



The Costs of Racism to White People¹

by Paul Kivel

WE TEND TO THINK OF RACISM as a problem for people of color and something we should be concerned about for their sake. It is true that racism is devastating to them, and if we believe in justice, equality, and equal opportunity for all, then we should be trying to end it. As we saw in the last sections, racism does produce material benefits for white people. However, the costs of racism to white people are devastating, especially to those of us without the money and power to buffer their effects. They are not the same costs as the day-to-day violence, discrimination, and harassment that people of color have to deal with. Nevertheless, they are significant costs that we have been trained to ignore, deny, or rationalize away. They are costs that other white people, particularly those with wealth, make us pay in our daily lives. It is sobering for us as white people to talk together about what it really costs to maintain such a system of division and exploitation in our society. We may even find it difficult to recognize some of the core costs of being white in our society.

For example, one of the costs of assimilating into white mainstream culture is that we are asked to leave behind the languages, foods, music, games, rituals, and expressions that our parents and/or grandparents used. We lose our own “white” cultures and histories. Sometimes this loss leads us to romanticize the richness of other cultures.

We have been given a distorted and inaccurate picture of history and politics because the truth about racism has been excluded, the contributions of people of color left out, and the role of white people cleaned up and modified. We also lose the presence and contributions of people of color to our neighborhoods, schools, and relationships. We are given a false sense of superiority, a belief that we should be in control and in authority, and that people of color should be maids, servants, and gardeners and do the less valued work of our society. Our experiences are distorted, limited, and less rich the more they are exclusively or predominantly white.

¹ Reprinted from *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*.



There are many ways that racism affects our interpersonal relationships. We may have lost relationships with friends, family members, and co-workers to disagreements, fights, and tension over racism. At the same time we may have lost relationships with people of color because the tensions of racism make those relationships difficult to sustain.

Racism distorts our sense of danger and safety. We are taught to live in fear of people of color. We are exploited economically by the upper class and unable to fight or even see this exploitation because we are taught to scapegoat people of color. On a more personal level, many of us are brutalized by family violence and sexual assault, unable to resist it effectively because we have been taught that people of color are the real danger, never the white men we live with.

There are also spiritual costs. Many of us have lost a connection to our own spiritual traditions, and consequently have come to romanticize those of other cultures, such as Buddhism or Native American beliefs. Our moral integrity is damaged as we witness situations of discrimination and harassment and do not intervene.

Our feelings of guilt, shame, embarrassment, or inadequacy about racism and about our responses to it lower our self-esteem. Because racism makes a mockery of our ideals of democracy, justice, and equality, it leads us to be cynical and pessimistic about human integrity and about our future, producing apathy, blame, despair, self-destructive behavior, and acts of violence, especially among our young people.

Costs of Racism to White People Checklist

It can be hard for us to be honest with ourselves about the costs of racism in our own lives. The following is a checklist you can use to evaluate the costs of racism to white people. Check each of the items that apply to you.

- I don't know exactly what my European American heritage is, what my great-grandparents' names were, or what regions or cities my ancestors are from.
- I grew up, lived, or live in a neighborhood, or went to school or a camp, which, as far as I knew, was exclusively white.
- I grew up with people of color who were servants, maids, gardeners, or babysitters in my house.
- I did not meet people of color in person, or socially, before I was well into my teens.



- I grew up in a household where I heard derogatory racial terms or racial jokes.
- I grew up in a family or heard as a child that people of color were to blame for violence, lack of jobs, or other problems.
- I have seen or heard images, in magazines, on TV or radio, on cassettes and CDs, or in movies of (check all that apply):
 - Mexicans depicted as drunk, lazy, or illiterate
 - Asians depicted as exotic, cruel, or mysterious
 - Asian Indians depicted as excitable or “silly”
 - Arabs depicted as swarthy, ravishing, or “crazed”
 - African Americans depicted as violent or criminal
 - Pacific Islanders depicted as fun-loving or lazy
 - American Indians depicted as drunk, savage, or “noble”
 - Any character roles from non-white cultures depicted by white actors
- I was told not to play with children of particular other ethnicities when I was a child.
- I have sometimes felt that “white” culture was “wonderbread”² culture — empty and boring — or that another racial group had more rhythm, more athletic ability, was better at math and technology, or had more musical or artistic creativity than mine.
- I have felt that people of another racial group were more spiritual than white people.
- I have been nervous and fearful or found myself stiffening up when encountering people of color in a neutral public situation (for example, in an elevator, on the street).
- I have been sexually attracted to a person from another racial group because it seemed exotic, exciting, or a challenge.
- I was in a close friendship or relationship with a person of color, where the relationship was affected, stressed, or endangered by racism between us or from others.
- I am not in a close significant relationship with any people of color in my life right now.
- I have been in a close friendship or relationship with another white person where that relationship was damaged or lost because of a disagreement about racism.



- I have felt embarrassed by, separate from, superior to, or more tolerant than other white people.
- I have worked in a job where people of color held more menial jobs, were paid less, or were otherwise harassed or discriminated against and I did nothing about it.
- I have participated in an organization, work group, meeting, or event which people of color protested as racist or which I knew to be racist and did nothing about it.
- I have had degrading jokes, comments, or put-downs about people of color made in my presence and did not protest or challenge them.
- I have felt racial tension or noticed racism in a situation and was afraid to say or do anything about it.
- I have seen a person of color being attacked verbally or physically and did not intervene.
- I am concerned that there is not enough attention paid to family violence and sexual assault in my community because of the focus of police and criminal justice resources on communities of color.
- I am concerned that drug abuse in my white community is not taken seriously enough because disproportionate attention is on drug use in communities of color.
- I experience a heightened and intrusive state of surveillance and security in my neighborhood, where I shop, in my school, when I cross borders, or when I use airports because of social fears of the dangers of people of color.
- I have had to accept unnecessary limits on my basic civil liberties because of social fears that people of color are dangerous.
- I have felt angry, frustrated, tired, or weary about dealing with racism and hearing about racial affairs.
- I live in a community where, for whatever reason, no people of color are present, so that some of these questions don't apply.

When I use this list in an exercise with a group of white people, and every person answers “yes” to a substantial number of the questions, I can clearly see that we have all paid some of the costs of racism. Realizing what those costs are can easily make us angry. If we are not careful, we can turn that anger toward people of color, blaming them for the problems of white racism. Sometimes we say things like “If they weren’t here we would not have these



problems.” But racism is caused by white people, by our attitudes, behaviors, practices, and institutions. How is it that white people in general can justify retaining the benefits of being white without taking responsibility for perpetuating racism? How do you justify it for yourself?

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