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Article in *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* · March 2018

DOI: 10.1111/jmft.12330

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WHITE PRIVILEGE: WHAT'S A FAMILY THERAPIST TO DO?

Gene Combs

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Privilege is the freedom to ignore things that other people are forced to confront; dramatic things like being gunned down by a vigilante on the way home from a convenience store or less urban and visible things like having to live on secluded parcels of land that no one else wants. Most family therapists enjoy the freedom not to experience such events. Many of the people who come to us for help don't have that freedom. My intent here is to increase felt awareness of the injustice of institutional racism and to suggest some actions that White family therapists can take to bring forth a more just society in terms of education, housing, access to wealth, and basic safety.

“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced”—James Baldwin (1963)

Privilege is the ability to ignore things that other people have no choice but to struggle with every day. White privilege is the taken-for-granted power we, who successfully assume a White identity, exercise when we act as if the status and comfort that whiteness gives us is something that we have earned, or that we deserve as an inherent right.

Throughout history, people in positions of power have legitimized their privilege by constructing other people as less human, less deserving, and “other” than themselves. The ancient Egyptians enslaved the Hebrews. During World War II, Germans slaughtered or imprisoned millions of people who, in the Nazi’s opinion, were not human enough to live. Turks slaughtered or subjugated Armenians. In present-day Myanmar, Buddhists are committing genocide on the Rohingya, a Muslim minority people. In America, we are still refusing to honor treaty obligations to the people who inhabited this land before we invaded it, enslaved them, and committed genocide upon them. One hundred fifty-four years after the Emancipation Proclamation, we are still treating people with African ancestry as if they are less deserving and more dangerous than those of us who successfully claim whiteness. This murderous othering is built into our institutions, our habits, and our perceptions, and it is unjust. My intention in this article is to further the conversation among family therapists about the injustice of institutional racism and to suggest some actions that White family therapists (or those of us who, in the words of James Baldwin, [1984], “think we are White”) can take to bring forth a more just society.

Before we go further, I should, as we say these days, “situate myself.” I am very privileged: White, male, cis-gendered, born into an upper-middle-class family, possessed of an MD degree. My privilege puts me in a position to be invited to write this article. In accepting the invitation, I am claiming space in this journal that could be given to a person or persons of color, a “queer” author, a group of people who grew up in poverty, or authors marginalized in some other way. I

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I want to express my deep gratitude to Fred Piercy for inviting me to write this essay and for his warm and copious support in the revision process. I also want to acknowledge Jill Freedman for her loving encouragement and guidance in this and all projects of my life, and my aunt, Evelyn Jones Rich, a lifelong trouble maker and activist in the fight for civil rights, for historically grounded conversations about racism and activism. I can’t acknowledge by name the many people of color who have entrusted me with intimate details of their life struggles, but it is through them that I offer whatever wisdom these pages contain.

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accepted the invitation because friends and colleagues from marginalized groups have said to me over the years that I should take my privilege and *use it* to change the institutions, traditions, and daily practices that keep my privilege in place. I will focus on the privilege my whiteness brings, but that privilege coexists and interacts with the privileges granted and denied by gender, socioeconomic status, and the like. In recent times, my heart has been captured by the Black Lives Matter movement and by the Dakota Access Pipeline protests organized by the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. I am writing in fervent hope of using my privilege to promote purposes such as theirs. I hope to convince you to join me in this awkward, painful, necessary process.

The first two people who read a draft of this article said it made them feel guilty, ashamed, and helpless. Like myself, they are White, male, financially comfortable, heterosexual, and cis-gendered. We meet regularly to share and critique each other's writings-in-progress. When I asked for their ideas about how I might better grab and hold a reader's attention with this article, each said that what I had written was clear and compelling. But both said that if they came across this article in a journal, they wouldn't read it. Reflecting on White privilege brought shame and embarrassment, and since they could avoid the topic, they would.

This in spite of the fact that we are deluged with information about institutional racism every day. News of unarmed Black, Native American, and Muslim people being killed by police and massacred by armed White civilians is everywhere. Statistics about the alarming rates of incarceration, and the racial disparities among the incarcerated are difficult to avoid. Movies like *I'm Not Your Negro*, *13th*, *Selma*, *Moonlight*, *Fruitvale Station*, *What Happened*, *Miss Simone?* and *12 Years a Slave* (to name just a few) are all around us. Authors from Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois through James Baldwin and Toni Morrison to Ta-Nehisi Coates have been writing about their plight for the last two centuries. Members of the Black Lives Matter movement are working their hearts out to get us to join them in their campaign against the violence of systemic racism.

The personalities and policies that came into power in the 2016 presidential election have made issues of White dominance obvious and ugly to White people who had previously been able to suppress awareness of the cries of the oppressed. More people do seem to be wanting things to change, yet still I encounter bafflement, shame, guilt, and a desire to avoid the issue of White privilege among my closest colleagues. Our very privilege gives us the ability to ignore the pain—both physical and emotional—that others are forced to deal with.

The self-described Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, and poet Audre Lorde (1981, para. 31) has this to say:

I cannot hide my anger to spare your guilt, nor hurt feelings, nor answering anger; for to do so insults and trivializes all our efforts. Guilt is not a response to anger; it is a response to one's own actions or lack of action. If it leads to change it can be useful, since it is then no longer guilt but the beginning of knowledge. Yet all too often, guilt . . . becomes a device to protect ignorance . . . the ultimate protection for changelessness.

