

2014

## Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity

Gita Gulati-Partee  
*OpenSource Leadership Strategies*

Maggie Potapchuk  
*MP Associates*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr>

 Part of the [Nonprofit Administration and Management Commons](#), and the [Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gulati-Partee, Gita and Potapchuk, Maggie (2014) "Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity," *The Foundation Review*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 4.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.9707/1944-5660.1189>

Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/tfr/vol6/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Foundation Review by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gvsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gvsu.edu).

# Paying Attention to White Culture and Privilege: A Missing Link to Advancing Racial Equity

*Gita Gulati-Partee, M.B.A., OpenSource Leadership Strategies, and Maggie Potapchuk, M.Ed., MP Associates*

*Keywords: Racial equity, white culture, white privilege, capacity building, organizational change*

## Introduction

Against the backdrop of persistent racial inequities in every region of the country and across nearly every aspect of U.S. life, few foundations can escape reflecting on race and how it relates to their grantmaking priorities, internal operations, and community leadership. While many foundations have chosen to focus on diversity and inclusion, a small but growing number have engaged more deeply with the cumulative impact and current reality of structural racism<sup>1</sup> – the ways that history, culture, public policy, institutional practices, and personal beliefs interact to maintain a racial hierarchy.

These foundations have developed and invested in compelling strategies to address the root causes of systemic racism. Some are asking their grantees to show the impact of their efforts to close racial gaps and reflect the concerns of those most affected and marginalized. Others have reviewed their grantmaking portfolio to examine the impact of their investments in communities of color, while some have increased their grants for community organizing, advocacy, or other policy change interventions to address racial inequities. And some have turned the lens inward to examine barriers that may exist to staff and board members of color, taken on recruitment and retention strategies, and assessed vendors and other policies to overcome access and inclusion issues.

## Key Points

- Racial disparities are driven and maintained by public- and private-sector policies that not only disadvantage communities of color but also over-advantage whites. Foundation processes aimed at racial equity change often overlook the privileged side of inequity.
- Through our experience as racial equity practitioners, we have encountered at least three challenges to engaging foundations in exploring white privilege and white culture in their internal and external racial equity work.
- For foundations to work toward racial equity through their philanthropic investments and leadership, they must shine a light on white privilege and white culture both internally and externally.
- This article discusses tools for tackling those challenges: creating a container with intentional group norms, exploring accumulated racial advantages and disadvantages, reflecting on white culture, and caucusing by racial identity.

All of these efforts are important and necessary. But we believe they will prove insufficient to addressing structural racism or fulfilling the promise of racial justice because they ignore or obscure the other half of the problem.

The racial disparities driven and maintained by public- and private-sector policies that many foundations seek to address not only disad-

<sup>1</sup> To learn more about structural racism, see <http://racialequitytools.org/fundamentals/core-concepts#FUN05>

*For foundations to work toward racial equity through their philanthropic investments and leadership, they must shine a light on white privilege and white culture both internally and externally.*

vantage communities of color but also over-advantage whites. But processes aimed at racial equity change can overlook the privileged side of inequity. For foundations to work toward racial equity through their philanthropic investments and leadership, they must shine a light on white privilege and white culture both internally and externally. This means engaging in dialogue, reflection, and action on racial equity, not only to target their grantmaking and leadership activities to effect equity in the fields they fund, but also to examine and change their staffing, operations, and organizational culture to more closely align with their equity goals and values.

For more than a decade individually, and over the past five years in partnership, the authors – a woman of color and a white woman – have consulted on and supported the racial equity efforts of foundations and other social change organizations. Through our experience as racial equity practitioners, we have encountered at least three challenges to engaging foundations in exploring white privilege and white culture in their internal and external work toward racial equity:

1. Foundation structures often embody dominant (white) culture and white privilege. By definition, this is normalized and difficult to see, prompting resistance and defensiveness about dissecting core ways of doing business.
2. Accustomed to identifying social inequities that focus on the community, it can be chal-

lenging to turn the mirror inward, particularly on sensitive topics like race and privilege. Few organizations are prepared for the emotional responses and conflict that naturally emerge from this work.

3. This change process itself can privilege white people by centralizing and accommodating their learning curve, which is sometimes steep and often lags behind people of color – who might appreciate the change process while also at times feeling marginalized within it due to the priority given to supporting the needs of whites.

This article offers our reflections on these challenges, as well as the following tools for tackling them:

- Create a container with intentional group norms.
- Explore accumulated racial advantages and disadvantages.
- Reflect on white culture.
- Caucus by racial identity.

