

I'm Colorblind

"People are just people; I don't see color." Or "I don't think of you as Chinese."

Reality Check and Consequence

Statements like these assume that people of color are just like us, white, and have the same dreams, standards, problems, peeves that we do.

"Colorblindness" negates the cultural values, life experiences and norms of people of color. Even if an individual white person could ignore a person's color, society does not. By saying we don't see their color, we are also saying we don't see our whiteness. This denies their experience of racism and our experience of privilege.

"I'm colorblind" can also be a defense when afraid to discuss racism, especially if one assumes all conversation about race or color is racist. Color consciousness does not equal racism.

The Rugged Individual and The Bootstrap Theory

"America is the land of opportunity, built by rugged individuals, where anyone with grit can succeed if they just pull up hard enough on their bootstraps."

Reality Check and Consequence

The "rugged individual" and the "bootstrap theory" are two of the crown jewels of U.S. social propaganda. They have allowed generation after generation to say, "If you succeed, you did that, but if you fail, or if you're poor, that's your fault."

Belief in this propaganda is founded in a total denial of the impact of either oppression or privilege on any person's chance for success.

Reverse Racism

- (a) *"People of color are just as racist as white people."*
- (b) *"Affirmative Action had a role years ago, but today it's just reverse racism; now it's discriminating against white men."*
- (c) *"The civil rights movement, when it began was appropriate, valuable, needed. But the playing field is now level."*

Reality Check and Consequence

- (a) To say People of Color can be racist denies the power imbalance inherent in racism. Yes, people of color can be and are prejudiced against white people. But there is a difference between being hurt and being oppressed. People of color, as a social group, do not have the societal, institutional power to oppress white people as a group.
- (b) This form of denial is based on the false notion that the playing field is now level. When people with privilege and access are expected to share that power, it is often perceived as discrimination.
- (c) Embedded here is also the assumption that to be "pro-Black" (or any color) is to be anti-white.

Blame the Victim

- (a) *"We have advertised everywhere, there just aren't any qualified people of color for this job." Or "If he only had a stronger work ethic."*
- (b) *"Internalized racism is the real problem here."*
- (c) *"She uses racism as an excuse to divert from her incompetence." And "He goes looking for racism everywhere."*

Reality Check and Consequence

All "blame the victim" behaviors have two things in common:

- 1) they evade the real problem: racism.
- 2) they delete from the picture the agents of racism, white people and institutions, which either intentionally perpetuate or unintentionally collude with racism.

As long as the focus remains on people of color we can minimize or dismiss their reactions, and never have to look directly at racism and our own responsibility or collusion.

Innocent By Association

“I’m not racist, because ...I have Vietnamese friends, or my lover is Black, I donate to Casa Latina, or I marched with Dr. King.”

“I voted for Obama.”

Reality Check and Consequence

This detour into denial wrongly equates personal interactions with people of color, no matter how intimate they may be, with anti-racism. It assumes our personal associations free us magically from our racist conditioning.

The White Knight or White Missionary

“We (white people) know just where to build your new community center.”

“Your young people (read youth of color) would be better served by traveling to our suburban training center.”

Reality Check and Consequence

It is a racist, paternalistic assumption that well meaning white people know what’s best for people of color. Decisions, by white people, are made on behalf of people of color, as though they were incapable of making their own.

This is another version of “blame the victim” and “white is right.” It places the problems at the feet of people of color, and the only “appropriate” solutions with white people. Once more the power of self-determination is taken from people of color. Regardless of motive, it is still about white control.

The White Wash

“He’s really a very nice guy, he’s just had some bad experiences with Koreans.”

“That’s just the way Uncle Adolf jokes. He’s very polite to the Black janitor in his building.”

Reality Check and Consequence

We’re trapped here by another version of our guilt response. We attempt to excuse, defend or cover up racist actions of other white people.

We are particularly prone to this if the other person is close to us, family or friend, and if we feel their actions reflect on us.

I Was An Indian in A Former Life

“After that sweat lodge I really know what it feels like to be an Indian. I have found my true spiritual path.”

Reality Check and Consequence

This is spiritual or cultural appropriation and poses a serious threat to the integrity and survival of Native cultures. To fill a void in their own spiritual core, some white people are drawn into the New Age garden to pick from a variety of Native spiritual packages usually offered for sale. Since Native spiritual practice is inseparable from their history and current community, it cannot be disconnected from that context.