Are you still reading? Or have guilt and rationalization talked you into moving on? If you are still here, let me tell you another story.

As I was agonizing over how to grab and hold the attention of at least a few people who are on the fence about this issue, my colleague Suzanne Gazzolo showed me an open letter (Wallach, Belknap-Fernandez, Neumann, & Gazzolo, 2017) that her 19-year-old daughter had co-authored with three of her classmates. Their suburban, mostly White, public school has a tradition of giving students the responsibility for organizing a day in which the entire student body studies a single subject. Suzanne's daughter, Francesca, was involved in organizing that day, which was scheduled to coincide with Martin Luther King's birthday. The students titled the day "Understanding Today's Struggle for Racial Civil Rights," and scheduled well-known and knowledgeable people as speakers, with a focus on challenging institutional racism.

As the day approached, a group of parents became perturbed about these plans and lodged a public complaint, insisting that

"The Seminar claims: 'Systemic racism' should be the root of all discussions. But, that means real solutions—choice in education, federal tax, regulation, and welfare policies

that encourage marriage and families, independence, and entrepreneurship—are squeezed out.”

In my view, and that of these young women, the “real solutions” suggested by the protesting parents are dripping with White privilege. For “choice in education” read “the freedom to send my child to a suburban school where s/he will be surrounded by other privileged people,” for “welfare policies that encourage marriage and families” read “don’t take my taxes to pay ‘welfare mothers’ to have more fatherless kids,” etc. For me, this incident underlined the fact that misunderstandings and controversies over White privilege are alive and well right in my own back yard. Parents at one of the area’s richest public high schools are upset that their children are being offered the opportunity to spend *one day* reflecting on the ways that our society makes an ongoing struggle for civil rights necessary.

The response to the objecting parents by Francesca and her friends featured this quote from Martin Luther King’s (1963) *Letter from Birmingham Jail*:

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the White moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the White moderate who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says “I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can’t agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a “more convenient season.” Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.”

I am addressing this article to the “White moderate” aspects of myself, and to the White moderates that, in my view, make up the main body of family therapists in today’s world (Doherty & Simmons, 1996; Northey, 2002). My hope is to compel us all toward something more substantial than “shallow understanding” and “lukewarm acceptance.”

I hear that parents’ group whispering, “What about reverse racism? What about how schools and big companies these days keep White people out so that they can be politically correct and hire Blacks and Asians and people from India?” And I hear readers of this journal whispering, “Anyway, what does any of this have to do with my day-to-day work as a family therapist?”

Let me give you an example from my practice. Twenty years or more ago, an African American university professor, I’ll call her Grace, sought me out as a therapist. She knew me through mutual friends, and had sensed that I might be helpful in the problems she was experiencing—problems of how to be a good mother to her teenage son, whom she was raising as a sole parent. But she had a test for me. She brought a copy of *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* by Derrick Bell (1992) to our first session, saying she wanted me to read it and to discuss it with her as a part of the therapy. The book is a collection of short stories that dramatize the relatively powerless condition of Black Americans in the last decades of the 20th century. Bell’s main thesis is that racism is so ingrained in American culture that we will never be rid of it, but we must nonetheless struggle to escape its grip. In the introduction, he says,

For White people who both deny racism and see a heavy dose of the Horatio Alger myth as the answer to Blacks’ problems, how sweet it must be when a Black person stands in a public place and condemns as slothful and unambitious those Blacks who are not making it. Whites eagerly embrace Black conservatives’ homilies to self-help, however grossly unrealistic such messages are in an economy where millions, White as well as Black, are unemployed and, more important, in one where racial discrimination in the workplace is as vicious (if less obvious) as it was when employers posted signs “no negroes need apply.” (p.5)

I read Bell’s book, and we talked about it. I began to see why Grace deemed it essential that we have the discussions about race and power that the reading provoked. She knew that we were

caught up in layers and layers of institutional racism, and that as a White person I had the power to ignore that fact. No matter how much I thought I cared about matters of race, I was still protected from direct bodily knowledge of its pervasive, powerful, daily effects on her and her son. She knew that if I was to be of any real use to her and her son, I would have to develop a fuller understanding of just how much the comfortable, invisible, cushioning of my privilege kept me from a felt sense of the daily struggles they faced. Her son was shy and not athletically gifted, yet in the White-majority school he attended he had to deal with people who were socialized to view him as an athletically gifted sexual predator. I had not ever had such an experience; it took some educating to give me a hint about how that might feel, and the effects it might have on one's body, on one's very posture in the world. Grace was a tenured faculty member at a prestigious university, and even in that setting she nearly daily had to deal with people who believed she had been granted her position through "reverse racism;" that she was there as a token.

While Grace had to defend herself against the mythical privilege of reverse racism, I didn't have to grapple at all with my actual and palpable privilege. I got into medical school in part because my father was a White doctor with connections to the school I attended, yet, in spite of my use of this privilege, nobody ever gave me any indication that I didn't deserve to be there. No one complained about the strings of racial and class privilege my family had pulled. For Grace to get herself into an academic position similar to mine, she had to grapple with economic, social, and cultural obstacles that I could completely ignore. She didn't owe her position to "reverse racism," she owed it to determination, intense effort, intelligence, and support from people and places beneath the awareness of most White people.