To be sure, as institutions dedicated to advancing the well-being of human kind and as part of a field whose existence is intertwined with the civil rights movement, many foundations steadfastly commit to racial equity as a value and goal. Leadership institutions, those that seek to address root causes and effect systemic change and leave a lasting legacy of justice, understand that this requires direct reflection on and deconstruction of white privilege and culture.

Throughout this article we will be sharing our observations of patterns of behavior by whites and people of color as we have experienced them in our racial equity capacity building work. We do not aim to oversimplify the human experience. While there is no monolithic response or behavior of all white people or all people of color, and people will demonstrate their own unique behaviors at any given moment, we have observed some patterns that reflect both the existence of and responses to white culture and privilege. We believe these patterns can be instructive, and we

offer them in the spirit of shared learning and reflection with colleagues who are doing this challenging and important work.

### Challenge No. 1: White Culture Operates All Around Us, Yet Remains Invisible

By “white culture,” we mean the dominant, unquestioned standards of behavior and ways of functioning embodied by the vast majority of institutions in the United States. Because it is so normalized it can be hard to see, which only adds to its powerful hold. In many ways, it is indistinguishable from what we might call U.S. culture or norms – a focus on individuals over groups, for example, or an emphasis on the written word as a form of professional communication. But it operates in even more subtle ways, by actually defining what “normal” is – and likewise, what “professional,” “effective,” or even “good” is. In turn, white culture also defines what is not good, “at risk,” or “unsustainable.” White culture values some ways – ways that are more familiar and come more naturally to those from a white, western tradition – of thinking, behaving, deciding, and knowing, while devaluing or rendering invisible other ways. And it does this without ever having to explicitly say so.<sup>2</sup>

Most foundations, like other institutions, did not have a team meeting to debate and decide to adopt “white culture” as the mode of operating. And yet, there it is – manifesting in every policy and practice and interaction. One can understand the resistance a group of people might have to examining something they don’t consciously know exists. But when it is given a name and examples are pointed out, its presence is undeniable.

2 The following are some resources about white culture: White Culture, by J. Katz, n.d., retrieved from [http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/district-leadership/White\\_Culture\\_Judith\\_Katz.pdf](http://www.pps.k12.or.us/files/district-leadership/White_Culture_Judith_Katz.pdf); *Lifting the White Veil*, by J. Hitchcock, 2002, Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie, & Douglass Books; *The Emperor Has No Clothes: Teaching About Race and Racism to People Who Don’t Want to Know*, by T. Okun, 2010, Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, [www.dismantlingracismworks.org](http://www.dismantlingracismworks.org); *Mirrors of Privilege: Making Whiteness Visible* [DVD], 2006, by S. Butler, producer, <http://world-trust.org/mirrors-of-privilege-making-whiteness-visible/>; and *Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building*, by M. Potapchuk, S. Leiderman, D. Bivens, and B. Major, 2005, <http://www.mpassociates.us/pdf/FlippingtheScriptmostupdated.pdf>

*By “white culture,” we mean the dominant, unquestioned standards of behavior and ways of functioning embodied by the vast majority of institutions in the United States.*

Thus begins the journey to see, deconstruct, and potentially transform white culture. In our experience it also can be the place of greatest resistance, for three primary reasons. The first is that the process can feel overwhelming. Culture lurks in every nook and cranny of organizational life, which now must be intentionally examined, considered, and negotiated. Further, an honest look at white privilege might lead to hard truths about the foundation itself, as wealth accumulation and favorable tax policy are primary manifestations of over-advantaging of whites (Kivel, 2006). The time and effort required for this scope of self-examination may exceed what the foundation team envisioned or allocated when it decided to do racial equity work. And yet, not doing this examination means that any equity conversations and work will continue to take place in a larger container that is shaped by the very dynamics that the group aims to change.

The second reason this work can spur resistance – especially to internal racial equity work – is that predominately white team members, and perhaps even some people of color, are attached to the current ways of working and do not want change to take place so close to home. Especially a foundation that sees itself as high-performing and successful can be skeptical about the degree of change needed. But racial equity is a change process; leaving out a look at white culture and privilege limits the potential for sustainable change.

The third reason is that because white culture and privilege are, by definition, ubiquitous, even if the

*Our clients report that their newfound awareness can end up challenging their sense of integrity, as they must make strategic choices about sharing this new consciousness and assessing how to interact with community partners and other philanthropic organizations that don't hold the same conceptual frameworks or language about white culture and privilege.*

foundation makes progress toward its own transformation it surely will continue to interact with funding partners, community decision-makers, and grantees who have not done their own examination. Our clients report that their newfound awareness can end up challenging their sense of integrity, as they must make strategic choices about sharing this new consciousness and assessing how to interact with community partners and other philanthropic organizations that do not hold the same conceptual frameworks or language about white culture and privilege.