Appropriating selected parts of Native cultures romanticizes the lives of Native peoples while denying their struggles. Their lands and livelihoods stolen, indigenous peoples now witness white people trying to steal their spirituality. Rather than escape our white racism by finding a spiritual path, we instead collude in one more way with the genocidal attacks on Native cultures.

The Isolationist

"I thought we resolved this issue when it came up last year."

"We need to deal with this specific incident. Don't complicate it by bringing up irrelevant incidences of the past."

"This only happened today because the TV news last night showed police beating a Black kid."

Reality Check and Consequence

Attempts are made to isolate a particular incident of racism from of the larger context. We blame a publicized incident of racism outside our organization to rationalize an internal incident and to avoid facing the reality of racism within.

When trying to resolve an accusation of racism within an institution, we often see the incident in a vacuum, or as an aberration, in isolation from an historic pattern of racism. Racism is so institutionalized that every "incident" is another symptom of the pattern. If we continue to react incident to incident, crisis to crisis, as though they are unconnected, we will find genuine resolution further from our reach.

"Bending Over Blackwards"

"Of course, I agree with you." (Said to a person of color even when I disagree)

"I have to side with Betty on this." (Betty is a woman of color.)

Reality Check and Consequence

Our white guilt shows up when we don't criticize, disagree, challenge or question people of color the way we would white people. And if we do disagree, we don't do it with the same conviction or passion that we would display with a white person.

Our racism plays out as a different standard for people of color than for white people. If this is our pattern, we can never have a genuine relationship with a person of color. For people of color when we are doing this, our sincerity, commitment and courage will be rightly questioned.

BWAME

"But What About Me. Look how I've been hurt, oppressed, exploited...?"

Reality Check and Consequence

This diminishes the experience of people of color by telling my own story of hardship.

I lose an opportunity to learn more about the experience of racism from a person of color, while I minimize their experience by trying to make it comparable or less painful than mine.

Teach Me, Please

"I want to stop acting like a racist, so please tell me when I do something you think is racist."

Reality Check and Consequence

White people often assume we can learn about racism only from people of color. We further assume that people of color have the energy and/or desire to do this teaching. Most people of color are weary of educating white people about racism.

Our inclination is to ask people of color to help us. We can't assume people of color should be so grateful for our attempts at anti-racism, that they will guide us whenever we ask. We should seek out other white people BEFORE we go to people of color. Perhaps, as we become more trustworthy as allies, we will build genuine relationships with a few people of color who offer their reflections for us when we get stuck. This is at their discretion, not ours.

White on White, and Righteously So

“What is wrong with those white people? Can’t they see how racist they’re being?”

“I just can’t stand to be around white people who act so racist.”

“You’re preaching to the choir we’re not the people who need this.”

Reality Check and Consequence

We distance ourselves from “other” white people. We see only confirmed bigots, card carrying white supremacists and white people outside our circle as “real racists.” We put other white people down, trash their work or behavior, or otherwise dismiss them. We righteously consider ourselves white people who have evolved.

This is another level of denial. There are no “exceptional white people.” We may have attended anti-racism workshops; we may not be shouting racist epithets or actively discriminating against people of color, but we still benefit from this system of oppression and advantage, no matter what our intentions are. This distancing serves only to divide us from potential allies and limit our own learning.

The “Certificate of Innocence”

Sometimes we seek or expect from people of color some public or private recognition and appreciation for our anti-racism.

Other times we look for a “certificate of innocence” to tell us we are one of the good white people.

Reality Check and Consequence

If our ally commitment depends on positive reinforcement from people of color, we set ourselves up for sure failure. The first time a person of color is displeased with our actions, we could respond, “Well, if the people I’m doing all this for don’t want my help, then why bother? I quit.”

Clearly, we’re challenging racism for “them” not for us. We have not identified our self interest, as white people, for fighting racism. Until we do, we cannot stay on this lifelong journey.

Smoke and Mirrors

We use the current PC language; we listen to the right music; we state the liberal line; we’re seen at the right meetings with the right people. We even interrupt racist remarks when the right people are watching and when there is no risk to us. We look like an anti-racist.

Reality Check and Consequence

This is the “Avon Ally,” the cosmetic approach.

People of color and other white antiracists see through this pretense quickly.

This pseudo-anti-racist posturing only serves to collude with racism and weakens the credibility of sincere white anti-racists.