I had no lived experience of being treated in the subtle but grindingly disqualifying ways that Grace and her son took as a matter of course in their daily lives. Our talks about Derrick Bell's stories were a gift. They cost Grace time, energy, and money. (Who wants to have to educate their therapist about something that they know inside out, have to put up with every day, and are so very, very tired of having to focus on?) I'm still trying to repay that gift. Grace and Derrick Bell helped me understand at least a little about the level of vigilance her son had to maintain every day, and the extra strength it took just to walk the halls of his "integrated" high school. I believe I was helpful to them as well—helpful in a way that I couldn't have been if they hadn't called attention to my privilege and insisted that I grapple with it. They didn't want me to be guilty or ashamed—they knew I hadn't invented the society all three of us were born into—but they needed me to see and feel their experience accurately enough through the haze of privilege that I could use the power of my privilege in helping them face that society.

When I took a job at Near South Clinic, a nearly-all-Black community health center on Chicago's South Side, I learned even more about privileges I had previously taken for granted. Every day, the staff and clients there (most often indirectly, just in the course of opening their lives to me) showed me things about the impact of race, class, and poverty in people's daily lives that I had not previously had to learn. I didn't really know about the generational impact of "redlining" (the governmental creation of Whites-only neighborhoods), which doomed families to second- or third-class housing and robbed them of the wealth we Whites can build through investing in a home. I knew intellectually about "food ghettoes," but I didn't have a felt sense of the daily impact of being unable to buy fresh produce or of having to pay higher prices for bread and milk than people in the suburbs. Over time, I did learn some of these things, not superficially, but at a gut level. Still, at the end of each workday, I went to my comfortable home on the North side of town, where I could drive without fear of being harassed by police and walk the streets without fearing for my life. And I am still blind, deaf, and numb to too many of the things others are forced to see, hear, and feel every day.

Before we can meaningfully discuss what to do, I believe we need to fill in some gaps and refresh our memories concerning aspects of history that most of us weren't taught in school.

History

One thing we White folks can do with our privilege is to take some of the time that it gives us and use it to educate ourselves about how that privilege has come to exist. Race-based inequity has deep roots. Walter Johnson, a Harvard-based historian, has taught me a lot about it through his writings. Johnson's work focuses on the historical interaction of race, power, and economics. I

hope you will bear with me as I paraphrase and condense his (2016) essay, *To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice*.

Drawing on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois, Johnson makes a convincing case that the industrial revolution, the British Empire, and our present American capitalist paradise were all built on the back of the African slave trade; that what we refer to as “the developed world” or “the first world” exists only because Africa has been invaded and pillaged for centuries and countless African people have been enslaved. He describes the “discovery of personal whiteness” (Du Bois, 1920) by Northern Europeans, and their accompanying designation of the world’s dark peoples as beasts of burden. In other words, the very concept of whiteness was constructed as a rationalization and legitimation for the “othering” and de-humanization of non-Europeans. Johnson describes in considerable detail how capitalism’s growth depended on the trade in enslaved people of color, and how capitalism cannot be separated from racism.

Johnson (2016) quotes W. E. B. Du Bois (1920) in a poetically compelling description of the rape of Africa. Let the imagery in these words sink in to your White flesh:

It all became a characteristic drama of capitalist exploitation, where the right hand knew nothing of what the left hand did, yet rhymed its grip with uncanny timeliness; where the investor neither knew, nor inquired, nor greatly cared about the sources of his profits; where the enslaved or dead or half-paid worker never saw nor dreamed of the value of his work (now owned by others); where neither the society darling nor the great artist saw the blood on the piano keys; where the clubman, boasting of great game hunting, heard above the click of his smooth, lovely, resilient billiard balls no echo of the wild shrieks of pain from kindly, half-human beasts as fifty to seventy-five thousand each year were slaughtered in cold, cruel, lingering horror of living death; sending their teeth to adorn civilization on the bowed heads and chained feet of thirty thousand Black slaves, leaving behind more than a hundred thousand corpses in broken, flaming homes. (para. 31)

Johnson says that Mississippi plantations, Manhattan banks, and cotton mills in Manchester are intimately connected components of a single slavery-based enterprise, and that in America that monstrous system was further tainted by the genocide of the American Indian population and the theft of the territory they had cooperatively shared.

While I focus mainly on whiteness as a way of creating and maintaining privilege over blackness in this article, there are volumes that we didn’t get taught in school concerning our ancestors’ enslavement, especially in the Caribbean, and in Central and South America, of the indigenous peoples of this hemisphere; about the brutal forced servitude we carried out over Chinese immigrants; about the internment of Japanese-Americans during WWII; and about our current demonization of people who follow Islam—all in the (unspoken, assumed) name of White privilege. While I only hint at those stories here, I hope you will bear their existence in mind as you read.