### **Challenge No. 2: Conflict and Emotion Challenge the 'White' Way of Operating**

Since real-life personal experiences about race and racism come packed with emotions including anger, frustration, hurt, and fear, it is hard to keep them in check when a foundation explores racial equity. Often, one goal of racial equity work is to improve relationships across race, perhaps with an implicit desire to reduce or avoid racial conflict. But an authentic process likely will increase conflict, at least in the short term, as issues of

concern become more visible, people of all races gain language and tools for talking about them, and the process itself invites more open communication.

So, intense emotions and conflict are predictable companions to racial equity work. And yet, white culture and privilege can obscure this reality, making them difficult to engage directly. Because these feelings do not always feel good, foundation leadership can mistakenly view them as “failures” of the process and reasons to abandon or restrict it, rather than accepting them as necessary and indicative of real change.

One aspect of white culture is the unspoken definition of acceptable emotions to share within the workplace, sometimes described as “professionalism.” What is meant by this, however, typically does not get discussed explicitly and transparently within the organization; it is simply assumed that all will know what this means and abide by it. It becomes a topic of conversation only when the unspoken boundary is violated – for example, when anything requiring personal reflection and disclosure gets framed as “too ‘touchy feely’.” This is bound to happen in any frank discussion of structural racism, white culture, and privilege. And the people of color and white people who violate the boundary may face consequences for taking the risk.

The hiddenness of these norms is problematic. But so is the narrowness, which can limit the range of expressions that naturally will arise in racial equity work. Once again, white culture, left unexamined, can hinder the full potential of racial equity work. And by defaulting to white culture norms, explicitly or implicitly, the organization is choosing the perceived comfort of whites over people of color.

We have observed whites shutting down because of discomfort with the rawness of emotions, fear of disclosing personal experiences that may suggest they have bias or racist thoughts, or the assumption that talking about white privilege means they are “bad” individuals instead of seeing privilege in the context of the system of racism in

which we all participate. White people's response to emotions is not a fault, but rather a manifestation of how the system is set up for people who are privileged in it. The default setting is for the structure to be invisible. For some whites, this is the first time they are realizing they have a white identity, learning about a system of racism rather than seeing racism as individual acts of hate, or even having an intense conversation on race. It may be the first time they are considering how the system is set up and may have furthered their career, performance appraisals, and quality of life. As a result of all this newness, plus discomfort with the emotions arising from their colleagues and even within themselves, whites often will advocate for even more strict boundaries around personal sharing and emotion when it gets too heated for their comfort.

On the other hand, many people of color talk about their anticipation of having an opportunity to share one's truth in a facilitated space and the potential that these discussions may result in institutional changes. In our observation, people of color are typically taking the lead in sharing personal experiences since they are more fluent in the impact of racism. They also might feel hesitation, since people of color are typically looked to for sharing their personal stories and lessons yet are covertly or overtly asked to keep their emotions in check. Some people of color have expressed fear that they will face harsh consequences for speaking truth – further marginalization, loss of credibility, or something worse.

This is a critical juncture for an organization. A foundation committing to racial equity work for the long haul must be open and receptive and make space for conflict and emotion. Without this, the process could unintentionally repeat the experience many people of color have throughout their lives – that is, efforts are made to address racial inequity, but when the conversation gets heated or uncomfortable for whites the group retreats, often blaming people of color for causing the discomfort. Business as usual returns with added anxiety for people of color, who may be unlikely to risk participating in such a process again.

*The default setting is for the structure to be invisible. For some whites, this is the first time they are realizing they have a white identity, learning about a system of racism rather than seeing racism as individual acts of hate, or even having an intense conversation on race. It may be the first time they are considering how the system is set up and may have furthered their career, performance appraisals, and quality of life.*

### **Challenge No. 3: Focusing on White Culture and Privilege Privileges Whiteness**

Racial equity work depends, in part, on people of color gaining access, voice, and leadership to advocate for change within their institutions. And they can be great supporters of the wide-angle-lens approach to this work, one that looks at the structural over-advantaging of whites as well as the under-advantaging of people of color. At the same time, they can experience discomfort with this approach and can become its most vocal critics.

Racial equity practitioners have made a valuable contribution to the field by putting forth an analytical method and innovative tools for understanding and deconstructing the accumulated impact of structural racism as the cause of racially inequitable outcomes and, in turn, developing strategies to improve outcomes and transform systems. We use this approach because we believe it is imperative to understand our history, how the

*People of color, who often have to accommodate, adapt, and assimilate in countless ways in order to gain entry and advance in white culture institutions, understandably might grow weary of bearing witness to white people discovering and grappling with their white privilege. Like the stages of grief, this process can include everything from denial to angry pushback from white people, jockeying to position oneself as the exception to the rule, or paralyzing white guilt and shame.*

system was constructed and continues to operate, and the statistical impact of structural racism in our daily lives. In our experience, this can be useful to people of all races.

