

HumanKind Foundation's Awakenings Project: Anti-Racism

“White Privilege does not exist” or “I don’t agree with White Privilege”

White privilege exists, period. This is not subjective, and it is not something to be “agreed” or “disagreed” with. Have you ever noticed that the only people who claim white privilege doesn’t exist are white people? That demands reflection.^[1] White privilege is something that white people often get defensive about when hearing the phrase, as they perceive it implies they are intentionally racist. Racism does not have to be intentional to exist; nice, loving, caring, and kind people can be and are sometimes racist. When we define “racism” as something intentional done by “mean” people it is no wonder it makes the hair on the back of our necks stand up and people get defensive.

Moreover, many who use one of the phrases above conclude that it is one’s actions that determine success, not their race; citing arguments about the value of hard work that leads to success. Arguments that assert it is economic privilege, not race, that make one more likely to become successful are laden with fallacies. There is no question, however, that being born incredibly wealthy has advantages; however, the argument whitewashes (intentional use of word) over the systematic inequities in the United States that created barriers to wealth for black and brown people. See, for example, an analysis by the [Century Foundation](#), which found that the gap between blacks and whites has tripled since 1984, increasing from \$85,000 in 1984 to \$236,500 in 2009.¹ The Century Foundation further reported that “the median wealth of white families was \$113,149 compared with \$6,325 for Latino families and \$5,677 for black families.”

“It [Racism] has gotten so much better over the years.”

The truth is that systemic racism has not significantly improved over the years though it has become less “obvious”, at least to white people; it can be argued that “[slavery didn’t end, it just evolved](#)”.² According to [Smith](#) (2013), “By reframing the conversation around how much progress has been made, we further the false narrative that racism is a problem that belongs to history. While we pat ourselves on the back for not being as horrible as we once were, we allow racism to become further entrenched in every aspect of American life.”

That some want racism to have improved does not make it so. This is not to say that as a country we haven’t made progress. The point is just saying, “But it’s gotten so much better over the years” implies it has been “horrible in the past” and now that it’s “better” and we’re OK. Can we hear how curious that sounds? This saying, like others on this page, give white people a “pass” to continue to not have to reflect on how our own thoughts and behaviors might contribute to systemic racism despite our belief that we are loving, kind, compassionate people.

“Talking about racism only makes it worse.”

This is a saying used when people want to bury their heads in the sand because the actual topic of conversation is too difficult to talk about. Replace any of the phrases below, like “alcohol addiction,” with the word, “race” in the sentences below and you will see what I mean. “Talking about Jimmy’s alcohol addiction only makes it worse,” “Talking about Jenny’s meth addiction only makes it worse,” “Talking about the affair you had with your secretary only makes it worse,” “Talking about your ADHD only makes it worse” . . . do you see what I mean? Many White Supremacists cite a [Morgan Freeman 60-Minute interview](#) (2.1.2012) where Freeman’s tells Mike Wallace that he doesn’t want a Black History month, nor does he want to be seen as “Black” to argue, “See, even a black man is saying that talking about racism only makes it worse!” Clearly Morgan Freeman doesn’t speak for all black and brown people, however, this clip should not be used to conclude that Freeman doesn’t believe racism is endemic, see his Twitter account [here](#).

“All Lives Matter, not just Black Lives”

The phrase, “Black Lives Matter” was coined and the organization started in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman in 2013 by Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi – the goal was to bring attention to systemic racism. From their website: “[Black Lives Matter](#) is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and

1

<https://tcf.org/content/commentary/graph-the-wealth-gap-between-blacks-and-whites-has-tripled-since-1984-heres-why/?session=1>

2

https://eji.org/reports/slavery-in-america/?gclid=Cj0KCOjwhvf6BRCKARIsAGl1GGjPCstsYVjOpvzfCmKGLVthvEmeeJeC0U1MrjzvB5rs7glUWBEXsWAaAmZAEALw_wcB

intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks' humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression."