Most of us are blissfully ignorant of specifics that would make us own up to the scale and horror of what our ancestors did to the original inhabitants of the Americas. In his book, *American Holocaust*, David Stannard (1993) documents in horrifying detail the genocide perpetrated upon the indigenous peoples of North and South America. Stannard says that a mere two decades after Columbus first arrived on the island that now comprises Haiti and the Dominican Republic, its population of nearly 8,000,000 was essentially wiped out, “killed by violence, disease, and despair.” He documents how Europeans routinely killed women and children, and builds a convincing case that their intentions were overtly genocidal. He says,

The destruction of the Indians of the Americas was, far and away, the most massive act of genocide in the history of the world. That is why, as one historian aptly has said, far from the heroic and romantic heraldry that customarily is used to symbolize the European settlement of the Americas, the emblem most congruent with reality would be a pyramid of skulls. (p. x)

The land that enslaved people worked was taken by trickery, false promises, and homicidal force from the original inhabitants. When we trace the legal history of private property in the United States, we find that White America recognized no ownership rights for the original inhabitants

of the landscape. Whiteness was a prerequisite for owning land, and the partitioning of Mother Earth into individually owned tracts was a White invention.

It wasn't just land that was commodified. Johnson describes in grisly detail how the bodies of enslaved women were treated as factories for the production of enslaved babies, with each new child's humanity ignored in service of treating it as property, as a product that its White owner could sell for profit. Slavery wasn't just a source of cheap labor to produce the profitable cash crops of sugar cane and cotton; it became a profit center in and of itself, with enslaved humans treated no differently than the animals in a modern-day chicken farm or cattle feedlot. And their overly imprisoned descendants are still suffering while we who think we are White enjoy the benefits of the banking and industrial systems built on the profits of slavery.

The cotton produced by enslaved people was shipped to factories in England and to the American North where predominantly White workers turned it into cloth, and the cloth into clothing. The White workers, while technically free, were still wage slaves, and race was used as a tool to pacify them by giving them a marginal sort of superiority to the literal slaves in the South. As White factory workers struggled for a share in the profits of their labor, they were pacified with wages that were higher than those of Blacks, and at the same time threatened with replacement by Blacks if they demanded too much. Lyndon Johnson (1963) commented on this to a young Bill Moyers:

If you can convince the lowest White man he's better than the best colored man, he won't notice you're picking his pocket. Hell, give him somebody to look down on, and he'll empty his pockets for you. (para. 1)

Racism didn't end with the Emancipation Proclamation. Matthew Desmond (2017) gives an excellent overview of how overtly racist policies have kept Black and Brown families from building wealth through home ownership. One of the examples he gives is the G.I. Bill, which was designed to exclude people on the basis of race. He says that to get the New Deal through Congress Roosevelt appeased White Southerners by limiting Social Security and similar programs so that they didn't apply to farm work, housekeeping, and other categories of work typically done by enslaved Africans and their descendants in the South. This carried over to the G.I. Bill, and created an atmosphere where it was easy for agencies in the Jim Crow South to deny its benefits to people who couldn't qualify as White.

The Federal Housing Authority policy known as "redlining" made it nearly impossible for a resident of a Black community to own a home. Desmond quotes the historian Ira Katznelson (2005), saying,

"By 1984, when G.I. Bill mortgages had mainly matured, the median White household had a net worth of \$39,135; the comparable figure for Black households was only \$3,397, or just 9 percent of White holdings. Most of this difference was accounted for by the absence of homeownership." (para. 15 in Desmond)

White privilege keeps us from thinking or caring very much about things like the difference in wealth between White people and Black people in our country. This difference in wealth has been actively created by our White-dominated government through housing, zoning, and banking policies that continue to make it much more difficult for Blacks to get loans at decent rates or to purchase property outside the ghetto.

In her recent documentary film *13th*, Ava DuVernay tells the story of how the current prison-industrial complex, which imprisons people of color at a hugely disproportionate rate, is a direct extension of slavery. The 13th amendment outlawed slavery *except as punishment for a crime*. This made it possible to use chain gangs to perform labor that was previously done by enslaved non-criminals. It has helped create the situation where we in the U.S. have only 5% of the world's population but 25% of the world's prisoners, and the huge majority of those incarcerated people are Black and Brown. We may know these facts at some subliminal level, but privilege cushions us from feeling them as current and direct continuations of enslavement and genocide.

As you read, I hope you are thinking about how each and every negative effect of racism for people of color would not exist without a reciprocal benefit for Whites. Justice demands that we work to balance the scales.

Most of us are familiar with the standard story of the struggle for civil rights, which is told as a tale of progress from the underground railroad to the emancipation proclamation to “negro” soldiers serving nobly in WWII to the struggle for voting rights and school desegregation to the election of the first Black president. And many of us White folks feel like that story should count for something. We keep ourselves less familiar with details or numbers or clear imagery of the routine lynchings, rapes, and casual humiliation that flood the memory of people of color to this day. How many of us can really identify with the rage these injustices nurture? How many readers of this article know these words of James Baldwin (1963), writing about Black disrespect for White hypocrisy?