The Accountant

We keep a tally sheet.

If we perform some “feat of anti-racism,” we expect reciprocity from an individual or group of color, usually with some prestige or power that can serve our interests.

Reality Check and Consequence

“I scratch your back, you scratch mine is NOT justice seeking nor ally behavior.

It serves only to reduce justice work to some kind of power brokering currency.

We Stay Silent

The reasons for our silence are many, but each time we miss an opportunity to interrupt racism, or to act as allies or to interact genuinely with people of color or other white people. And no anti-racist action is taken as long as we are silent.

Reality Check and Consequence

Our silence may be a product of our guilt or fear of making people of color or white people angry with us or disappointed in us. We may be silent because our guilt stops us from disagreeing with people of color. We may be afraid that speaking out could result in losing some of our privilege. We may be silenced by fear of violence.

Silence is a complicated issue. There are times when faced with a potential intervention situation that you may choose not to interrupt for reasons of good sense or strategy. Anti-racists need courage, but foolish risks make little sense. When the choice is between intervening in this moment, alone or gathering allies to speak out later in a more strategic way, the latter may prove more effective.

Exhaustion And Despair – Sound The Retreat

“I’m exhausted. I’m only one person. I can stop and rest for awhile.”
“Racism is so pervasive and entrenched, there isn’t any hope.”

Reality Check and Consequence

Despair is a real enemy of anti-racists. One of the historical, repeated failures of “liberals” in social justice movements has been short-term and inconsistent commitment to the “issue du jour.”

If we quit, for any reason, we engage our “default option.” As white people, we can take a break from the frustration and despair of anti-racism work. Such retreat will result in no significant consequences for us. Racism doesn’t allow such a respite for people of color. One of the elemental privileges of being white is our freedom to retreat from the issue of racism. If things get too tough we can always take a break. And our work against racism doesn’t get done.

We Have Overcome

“We dealt with racism in the 60’s with all the marches, sit-ins and speeches by Dr. King.”

“Laws have been changed. Segregations and lynching are ended. We have some details to work out but real racism is pretty much a thing of the past.”

“This isn’t a racist country because we elected a Black President.”

Reality Check and Consequence

The absence of legalized, enforced segregation does not equal the end of racism.

This denial of contemporary racism, based on inaccurate assessment of both history and current society, romanticizes the past and diminishes today’s realities.

Lighten Up (lighten? whiten?)

“Black people are just too sensitive and think-skinned.”
“Indians should get a sense of humor. We’re just kidding around.”
“It didn’t mean anything racist; it’s just a joke.”

Reality Check and Consequences

Here are racism and agent deletion in partnership. “Agent-deletion” is a convenient way of saying something has been done, but the person who does it is not named or held accountable. The offending joke has been told, but the person telling it takes no ownership.

The problem and the perpetrators are exonerated because the rationale declares that humor isn’t hurtful. This form of denial serves to trivialize the pain and reality of daily racism.

The End Run, Escapism

“Of course, racism is terrible, but what about sexism? or classism? or heterosexism?”

“Racism is a result of classism, if we work on that, racism will end too.”

Reality Check and Consequence

Audre Lorde’s says, “There is no hierarchy of oppression.” At the same time, we cannot attempt to evade recognition and responsibility for any form of oppression. Statements like these divert attention from racial injustice to focus on some other form of oppression. They are usually said by white people who experience both white privilege and oppression in another form. We are all more willing and more comfortable decrying our oppression than scrutinizing our privilege.

Oppressions are so inextricably linked that if we allow our fear, guilt and even denial to divert us from confronting racism, even while we work to dismantle other forms, no oppression will ever be dismantled.

The Penitent

“I am so sorry for the way whites have treated your people.”

“I am sorry for the terrible things that white man just said to you.”

Reality Check and Consequence

While there is probably no harm in the “sorry,” if it is not attached to some action taken against racism, it is most often just another expression of white guilt.

Being an ally to people of color is not limited to our apology for other white people’s behavior, it must include anti-racist action.

Not Here in Lake Wobegon

“We don’t have a racism problem here at this (school, organization, community).”

“We didn’t have a racism problem in this town until that Mexican family moved here.”

Reality Check and Consequences

As white people, we do not have to think about racism when our school, organization or community is all white.

Racism does not usually become apparent TO US until there are people of color in our frame of reference.