But strictly focusing on analysis and evidence can unintentionally, though not unpredictably, reify the marginalization experienced by people of color because it tends to more closely match the learning and emotional needs of white participants. We have observed this happening in at least three ways.

The first is when it is primarily a cognitive approach and does not include attention to affective or experiential needs and ways of knowing. For people of color, their lived experience of racism often hits them at a gut level as well as the cogni-

tive level, in a way that is less familiar to whites. In our racial equity capacity building sessions we typically include, for example, an overview of statistics showing racial disparities in different sectors. While these might validate the experience of people of color, they also can leave them feeling detached from their personal pain and suffering at the hands of racial oppression. Imagine the experience of crime survivors being asked to take in “data” about their victimization – their lived experience is far more powerful data than a PowerPoint© presentation ever could be. And yet, this approach is also what can make it easier for white people to take in – and finally believe – that structural racism exists. In this way, this method can privilege the convincing of white people over the comforting of people of color.

The second is when it emphasizes structural outcomes to the exclusion of personal bias or individual racism. Again, this can be helpful in engaging white people and helping participants of all races understand the systemic nature of racism. And it is an important counternarrative to the focus on the individual in U.S. culture. But it also can leave both white people and people of color detached from the structure, viewing it more like an intellectual exercise than an urgent, personal imperative. For many white people, this can be the perfect match for their learning style and sense of self, and it complies with white culture. But it can leave people of color feeling that no one is taking responsibility for the persistent pain and consistently inequitable outcomes and experience being generated by structural racism – including in everyday interactions with their white colleagues. In this way, the organization as a whole may make progress in its understanding of structural racism and its commitment to racial equity, at the same time that people of color may feel more isolated in their daily experience of racism within the organization.

The third way this analytical approach can privilege white participants while remarginalizing people of color is that the necessary focus on white culture and privilege, which we maintain is critical for racial equity work to be effective, means that the white experience takes center stage in the

change process, even as the purpose of the work is to dismantle the centrality of and privilege inherent to whiteness. People of color, who often have to accommodate, adapt, and assimilate in countless ways in order to gain entry and advance in white culture institutions, understandably might grow weary of bearing witness to white people discovering and grappling with their white privilege. Like the stages of grief, this process can include everything from denial to angry pushback from white people, jockeying to position oneself as the exception to the rule, or paralyzing white guilt and shame. Meanwhile, people of color are asked to be patient and graciously share their stories, as this is part of the necessary process of white people becoming allies in the struggle for racial justice. We can understand why people of color may lose patience or check out of this process. Like the crime victim in the example above, remediating perpetrators is important and necessary to reduce future crime, but asking survivors to witness or perhaps even participate in that remediation might feel like adding insult to injury.

### Tools to Address the Challenges

Our own understanding of our racial identity and our life experiences in the context of the daily impact of structural racism is critical to being thoughtful, effective, and courageous leaders working toward racial justice. Organizations doing this work must balance the need for both conceptual frameworks and storytelling, for unpacking the personal and organizational impact of structural racism, and for developing an institutional culture that reflects racial equity principles.

So, putting white culture and privilege on the table is critical to include in racial equity work – and it is fraught with challenges due to the complex manifestations of structural racism. In our experience, there is no way to avoid these challenges; the best leaders can do is anticipate them and become equipped with tools to mitigate them. We offer four tools.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In addition to these four tools, several others developed by different organizations can be found at <http://www.racialequitytools.org>; a good section to start at is under the tab, “Act.”

### *Tool No. 1: Create a Container With Intentional Group Norms*

Some people, often whites, will say that they cannot have a conversation about difficult topics like racism and privilege without building trust and having a strong relationship with their colleagues of color. At the same time others, often people of color, will say they cannot possibly build trust or

---

*Putting white culture and privilege on the table is critical to include in racial equity work – and it is fraught with challenges due to the complex manifestations of structural racism. In our experience, there is no way to avoid these challenges; the best leaders can do is anticipate them and become equipped with tools to mitigate them. We offer four tools.*

have authentic relationships with white colleagues who are unable to have candid conversation about racism and privilege. Rather than privileging one need over the other or handicapping the process by building only one capacity when both are needed, a thoughtful process begins with attention to creating a “container” to hold the process and enable participants of all racial identities to be challenged but not traumatized.