Negroes had excellent reasons for doubting that money was made or kept by any very striking adherence to the Christian virtues; it certainly did not work that way for Black Christians. In any case, White people, who had robbed Black people of their liberty and who profited by this theft every hour that they lived, had no moral ground on which to stand. They had the judges, the juries, the shotguns, the law—in a word, power. But it was a criminal power, to be feared but not respected, and to be outwitted in any way whatever. And those virtues preached but not practiced by the White world were merely another means of holding Negroes in subjection. (p. 36 in iBooks edition)

A Closer Look at Privilege

Peggy McIntosh’s (1988) classic article on unpacking the invisible backpack of White and male privilege is, even after 30 years, a reliable aid to experiencing and understanding the many ways that privilege affects our experience. The list below is just a sampling of privileges that she documents.

- “I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.”
- “If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.”
- “I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.”
- “Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.”
- “I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.”
- “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.”
- “I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.”
- “I will feel welcomed and “normal” in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.”

We may, indeed, feel guilty when we fully acknowledge these privileges, but we must not let guilt paralyze us. It is our moral responsibility, once we have recognized our privilege, to work for change. The history that was sketched out in the previous section is just a quick overview of a few incidents in the social construction of the institutional racism that surrounds us every day. That racism is present and unavoidable in the traditions, the carefully (if indirectly) schooled blind spots, the laws, the architecture, the history texts, and the customs of our daily lives. And it will remain there unless we consciously, intentionally, find it, oppose it, and root it out; and it is all too easy to keep putting that effort off to another day.

Fred Piercy, who invited me to write this article, told the following story after reading my first draft. It illustrates the situation of so many of us that I asked (and he gave) his permission to include it here.

I’m from a working-class family in New Jersey. Both my parents worked in factories. I have always felt that I was an advocate for others from challenging circumstances. After all, I never owned a slave and have worked for a number of just causes – political and community – that support equity and justice. (Aren’t I special!?) Anyway, recently in

reading *Waking Up White* (Irving, 2014), I answered some of the questions the author poses after each chapter, and was taken aback by my answers to more than a few. Here is the gist: “Did your family value college and give you a sense it was possible for you? (Of course.) Did your family ever help you with college tuition? (Err, yes.) How about college expenses (Err, yep.) How about purchasing your first car? (Err, yes.) How about purchasing your first home? (Oh, jeeze, that’s right!). There were a few more yeses, too. While my parents didn’t have a lot of money, they had enough to give me an advantage over others with lower incomes. That invisible (to me) privilege probably changed my life. Without it, I could easily be working in a New Jersey factory like my parents did and like so many others with less resources do right now. Privileged kid that I was, their financial and emotional support never really occurred to me. Why did it take 45 years for that to occur to me? I’m not a bad person. I’m just blind to what is in my knapsack that is not in others’. I mention this as an example of privilege that I was not even aware of. White privilege doesn’t necessarily mean racism. It can take the form of unquestioning entitlement and cluelessness, as well.

WHAT CAN WE DO?

Before I make any specific recommendations, I will focus on one brief article, George Yancy’s (2015) New York Times blog post, “Dear White America.” It ends with these words:

If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child’s face. Smell your child’s hair. Count the fingers on your child’s hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is Black.

Can you imagine stepping into the loving, grounded-in-your-flesh, regard for the effects of racism that Yancy’s request evokes, and taking that into every meeting you have with a family, couple, or individual? Into every conversation you have with people of any color as you move through your day? What difference might it make if you did?

In the essay, Yancy speaks of James Baldwin’s (1963) definition of love as

“a state of being, or state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth; . . . [a kind of love that] takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.” (para. 22)

Yancy wants us to take off the mask that we hide behind in our shame, fear, and awkwardness, and love each other deeply enough to demand to the best of each other. He says,

This letter is not asking you to feel bad about yourself, to wallow in guilt. That is too easy. I’m asking for you to tarry, to linger, with the ways in which you perpetuate a racist society, the ways in which you are racist. I’m now daring you to face a racist history which, paraphrasing Baldwin, has placed you where you are and that has formed your own racism. Again, in the spirit of Baldwin, I am asking you to enter into battle with your White self. I’m asking that you open yourself up; to speak to, to admit to, the racist poison that is inside of you. (para. 16)

As family therapists, we know that “inside of you” is a complex proposition—our experience of “inside” is sustained, shaped, and in constant interaction with our familial, social, historical, political, and natural worlds. No single one of us has invented the racist poison that infects us, and we must work together if we are to find an antidote to stop the effects of that poison in ourselves and our world. The first step in this process is to stay conscious of our privilege, not to wrap ourselves in its numbing folds. Staying conscious requires standing up to “White fragility,” which Robin DiAngelo (2011) defines as

. . . a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions

such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate White racial equilibrium.(p. 56)

It was White fragility, in part, that made my colleagues say they wouldn't read this article if they encountered it in a journal. White fragility has slowed me down and whispered doubts and excuses in my ear as I have worked on this article. We are so accustomed to being comfortable, feeling like "good people" in our own skins, that any questioning of our right to feel safe or to hold the job that we hold or to send our children to the school they attend or to own a house in the neighborhood we inhabit hurts our feelings. We can do better. We need to challenge each other to face our privilege and let it go in favor of a more just society.

