who are white see and acknowledge just how extensive and pervasive those benefits are.

Guidelines for Getting Ready

Tell the group that you are going to read a series of statements and that each white person to whom a statement applies should stand up after that statement is read.

Tell the group that all white people are being asked to participate, and people of color are being asked to observe.

Those who are physically unable to stand may raise their hand to indicate that they are part of the group standing.

The participants should decide for themselves whether the statement applies to them or not.

If they are unwilling to stand for a particular statement that applies to them, they may pass, but at the same time encourage them to notice any feelings they have about *not* standing.

The exercise will be done in silence to allow participants to notice the feelings that come up during the exercise and to make it safer for all participants.

After each statement is read and people have stood for a few moments to reflect, ask the participants to sit down again, then move on to read the next statement.



Begin the Exercise: a White Benefits Checklist

Please stand if:

1. Your ancestors were legal immigrants to this country during a period when immigrants from Asia, South and Central America or Africa were restricted.
2. You live on land that formerly belonged to Native Americans.
3. Your family received homesteading or landstaking claims from the federal government, or if you or your family or relatives receive or received federal farm subsidies, farm price supports, agricultural extension assistance or other federal benefits.
4. You lived or live in a neighborhood that people of color were discriminated from living in or you lived or live in a city where red-lining discriminates against people of color getting housing or other loans.
5. You or your parents went to racially segregated schools.
6. You live in a school district or metropolitan area where more money is spent on the schools that white children go to than on those that children of color attend.
7. You live in or went to a school district where the textbooks and other classroom materials reflected your race as normal, heroes and builders of the United States, and there was little mention of the contributions of people of color to our society.
8. You attended a publicly funded university, or a heavily endowed private university or college, and/or received student loans.
9. Your ancestors were immigrants who took jobs in railroads, streetcars, construction, shipbuilding, wagon and coach driving, house painting, tailoring, longshore work, brick laying, table waiting, working in the mills, working as a furrier, dressmaking or any other trade or occupation where people of color were driven out or excluded.
10. You have received a job, job interview, job training or internship through personal connections of family or friends.
11. You worked or work in a job where people of color made less for doing comparable work or did more menial jobs.



12. Your parents were able to vote in any election they wanted without worrying about poll taxes, literacy requirements or other forms of discrimination.
13. You live in a neighborhood that has better police protection, municipal services and is safer than that where people of color live.
14. You have never had to worry that clearly labeled public facilities, such as swimming pools, restrooms, restaurants and nightspots were in fact not open to you because of your skin color.
15. You see white people in a wide variety of roles on television and in movies.
16. A substantial percentage of the clothes you wear are made by women and children of color in this country and abroad.
17. Most of the food you eat is grown, processed and/or cooked by people of color in this country and abroad.
18. The house, office building, school, or other buildings and grounds you use are cleaned or maintained by people of color.
19. Most of the electronics goods that you use such as TVs, VCRs, microwave ovens, computers, and cameras are made by people of color in this country and abroad.
20. You, other family members, friends or colleagues were ever cared for by people of color either at home or at a medical or convalescent facility.
21. You don't need to think about race and racism everyday. You can choose when and where you want to respond to racism.

Group discussion

After the exercise ask white people to pair with other white people to talk about what feelings and thoughts came up for them participating in the exercise.

Ask people of color to pair with other people of color to share what came up for them and what it was like to observe white people doing the exercise.



Reassemble the group and facilitate an open discussion of the feelings, thoughts, reflections, and insights that people want to share.

To conclude the discussion tell the group that the purpose of this exercise is not to discount what white people have achieved but to question prevalent assumptions that everyone started out with equal opportunity or that white achievement occurs on a level playing field.

Also remind them that although some of the benefits listed above are money in the bank for each and every white person some white people have bigger bank accounts—much bigger—than the rest.

According to 1998 figures, 1 percent of the population controls about 47 percent of the net financial wealth of this country. In 1996, women generally made about 74 cents for every dollar that men made. People with disabilities, people with less formal education, and people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual face substantial discrimination.

Benefits from racism are amplified or diminished by our relative privilege. All white people benefit in some ways from whiteness, but some have cornered the market on significant benefits from being white to the exclusion of the rest.

Finally, point out that individual white people are not responsible for the circumstances under which they stood for particular questions in the exercise. They were born into and inherited a system that exploits people of color and provides benefits to white people whether they want them or not. Individual white people are not responsible for racism—but they are responsible for how they respond to it.

For further information see *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* by Paul Kivel, (Gabriola Island, BC: New Society, 1996 rev. 2002).

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.