It is important to note that we build the container not to avoid conflict and hard emotions or create some false sense of “safe space.” Rather, we build it precisely because we know conflict and emotions will arise and that “safety” can be elusive and subjective. The container helps the group support



*We offer and engage groups with these norms: (1) Speak your truth. (2) Lean into discomfort and lean into each other. (3) Commit to nonclosure. (4) Embrace paradox. (5) Seek intentional learning, not perfection (OpenSource Leadership Strategies, n.d.).*

one another rather than marginalize individuals, be better able to recover from challenges, and remain intact even as differences are emphasized. It also encourages community members to bring their best and full selves, be respectful in their own words and actions and of others, and create a shared sense of accountability to one another and the process.

What goes into and creates the container is important. It includes the common language and framework that is being used to understand structural racism and racial equity. We have learned that it also must include intentional group norms that enable everyone in the process to bring their cognitive, affective, and experiential wisdom into the group.

Every group has norms – standards of behavior, communication, and getting the work done. As discussed earlier, often norms arise unintentionally, reflecting the dominant white culture, and are not negotiated intentionally in a way that takes full advantage of a group’s cultural diversity. The sheer act of articulating norms for the racial equity process can expose the unintentionality of current group norms while also creating a space to complement and support the change effort.

In our work, we have made the choice to offer a set of group norms for the group to “try on,” rather than generate a list from the group. Arising from our experience with a diverse range of groups, our list helps to balance power in the group from the start and offers a tool and shared frame of reference to begin using right away. If time allows, a process could include the group generating its own norms. Care should be taken, however, to balance power in the group so everyone can contribute freely to the process, make sure these norms are truly negotiated and not simply brainstormed and added to the flip chart like a grocery list, and ensure they do not simply default to dominant white culture.

We offer and engage groups with these norms: (1) Speak your truth. (2) Lean into discomfort and lean into each other. (3) Commit to nonclosure. (4) Embrace paradox. (5) Seek intentional learning, not perfection (OpenSource Leadership Strategies, n.d.).<sup>4</sup>

Embedded in these norms are others, like maintaining confidentiality and stepping up or back in order to balance participation across personalities, behavioral styles, and racial identities. These norms intentionally reflect different cultural perspectives. “Speak your truth” – with the emphasis on the individual “you” – surely reflects the American/western ethos of individuality. When it comes to talking about things like white privilege, however, many white Americans suddenly default to the universal “we” or the detached “you” rather than taking ownership of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. There can be great power and value in speaking from the “I,” for both the speaker and the group. This is an example where we think a “white” norm can be useful and we are intentional about claiming it as part of the container.

Conversely, paradox is more valued in eastern schools of thought. While critical thinking skills are important to racial equity work, we find the

<sup>4</sup> This original document has evolved over a decade of work with social justice groups and has been informed by many teachers and colleagues, including Angela Bryant and Visions; Claudia Horwitz and stone circles; George Lakey and Training for Change; Tema Okun and dismantlingRacismworks; and Leah Wing and Social Justice Mediation Institute.

white culture norm of “either/or” logic to be limiting. Instead, we encourage “both/and” paradoxical thinking. Similarly, the focus on nonclosure and learning is a direct challenge to the white-culture norm of perfectionism that dominates foundations and other elite U.S. institutions. So in these cases, we are intentionally challenging dominant white norms and preferencing counter-culture norms.

The norm “leaning into discomfort and each other” most directly attempts to challenge white culture norms around avoiding conflict and emotions that cause discomfort. It also attempts to bridge the seemingly disparate needs within the group to both build trust and engage in an honest conversation. This norm is not about romanticizing pain; it is about recognizing that growing pains are a normal and necessary part of the process, and that we can rely on one another to be allies as we engage the messiness that comes with learning, taking risks, and staying present.

Collectively, these norms are designed to stretch everyone – in different ways, at different times. They were intentionally created and they require intentional practice. We deliberately chose not to call them rules; few people take kindly to imposed rules, and we do not want to take on the role of policing them anyway. Instead they are norms that the group is free to take on or not, but that at the very least challenge the unspoken norms of white culture that allot privilege and deter true progress toward racial equity. We have heard from our clients that these norms have been useful beyond the specific racial equity engagement; in this way, racial equity work and specifically work on white culture and privilege can have far-reaching use for organizational development.

*Tool No. 2: Explore Accumulated Advantage and Disadvantage*

Understanding how racism relates to the issues a foundation funds – education or health, for example – typically would include looking at the history of the issue as well as various public and institutional policies that created and help maintain racial disparities. We have found these exercises to be most powerful when they reveal the persistent

*We have been fortunate to work with some courageous organizations who have turned the lens inward to see how those accumulated privileges and disadvantages have determined who holds leadership positions in the organization, how decisions get made, what constitutes success, what and who gets rewarded, and whose voice has the most influence.*

and often intentional disadvantaging of people of color through, for example, enslavement or denial of rights or barriers to participation, as well as the advantaging of white people through, for example, the explicit granting of rights. This helps reveal how privilege develops and how racial gaps grow from both ends. In turn, this means that any remedies must address structural over-advantaging of whites as well under-advantaging of people of color.