"Fine words," you say, "but what can a person actually do that might make a difference?" For starters, we could emulate Gregg Popovich, the head coach of the San Antonio Spurs. As an NBA celebrity, he has frequent access to national press and TV, and he uses that platform to speak up about institutional racism. Here is a quote from an interview with Popovich:

There has to be an uncomfortable element in the discourse for anything to change. Whether it's the LGBT movement, or women's suffrage, race, it doesn't matter. People have to be made to feel uncomfortable. And especially White people, because we're comfortable. We still have no clue what being born White means. It's like you're at the fifty meter mark in a hundred yard dash, and you've got that kind of a lead. Yes, because you were born White, you have advantages that are systemically, culturally, psychologically there. And they've been built up and cemented for hundreds of years. But many people can't look at it. It's too difficult. It can't be something that is on their plate on a daily basis People want to hold their position, people want the status quo, people don't want to give that up. And until it's given up, it's not going to be fixed. (transcription of video by the author)

To paraphrase Popovich, we need to get beyond our discomfort in dealing with institutionalized racism. We need to get over our White fragility and act to make real, equal spaces in our society, which will mean genuinely sharing, instead of tokenism.

The list in Figure 1, drawn from several sources (e.g., Anderson, 2016; Keely, 2016; Dang, Soo, & Fareez, 2015; Clifton, 2014) is my attempt at a quick overview of ways we might use our privilege to undermine the structures and practices that keep us in our privileged place.

We need to keep each other educated and vigilant. It's past time for us to study writers like Ta-Nehisi Coates, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, James Baldwin, Winona LaDuke, Audre Lourde, Sherman Alexie, Junot Diaz, and Toni Morrison; to listen to speakers like DeRay Mckesson, Melissa Harris-Perry, Trevor Noah, David Archambault, Cornel West, and Angela Davis; to watch movies like *13th*, *I Am Not Your Negro* or even something as popular and entertaining as *Smoke Signals*. I especially recommend the podcast series *Seeing White*, at Scene on Radio, produced by John Biewen (2017). We must take what we see and hear and feel in sources like these as more than entertainment or education. We must take it in as an ongoing cry for change.

We must also sharpen our felt sense of how racism intersects with the politics of class and gender so that we can help join and build coalitions that work for fair, just, and equitable treatment of all families in our society. This is another reason for learning more about the history of how the power elite have used race to pit exploited workers of color and their families against poor and working-class Whites.

There are ways that other countries have taken steps toward reparations for racism and genocide. At the end of apartheid, the government of South Africa instituted the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The Australian government has officially apologized to the indigenous people of its land and instituted a national Sorry Day, set aside for speeches, marches and presentations reflecting on the harms done to its indigenous people. In Germany, schools and public institutions do not glorify their all-too-recent past. They do not forget their brutality, robbery, torture, and genocidal murder of Jews during World War II. They teach the terrible lessons of what they did in the war in their elementary and high schools. Their education doesn't let them forget. For example,

- Get uncomfortable. Confront our own racism, and find responsible ways to deal with our fragility in facing it.
- Acknowledge ourselves as racial beings with particular and limited perspectives on race.
- Support meaningful policies toward structural and financial reparations for the continuing effects of slavery, genocide, land theft, Jim Crow, and structural racism. Examples of reparations include some form of formal recognition of the history of injustice and a genuine restitution of equality in education, voting rights, and the ability to build wealth.
- Educate ourselves instead of depending on people of color to do it for us.
 - Learn the basics of black history, and the histories and circumstances of indigenous people, and of immigrants who have come seeking refuge but found little opportunity.
 - Read some classic works of black, native American, Latino, Asian and other literatures.
- Use our privilege: speak up, speak out, influence those with whom we have influence.
 - Go to protests.
 - Hold our public officials accountable for ending racial profiling, stop-and-frisk policies, police brutality, and the murder of people of color.
 - Work to elect people who understand institutional racism and are dedicated to undoing it, and oppose elected officials with racist beliefs and practices.
- Give money to an anti-racist cause.
- Do pro-bono clinical work for people who can't find affordable care.
- Seek out marginalized voices and perspectives; listen—closely, carefully, often—to people of color and learn from them.
- Connect with other white people to hold each other accountable to people of color for the effects of our actions (or lack of action) on their lives.
- Expand our knowledge of how racism intersects with other issues such as class and gender, but take care not use those other issues as distractions from race.
- Work to make the organizations we participate in more inclusive, with more people of color in leadership positions.
- Attend and/or sponsor trainings on structural racism, whiteness, and other forms of injustice.
- Pay attention to previously-unexamined racism in the words we use and the stories we tell.
- Be peacefully intolerant of intolerance.
- Join a multi-cultural community organization.
- Remember that “race” constructs a spectrum of possible identities. Don't treat it as a binary.

Figure 1. What to do with privilege.

German students visit concentration camps, and students say they never forget the horror of those visits.

We could push our local, state and national governments to do likewise concerning the genocide against American Indians and the sins of slavery and Jim Crow. We could look for and support ways to make financial reparations—not in terms of payments to individuals, but in supporting access to better housing, better schools, and the mechanisms of wealth-building for communities of color. We could make voting more possible in marginalized communities, with accessible, convenient polling places and fair registration practices.

