# The Costs of Racism to White People

From *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* 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 racism is devastating to them, and if we believe in equity and justice for all we should work for racial justice. However, as we've seen in previous chapters, although racism produces material benefits for white people, there are significant costs we've been trained to ignore, deny or rationalize away.

For example, one of the conditions of assimilating into white mainstream culture — to be accepted as white — people are asked to leave behind the languages, foods, music, games, rituals and the expressions their parents and/or fore parents used. We lose our own families' cultures and histories. Sometimes this loss can lead us to romanticize other cultures.

White people have a distorted and inaccurate picture of history and politics because the truths about colonialism, racism, and US military aggression have been excluded, the contributions of people of color left out and the roles of white people cleaned up and highlighted. We also lose the presence and contributions of people of color to our neighborhoods, schools and relationships. Our experiences will be distorted and limited the more they are exclusively or predominantly white.

Racism affects our interpersonal relationships in many ways. We may have had to silence our voice and ignore or deny racism in order to remain accepted by family, friends and coworkers. This betrayal of trust can damage our sense of our own integrity as well as that of people around us.1 We may have lost important relationships with those close to us due 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 can make those relationships difficult to sustain.

These interpersonal costs lead to white fear, anxiety, and apprehension in situations where racism is visible or unavoidable. This fear in turn leads to lower racial awareness, pretense and lack of authenticity towards people of color, fewer interracial friendships, less openness to diversity and other negative features. It also leads to lower empathy and sensitivity towards people of color.

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 ruling class and unable to resist or even see this exploitation because we are taught to scapegoat people of color. On a more personal level, many of us have been brutalized by family violence and sexual assault. We are less able to resist it effectively because we have been taught 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 (and appropriate) those of other cultures, such as Native American, Buddhist, or Hindu rituals and practices. Our moral integrity is deeply damaged as we witness situations of discrimination and harassment and do not intervene. We become callous and cold towards our fellow human beings, able to ignore or even support and rationalize aggression, torture, rape, hate, terrorism, expulsion, and war towards others. 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.2

It can be hard for us to be honest with ourselves about the costs
of racism in our own lives. The following is a checklist3 you can use to evaluate the costs of racism to white people. Check each of the items that apply to you.

Costs of Racism to White People Checklist

1. I don't know exactly what my European American heritage
is, what my great-grandparents' names were, or what
regions or cities my ancestors were from.

2. 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.

3. I grew up with people of color who were servants, maids,
gardeners, or babysitters in my house.

4. I did not meet people of color in person, or socially, before
I was well into my teens.

5. I grew up in a household where I heard derogatory racial
terms or racial jokes.

6. As a young person I heard that people of color or recent immigrants were dangerous and were to blame for violence,
lack of jobs, or other problems.

7. The US history I was taught in school and by the media was
biased, distorted, or misleading.

8. I have seen or heard images, in magazines, on TV or radio,
on CDs, or in movies of (check all that apply):

. Mexicans depicted as drunk, lazy or illiterate

. Asians depicted as exotic, cruel or mysterious

. South Asians 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"

. Muslims depicted as fanatics and terrorists

. Women of color portrayed as exotic, erotic or dangerous

. Any character roles from non-white cultures depicted
by white actors

9. I was told not to play with children of particular other
ethnicities when I was a child.

10. As a young person I tried to question or challenge racism
and was shut down by parents, teachers, or others.

11. I have sometimes felt "white" culture was bland — 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.

12. I have felt that people of another racial group were more
spiritual than white people.

13. 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).

14. I have been sexually attracted to a person from another
racial group because it seemed exotic, exciting, or a challenge.

15. 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.

16. I am not in a close significant relationship with any people
of color in my life right now.

17. I have been in a close friendship or relationship with another
white person where the relationship was damaged or
lost because of a disagreement about racism.

18. I have felt embarrassed by, separate from, superior to, or
more tolerant than other white people.

19. I have worked in a place where people of color held more
menial jobs, were paid less, or were otherwise harassed or
discriminated against and I did nothing about it.

20. I have been paid less or have been more vulnerable to exploitation at work because corporate leaders have pitted white workers against workers of color and immigrant workers.

21. 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.

22. I have had degrading jokes, comments, or put-downs about people of color made in my presence and did not protest or challenge them.

23. I have felt racial tension or noticed racism in a situation and was afraid to say or do anything about it.

24. I have seen a person of color being attacked verbally or physically and did not intervene.

25. I am concerned there is not enough attention paid to family violence and sexual assault in my community because of the focus of police and criminal/legal resources on communities of color.

26. I am concerned drug abuse in my white community is not taken seriously enough because disproportionate attention is on drug use in communities of color.

27. 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 about the dangers of people of color.

28. I have had to accept unnecessary limits on my basic civil liberties because of social fears that people of color are dangerous.

29. I have felt angry, frustrated, tired, or weary about dealing with racism and hearing about racial affairs.

30. I live in a community where, for whatever reason, few people of color are present, so some of these questions don't apply.

When I use this list in an exercise with a white group and every
person answers "yes" to a substantial number of the questions, I can see 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 our 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 and institutions. How is it that white people can
justify retaining the benefits of being white without taking responsibility for perpetuating racism?

Endnotes

1. For examples of this process, see Thandeka. *Learning to be White.*
2. For a more extended discussion of the costs of oppression to the oppressors, see Derald
   Wing Sue. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender and Sexual Orientation*. Pp.
   128-33.
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