Further, seeing that these gaps have grown over time through the confluence and cumulative impact of myriad over-advantages and under-advantages also helps to lay bare that privilege exists, has been constructed, and will need to be intentionally and strategically dismantled systemically in order for racial equity to emerge.

A final step in the process is, perhaps ironically, personalizing the structural. It is not enough for foundation team members to talk in detached, intellectualized ways about how privilege has evolved in the world. We have been fortunate to work with some courageous organizations who have turned the lens inward to see how those

***Are all aspects of white culture “bad?” Not necessarily. But as the default, they are unnegotiated. Our assessment process focuses on how white culture dominates within an organization and, specifically, how it discredits, marginalizes, or oppresses other ways of behaving, thinking, and doing.***

accumulated privileges and disadvantages have determined who holds leadership positions in the organization, how decisions get made, what constitutes success, what and who gets rewarded, and whose voice has the most influence. This exploration can catalyze deeper reckoning with the relationship between accumulated advantages and the existence of the foundation itself, perhaps leading to radically new grantmaking priorities and processes.

Examining white culture can be difficult in any context, but examining it “out in the world” at least brings the comfort of distance. Turning the lens inward can be more risky, but also bear great rewards. George Penick (2008), the white former executive director of the Foundation for the Mid South, shares – based on personal experience – the critical importance of challenging the current ways of knowing and doing the work:

Foundations may think that they are being bold with their money when applying it toward issues affecting those outside of their walls, and yet they usually do not understand how those same issues manifest themselves within their own foundation. ... And most of all, foundation leaders who are afraid to open the issues of racial and social equity for a full discussion by board and staff alike – of what this means to their governance, their grant practices, and

their hiring, recruitment, and outreach – will find themselves isolated and clueless. (p. 12)

Privilege very much operates in here, especially when it comes to foundations. Conducting this analysis in a thorough and honest way can help put privilege on the table explicitly, where it finally can be interrogated and transformed.

*Tool No. 3: Reflect on White Culture*

Identifying how white culture is present within an organization’s internal and external practices and grantmaking is a critical dimension of racial equity work. The dominant white culture is ever-present in most organizations, and it can be especially invisible to members of a dominant group. We believe there are helpful steps to reveal white culture:

- Understand the concept of white culture and its different components – for example, using the White Culture worksheet (Potapchuk, 2013).
- Increase skills to identify white culture in an organizational setting – for example, through case studies.
- Assess how white culture is present within the organization and set goals for transforming it – for example, using the Transforming Organizational Culture Assessment tool.<sup>5</sup>

Are all aspects of white culture “bad?” Not necessarily. But as the default, they are unnegotiated. Our assessment process focuses on how white culture dominates within an organization and, specifically, how it discredits, marginalizes, or oppresses other ways of behaving, thinking, and doing. Here are some questions that guide our facilitated assessment process, looking at both internal and external dynamics of a foundation:<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> This tool has been developed by Maggie Potapchuk as part of the Transforming White Privilege project with Sally Leaderman of the Center for Assessment and Policy Development and Shakti Butler of World Trust Educational Services, with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Among the sources for these questions: Consulting With Racial Equity Lens Tool by M. Potapchuk, 2011, at <http://www.mpassociates.us/documents/ConsultingwRacialEquity-LensPotapchuk.pdf>; How Can We Lay Out Assumptions to Understand Our Theory of Change? from MP Associates and the Center for Assessment and Policy Development, 2013, at [http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles%20How\\_Can\\_We\\_Lay\\_Out\\_Assumptions\\_To\\_Understand\\_Our\\_](http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles%20How_Can_We_Lay_Out_Assumptions_To_Understand_Our_)

- What kind of information is considered credible, and from whom?
- How is success being defined? Who is defining it? What are the consequences if the outcomes are not reached? What is the foundation's responsibility and accountability to those outcomes? Are there reparations for the community based on negative impacts from a foundation-led initiative?
- How is time for an initiative being defined? Who is defining it? How are different variables – politics, organizational issues, other priorities – being factored in? What is the time and monetary contingency plan?
- How is leadership being defined? By title? By characteristics? By individuals in the community? Who are the formal and informal leaders?
- What leadership behaviors are being rewarded? What are the consequences for those who do not embody specific leadership characteristics? Do they still have access to resources and decision-making?
- What is the decision-making process? Who is included? Is the process transparent? Are there opportunities for feedback and flexibility to make changes to the process? Who decides?
- When and how is conflict addressed? What are the responses when an individual or a group raises a difficult issue, especially one involving race, inequities, power, or privilege? Are there different patterns of response by staff groups? By race/ethnic identity groups?
- What are the consequences if the decision-making structure and process are not followed? Are there different consequences based on roles within the organization or racial/ethnic identities?
- Do the strategies and possible policy changes anticipate and address the different impacts of a practice on distinct racial groups? Do they take into consideration accumulated advantages for whites and accumulated disadvantages for people of color?