We owe it to ourselves and to the families and communities we serve, to work for racial justice not just at the ballot box on election day, but in our everyday interactions. Our privilege gives us voice in the larger culture. Speaking up is one of the most important ways we can use our privilege. We can speak up to our friends and colleagues about the alarmingly high incarceration rate in our

country, and the grossly disproportionate number of people of color who are currently in jail, and who are permanently stripped of voting rights because of their criminal records. We can actively discuss and oppose the high rates of Indigenous suicide, and violence against Indigenous women. We can pay attention to whether and how our elected officials oppose stop-and-frisk policies and racially based police brutality (and unpunished murder). We can take a public stand against exclusionary immigration policies. We can let our officials know by phone, by email, or in person that these issues matter to us. We can look for and act on opportunities to forge friendships with people of color, and we can see that our Black and Brown friends and colleagues are included and represented in all areas of our lives.

We can work to make our professional organizations more inclusive and more active in pursuing racial justice. I am currently on the board of directors of the American Family Therapy Academy, many of whose members would consider themselves to be passionate advocates for social justice, and I can report that the struggle to overcome White privilege is far from completed there. In the last 3 years we elected two presidents who were people of color, and both of them have felt invisible and powerless at times due to the behind-the-scenes workings of White members whose privilege coached them to assume that their vision for the future of the organization was the correct one. One of the presidents of color was so frustrated by the situation that she resigned. We are still a mostly White organization. We still hold our annual meetings in venues that are expensive, thus making it difficult for people who have been financially marginalized through racism to attend.

At least the members of AFTA are discussing these issues as problematic. Many of the presentations at the 2016 annual meeting featured people of color and spoke directly about White privilege as a problem that we must use our energies to address. An example of our actions is our organization's statement (AFTA, 2016) in support of Black Lives Matter, part of which is the list of strategies for intervention shown in Figure 2.

Our day-to-day work with individuals and families will look different, and feel different, when we approach it with sensitivity to our privilege and with the intention to use that privilege constructively rather than ignore it. When working with people who do not share in our whiteness, we can acknowledge our privilege (either directly or indirectly, depending on the particularities of the moment), taking it into account rather than acting as if we are inhabiting equivalent experiential worlds. We can monitor, review, and reflect on our day-in-day-out practices to be sure we are not replicating the power relationships of institutional racism in our therapy rooms. We can make visible how the problems families struggle with are supported by lack of privilege and how accomplishments that might seem small in the moment are so much more when we acknowledge that they were made in spite of the heavy restrictions of institutional racism.

For example, my partner, Jill Freedman, saw a family from Mexico who came here for a better life. The father got the best job he could find, driving a truck that made deliveries to small food stores. The family, which included a teenage girl and a younger boy, could only afford a studio apartment on the father's income. The mother and daughter were at odds with each other, and during one argument the girl hit her mother. The boy called the police, who came and took the screaming girl away. She was admitted to a psychiatric hospital. When Jill saw them, she asked questions that helped them relate the family disruption to the impoverishment that comes from jobs that don't pay a living wage. Seeing the family strife and the daughter's hospitalization as related to institutional racism and classism (although Jill didn't use those words) helped them claim dignity and feel solidarity in their struggle that they hadn't felt before.

I frequently work with families of color in which children are having both academic and social problems. I consciously use my privilege as a White, male, doctor to speak up when institutions are not listening to these children and their families. I write letters. I attend Individual Educational Plan meetings. Where institutional racism and classism bring forth stories of deficits, I document and spread the news of achievements in the face of hardships: of parents working 3 jobs so their children can have clothes for school, of dignity and restraint in the dealing with racial slurs, of successfully negotiating a new culture and speaking more than one language. I attempt to make visible the context and challenges facing the families I work with, and to help them and the larger society recognize and lay claim to their hope, hard work, and heroism.

Strategies for Intervention (from the AFTA statement on Black Lives Matter)

We are committed to learning from and supporting groups such as *Black Lives Matter*. As professionals with expertise in systemic, contextual thinking and family wellness, we have a unique opportunity and responsibility to expand our individual and collective efforts to end structural racism, promote healing and minimize the residual effects of oppression on those most marginalized in our society. Through a variety of strategies including advocacy (such as writing newspaper articles and letters to the editor), participation in public hearings and community meetings, addressing legislators and government officials and participation on boards and committees we endeavor to:

- Engage in the broader social discourse from our position as experts on family life and family systems;
- Expose discriminatory and racist practices in educational and other public institutions;
- Expose the intersection of structural racism with the oppression of other marginalized groups as it makes it impossible to end the oppression of one to the exclusion of the other;
- Promote a multifaceted framework for well being that includes a focus on preventing/reducing the negative social, emotional, relational and behavioral consequences that oppression and inequality have on individuals, families, and communities;
- Provide training, consultation and technical assistance to support larger systems (e.g. schools, juvenile justice, mental health) in becoming more culturally proficient service deliverers;
- Promote mandatory participation of teachers, healthcare and mental health professionals in undoing racism training;
- Assist vulnerable communities to actively promote their constituents' capability to resist the damaging effects of internalizing racism by drawing upon cultural wisdom, strengths and traditions.
- Recognize the liberation and resistance efforts of people who are dominated.

Figure 2. Strategies for intervention (from the AFTA statement on Black Lives Matter).