When people say, "All Lives Matter" they are missing the point of the movement. Two metaphors help to make the point: if on your block your house were on fire and the fire department was called, the fire department would put all their energy and resources into putting out the fire at your house. Of course, all houses on the street "matter" and if another house were on fire, they would attend to that as well. A second metaphor: Have any of you ever run a race to raise money for a particular disease, or attended a rally to raise awareness about a particular disease? Would anyone at one of those races or rallies, ever hold signs or shout, "All diseases matter!!" Of course not, of course all diseases matter, their race or rally was simply to raise awareness about a particular problem that plagues a specific group of people who suffer from the disease.

BLM folks are not saying that no other lives matter; they are drawing attention to the fact that it is "their house" that is on fire; without all people acknowledging that systematic racism exists and begin to behave in anti-racist ways, our country will not be able to live up to its promise to treat all people equally.

"I have a Black or Brown, friend, lover, partner, niece, child . . . so I cannot be racist."

This phrase is often used by white people who want to deny any complicities in perpetuating racism because of a relationship they have with black or brown people. Just because a person may have a lover, child, friend, etc. who is black or brown does not make them immune to racism; remember, talking or behaving in racist ways does not mean we have to be mean, cruel, or intentional; that's why, as stated above, it can be so hard for white people to accept that systemic racism is prevalent in our society.

[Hennick](#) (6.22.20), writes, "When I realized what was happening in my own brain, [after making a biased assumption] I shuddered. I wasn't what anyone would describe as a racist. I was engaged to a Black woman whom I would marry later that year, and who would become the mother of my two children. But white supremacy had infected me in ways I'd never realized." Understanding unconscious bias and privilege and thinking, talking, and behaving in explicitly anti-racist ways is a critical antidote to conquering this myth.

"We" are all human, "we" are all equal."

The truth is, that in the United States, not all people are treated equally – again, only white people say that. One of the great questions we can ask ourselves when we want to discern if we are partaking in racist ways is to ask yourself, "Is this only how white people think or do brown and black people also think this way?" If your answer is that it's a white person's narrative you can be sure it is racist, even if the person speaking it is a "nice" person. Frankly, this saying, like so many, simply gets white people off the hook for having to think about, reflect on, or do anything about racism.

Remember, racism in the U.S. pre-dates the signing of the Constitution. The [14th Amendment](#) was signed in 1869, 82 years after the Constitution was written and signed in 1787. It wasn't until 1965 that Congress passed the [Voting Rights Act](#), an effort to remove legal barriers at local and state levels that prevented black people from voting. Though there has been some legal progress in creating equal rights for black and brown people, the White system of government and of many organizations, continues to thwart the ability of black and brown people to thrive. Notably, this inequality is pervasive in banking, commerce, health care, education, and other systems. Though so many want to believe we are all equal, wanting it to be so does not make it true.

"I'm 'color-blind', I don't see the color of people's skin, I see all people the same."

Burke, in her book "[Colorblind Racism](#)" (2019), writes that the roots of racism may be well-intended, saying: "It borrows right from that last third of [Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech](#), where he says that he wants people to see his kids for the content of their character, not the color of their skin. So, I think it's easy for a lot of well-meaning white folks to hear that and say, 'Well, gosh, okay. Yeah. I don't want that to be the primary lens that I use to judge people's character.'"

In reality, however, one cannot not see skin tone when we are interacting visually. To suggest one "does not see color" denies the reality of the person who has black or brown skin tones and perpetuates the myth that "we are all the same." People who claim they are "color-blind" often point to personal stories where they as a white person "helped" or "interacted with" a black or brown person and how their actions were not motivated by color – "it" didn't matter, they love all people. Also, this line of thinking perpetuates the myth that "good people" can't be racist. As [Melody Hobson](#) explains, we must learn to be color brave, not color blind.

[1] For those interested in learning about the legal history of systemic racism in our country, one great book to read is "The Color of Law" by Richard Rothstein, "Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" by Ibram X. Kendi, or "Black Reconstruction in America" by W.E.B. DuBois.

[2] For one study on “color-blindness” see [“The Costs of Racial ‘Color Blindness’”](#) by Norton and Apfelbaum