*One tool we have found to be very helpful, especially in acknowledging and supporting some of the emotions that naturally occur in racial equity work, is racial identity caucusing. The value of caucusing is so both white people and people of color have intentional space and time to focus on their respective work to dismantle racism and advance racial equity.*

Understanding, analyzing, and intervening on how white culture manifests within a foundation is critical for working toward racial equity, and it is especially essential for establishing credibility within a community.

#### *Tool No. 4: Caucus by Racial Identity*

One tool we have found to be very helpful, especially in acknowledging and supporting some of the emotions that naturally occur in racial equity work, is racial identity caucusing.<sup>7</sup> The value of caucusing is so both white people and people of color have intentional space and time to focus on their respective work to dismantle racism and advance racial equity. Caucusing does not happen instead of integrated groups; rather, caucusing can lead to more authentic and powerful integrated groups.

Caucusing not only respects the choice of marginalized groups to be together, it also makes the dominant culture visible – an important step in making intentional changes to the culture.

Theory\_Of\_Change.pdf; and Flipping the Script: White Privilege and Community Building, by M. Potapchuk, S. Leiderman, D. Bivens, and B. Major, 2005, at <http://www.mpassociates.us/pdf/FlippingtheScriptmostupdated.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> For more information about caucusing as a tool, see <http://racialequitytools.org/fundamentals/core-concepts#FUN05>.

Further, working only in integrated groups puts an undue burden on people of color to be the teachers and obscures the responsibility of white people to do their own work. Both people of color and white people are needed to work collectively for racial equity. But they have different work to do, precisely because of their different experiences with and location relative to white culture and privilege.

---

*For people of color the caucus can be a space where whiteness is not at the center or a place where one need not accommodate or assimilate to white people's responses to the emotional and conflictual nature of racial equity work.*

Though there is often resistance to participating in explicit race-identified groups, these formations occur all the time – though usually without intentionality or consciousness. One common resistance to caucusing by whites is, “I don’t like to feel guilty” – though having that feeling is an opportunity to remember one’s humanity and commitment to justice. What caucus time does in part is ensure the feeling of guilt does not result in paralysis, but rather reflection and action. Caucusing can be an opportunity to transform the white space into a liberating space to build strengths, skills, and courage for white people to act purposefully toward racial equity.

A white caucus provides an opportunity for white people to:

- Unpack feelings – especially fear, anger, and sadness, all natural feelings – as well as understand how whites internalize superiority<sup>8</sup> and mani-

fest it in their attitudes and interactions. It is an opportunity for people to support one another and resist marginalizing for being emotive or for honestly sharing racist beliefs.

- Continue the learning by sharing personal incidents and interactions, receive feedback from peers, and encourage responsive actions to address privilege and racism on individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels.
- Discuss current events, organizational patterns, and policies and apply a structural racism analysis to understand how white privilege and culture are present.
- Create an accountability process.<sup>9</sup> Caucusing is not a time for confessionals, but rather a place to build the capacity of each person as well as the white collective to act intentionally, consistently, and effectively and not be complicit or silent.

For people of color the caucus can be a space where whiteness is not at the center or a place where one need not accommodate or assimilate to white people’s responses to the emotional and conflictual nature of racial equity work. The caucus provides an opportunity to not only speak about the impact of racism and white culture within an organization, but also about how oppression is internalized on an individual, intergroup, and institutional level. This space can build solidarity among diverse people of color while at the same time allowing that full diversity to emerge and be celebrated. This caucus can be a liberating place for people of color to heal, bring their full selves, and consider how to collectively work for racial equity.

A people of color caucus provides an opportunity for people of color to:

---

Racist Collective, from Crossroads Anti-Racism Organizing and Training, at <http://www.crossroadsantiracism.org/wp-content/themes/crossroads/PDFs/Racial%20Identity%20Caucusing%20Strategy.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> To learn more about accountability processes, see <http://racialequitytools.org/plan/change-process#PLA26> and Accountability and White Anti-Racist Organizing: Stories of Our Work, B. Cushing, L. Cabbil, M. Freeman, J. Hitchcock, and K. Richards, eds., 2010, Roselle, NJ: Crandall, Dostie, & Douglass Books.