I am not telling these stories to glorify myself or my partner, but to give some grounded examples of how we family therapists can use our privilege, and our awareness of other people's relative lack of privilege, in our daily work.

I see a Black mother and daughter who live in section 8 housing on Chicago's South Side. Velma is disabled by arthritis, and she is financially dependent on her meager disability check and on her daughter, Pauline's, income as a sales clerk in a clothing store. I have seen them for several years now, and our relationship is solid, with the trust and mutual respect that comes from well-intentioned trial and error. But that doesn't mean that we take the same things for granted. They recently had to educate me about the effects on their lives of taking their treasured pet chihuahua

to the veterinarian when they were afraid he was going to die. Because I have been working to understand and correct for the ways White privilege blinds me, I asked with real curiosity about how the dog's illness had affected them, and I learned that the effects were much worse than I would have understood if I didn't ask. There is no veterinarian anywhere near their neighborhood, and they depend on public transportation, so it takes a huge chunk out of a day to get to the vet and back. Responsibility for the trek falls to Velma, because Pauline works during the hours the vet is open. The long ride with several transfers aggravates Velma's arthritis so that she aches for days afterwards. The thirty-dollar minimum charge for a visit uses up every last cent of their discretionary funds for a month. The elderly White receptionist in the vet's office gives Velma looks that clearly say, "You are lazy and ignorant and have no business trying to care for a pet."

What would be an inconvenience to me amounts to a life crisis for Velma and Pauline. Asking, and cultivating the skills of respectful asking (and along the way accumulating the knowledge that comes from mistakes), strengthens the therapeutic relationship among this mother, daughter, and me.

Having a feel for the detailed effects of racism, and the poverty that it so often coexists with, gives us a more grounded sense of the contextual, relational nature of people's life problems. Instead of individualized notions of "depression" or "anxiety," we, as good family therapists, can conceptualize people's difficulties as struggles for dignity and survival in the face of injustice, and we can invite people to step into the stories that let them claim the fruits of their struggles. But it shouldn't stop with our work with any one person or family. Understanding and owning our privilege through grounded interaction can provide consistent motivation to work for racial and economic justice at the ballot box, in our workplaces and in our communities.

Focusing some of our time and energy on understanding White privilege can have beneficial effects in therapy with White people too. A recent example happened with Tim, a White marketing executive who was having nightmares and panic attacks after the company he rose to power in let him go in a downsizing. After the job loss, he quickly found work as a self-employed consultant, but he was now responsible for his own retirement savings and health insurance, and he was only finding short-term consulting assignments. Tim was panicked and disoriented by the possibility that he would have to sell the Victorian mansion he and his family were so proud of, and that he wouldn't be able to pay his daughter's full tuition at the Ivy League school she was attending.

My third session with him occurred on the afternoon following the morning I had seen Velma and Pauline, and had heard about their chihuahua crisis. I shared with Tim the broad outlines of their story, and asked him how he thought he would deal with the life circumstances that these Black women faced every day. I was careful to keep my tone curious and non-blaming, as I didn't want to awaken the demons of White fragility or guilt. Tim sat in quiet, but very active, reflection for several minutes after I finished talking. The longer he sat, the calmer he got. Then, almost in a trance, he said, "Yeah, that puts a different light on it, doesn't it?"

This was a turning point in our work together. In subsequent sessions, he spoke of the "raw" feeling that financial insecurity gave him, and how that wasn't an altogether bad thing, as it increased his sensitivity to and empathy for the plight of others. The last time I saw him he was no longer ruled by panic and fear, and was hard at work on keeping the beneficial effects of the rawness, one part of which was a more finely tuned awareness of the privileged position that he, as a White man, occupied in relation to many other people.

As I close this article, I would like to share the words of my colleague, Debbie Edberg (2016). They are part of a longer post that she published on Facebook on the morning after the 2016 presidential election. Debbie is not a family therapist, she is a family physician who directs a Family Medicine residency program. She is sharing her own concerns about the proper actions for a White professional when confronted with new evidence of our country's institutionalized racism:

It is tempting to think about leaving the country. It wouldn't be that hard for us. We have the means, Canada is apparently looking for primary care doctors. Maybe that would be the easy answer. And tonight as I tucked in my lily White babies and watched them close their big blue eyes, I worried about their future. But we are privileged and the truth is they are relatively safe, for now. I think about my patients and my friends and colleagues who are tucking in their babies who are not so lily White and may not have the means to pick

up and work somewhere else. Their fear for their children's future is much more real and imminent and severe. And I know that I owe it to them to stay, simply because I have the means to leave. I have a responsibility to stand behind them, beside them and, if necessary, in front of them. To support them and protect them. To change the narrative and change the system that allowed this flawed and dangerous narrative to prevail. In a few days or a week or so I will join my colleagues in mobilizing and strategizing and thinking about what it is that we can do. But for today it is time to wallow, to reflect and to let the sadness come. (final paragraph)

I've come to the end of what I know to say, but we are far from the end of our struggles to "[bring] forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all [humans] are created equal." We may need to take breaks to reflect and let the sadness come, but I fervently hope that if you have traveled this far with me, we can continue our journey together, that we can convince more people to join us along the way, and that together we can create a world in which everyone shares much more equally in the privileges our whiteness has allowed us to take for granted.

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