<sup>8</sup> See Racial Identity Caucusing: A Strategy for Building Anti-

- discover patterns of white culture and privilege within the organization and how to address them on a personal and organizational level;
- provide relief and support to one another by offering space to share experiences openly and freely, without having to explain them in a way that white people can hear;
- discuss internalized manifestations of racism and how it affects each person personally and professionally;
- build solidarity and interrupt the interpersonal manifestations of racism that are imposed by the hierarchy of racial and ethnic identity; and
- discuss accountability processes and expectations of whites and the organization.

Facilitators use the caucusing tool in different ways. Typically we include a prompt question – sometimes the same for each caucus, sometimes different. Depending on the size and diversity of the group, we sometimes choose to subdivide the caucuses – for example, the people of color caucus might end up being two groups, one for African Americans and one for other people of color; the white caucus might be split by role in the organization, so that whites in leadership have their own space to contemplate their unique relationship to privilege. When we do subdivide, we create an added step to integrate each racial-identity caucus before the cross-race integration. The final step in this process is to intentionally integrate the caucuses by sharing responses to the prompt question, sometimes in a fishbowl formation. Integration does not always mean equal reporting; it is about creating common ground, respecting one another’s process, and sitting with the discomfort of the intentionally segregated groups.

### Conclusion

We believe that focusing on white culture and privilege is an often overlooked but critical component of effective racial equity change processes; that this work can be challenging in some predictable ways; and that these challenges can be mitigated with some intentional tools. As Andrea Smith (2013) expresses in her blog post, *The Problem with Privilege*: “There is no simple anti-oppression formula that we can follow; we are

*We believe that focusing on white culture and privilege is an often overlooked but critical component of effective racial equity change processes; that this work can be challenging in some predictable ways; and that these challenges can be mitigated with some intentional tools.*

in a constant state of trial and error and radical experimentation.”

We hope the tools we have offered provide a start, though each situation requires presence, creativity, and courage. Indeed, the fact that these challenges exist should not be used as an excuse not to engage, but rather as evidence of the persistence and power of white culture and privilege – and the urgent need to take them on directly and explicitly. We encourage foundations committed to racial equity to lean into the hardest parts of the work – namely, unearthing white culture and privilege internally and externally. Anything less would fall short of their mutual accountability<sup>10</sup> to grantees and the communities they serve, as well as their deeply held value and goal of racial equity.

<sup>10</sup> Discussing accountability processes usually focuses on the process used with grantees to track organizational outcomes to ensure they follow the agreement on how grant monies are used. Equally important is being transparent regarding the foundation’s accountability to the grantees and communities it serves. This includes tracking responsiveness to community needs, assessing how resources are being distributed and to whom, ensuring that success is being defined by the community / grantees, conducting a structural power analysis, attending to power dynamics at all levels, and reviewing practices to assure they are not contributing to inequities or unintentionally having a racialized impact.

## Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge those who have supported and/or inspired our thinking and work along the way, including the Baltimore Racial Justice Action, Donna Bivens, Angela Bryant, Shakti Butler, Ron Chisom, Robette Dias, Judith Katz, George Lakey, Sally Leiderman, Barbara Major, Tema Okun, John A. Powell, Omowale Saterwhite, Rinku Sen, Lisa Weiner-Mahfuz, Leah Wing, Scott Winn, our clients, and many others including those who've taken courageous risks to move racial justice forward.

## References

- KIVEL, P. (2006). *You call this a democracy? Who benefits, who pays, and who really decides*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.
- OPENSOURCE LEADERSHIP STRATEGIES. (n.d.). *Group norms for breakthrough social change: The OpenSource approach*. Available online at [www.opensourceleadership.com](http://www.opensourceleadership.com)
- PENICK, G. (2008). *Navigating transformation: Uncertainty and fear of the unknown*. Jackson, MS: Foundation for the Mid South. Available online at [http://www.fndmidsouth.org/images/user\\_files/files/MoreThanWords2.pdf](http://www.fndmidsouth.org/images/user_files/files/MoreThanWords2.pdf)
- POTAPCHUK, M. (2013). *White culture*. Available online at <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/whiteculturehandout.pdf>
- SMITH, A. (2013, August 14). The problem with privilege [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://andrea366.wordpress.com/2013/08/14/the-problem-with-privilege-by-andrea-smith/>

*Gita Gulati-Partee, M.B.A., is founder and chief strategist of OpenSource Leadership Strategies, a national consulting practice that amplifies the work of social justice groups as both agents and units of change.*

*Maggie Potapchuk, M.Ed., is founder of MP Associates, a national consulting firm that builds the capacity of organizations and communities to address structural racism and privilege issues for building a just society.*