

**Bendigo Reconciliation Committee**

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**Identifying and Addressing**  
**Organisational White Privilege**

## 1. Introduction

During Reconciliation Week 2018 the Bendigo Reconciliation Committee (BRC) conducted a series of Conversation Circles hosted by BRC member organisations. In the Conversation Circle on 'Exploring Partnerships' between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people the issue of white privilege was extensively discussed. The Conversation Circle also explored the issue of organisational white privilege and its impact on the relationships between Aboriginal peoples and mainstream community based organisations. Whilst it is commonly recognised that white privilege exists for individuals, the issue of white privilege existing for mainstream organisations is not recognised, discussed or explored.

It was agreed in the 'Exploring Partnerships' Conversation Circle that further work needs to be done to understand organisational white privilege and its impact both for Aboriginal people and the organisations themselves. It was also agreed that there is a need for mainstream organisations to take responsibility to explore the issue of organisational white privilege and the benefits that exists for organisations by virtue of their organisational white privilege.

The aim of this paper is to explore the nature of organisational white privilege, the circumstances in which it exists and provide some questions that organisations could use to explore their organisational white privilege and its impact on Aboriginal people.

## 2. What is white privilege?

White privilege can be defined as *"the unquestioned and unearned set of advantages, entitlements, benefits and choices bestowed upon people solely because they are white. Generally white people who experience such privilege do so without being conscious of it"*. (1)

White privilege can also be seen as *"An institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions. One of the primary privileges is that of having greater access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of our skin color doors are open to us that are not open to other people"*. (2)

Jenny Tannoch-Bland in her book *'Bringing Australia Together: The Structure and Experience of Racism in Australia'* talks about white privilege as being *"invisible, unearned, denied, systemic, undesirable, and confers dominance"*. Jenny Tannoch-Bland also highlights that white privilege cannot be looked at without looking at racism. In particular she says:

(1) McIntosh P; *'White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women Studies'* 1988

(2) Kendall F; *'Understanding white privilege'* 2002

*“Racism is seen as a problem for Indigenous people - but not for white Australians. By seeing racism in terms of racial oppression we locate it with Indigenous people. It is not our problem -- not the problem of white Australians. It exists in the system outside us, impacting on others but not on us, not on white Australians. This means that we white Australians tend to see racism as causing Aboriginal disadvantage. The Siamese twin of Aboriginal disadvantage is white advantage. Logically we can't have one without the other. But we don't connect white advantage - unearned advantage - with racism. We don't think of racism in terms of our white race privilege. We think our lives are not affected by racism. But we benefit from it. Through white advantage, through unearned race privilege, through not experiencing race disadvantage, our lives are affected by racism. It is just that we are not conscious of it. It is invisible to us, but not to Indigenous people because, on a daily basis, our race privilege affects them. Thus far we know two points about our white race privilege: it is invisible to us and unearned”.*

Jenny Tannoch-Bland then lists 47 benefits, largely unrecognised, that white Australians accrue from the system of racism. These are benefits are not earned but are there by birth and are experienced as normal. However, Aboriginal people cannot count on most of these benefits. Examples of this white privilege include:

- *I can be reasonably confident that in most workplaces my race will be in the majority, and in any case that I will not feel isolated as the only, often token, member of my race.*
- *When I am told about Australia's history or about 'civilisation', I am shown that people of my colour made it what it is.*
- *I can let my children travel to and from school by bus confident they will not be harassed because of the colour of their skin.*
- *I can be casual about whether or not to listen to the voices of Indigenous people.*
- *My main worries about my children do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.*
- *I can choose whether or not to be concerned about racism.*

When people from mainstream start to consider or begin to accept/understand white privilege it is usually through an individual lens, about how they as individuals might benefit from white privilege. Until now this conception has remained largely personalised and has not extended beyond the individual, to systemic white privilege that exists at an organisational level. Jenny Tannoch-Bland's point that white privilege cannot be looked at without looking at racism also applies to organisations not just to individuals. Organisations as such are also affected by racism and they experience benefits from systematic racism.

Currently, there is not the recognition by workers and leaders in community service sector that their organisations benefit from organisational white privilege. We might argue that while individual/ground-up change is an important part of the change equation, its effectiveness and sustainability will be slowed or impeded until mainstream organisations are able to understand and accept organisational white privilege. However, organisations should not limit themselves to the recognition of white privilege without that recognition being the impetus for change and action.

The reflections on white privilege as outlined (both at the personal and organisational level) raise issues and questions for mainstream community organisations that need to be discussed and acted upon. These include:

- What are the benefits and advantages that mainstream organisations gain from white privilege?
- Does white privilege give mainstream organisation greater access to power and resources than Aboriginal people and their organisations?
- How do mainstream organisations experience privilege and do so without being conscious of it?
- Do mainstream organisations connect white privilege i.e. white advantage with racism? Is this lack of recognition of organisational white privilege a form of covert racism?
- Do mainstream organisations see racism as something that exists outside of their realm, that it impacts on Aboriginal people and is not something that organisations need to face?
- Do organisations need to examine their motives for building greater cultural competence within their organisations? Is a motive the understanding of organisational white privilege and the connection between organisational white advantage and systemic racism?
- Is the blindness of mainstream organisations to organisational white privilege a major impediment to their role in reconciliation and the building of culturally competent and safe organisations?

### **3. Benefits of Organisational White Privilege**

The following is a list of benefits that organisations receive by merely being white mainstream organisations. These benefits are received not earned and would be considered as normal for the organisations and their staff. However, Aboriginal people and their organisations cannot count on most of these benefits.

1. Our organisation knows that most of our staff can go to meetings with other agencies knowing that they will be culturally safe and will not feel culturally challenged.
2. We, as a mainstream organisation, can submit a tender for funding with the reasonable expectation that it will be reviewed by someone from our culture.
3. Our organisation can choose whether to embark on a self-reflection process across our organisation that explores our beliefs and values around culture, white privilege, and racism and we know we will not be challenged if we do not embark on this process.

4. When attending conferences, forums, network meetings and interagency meetings our organisational leaders and staff know that they will be surrounded by people from mainstream culture most of the time.
5. When arranging meetings with Aboriginal agencies or agencies from other cultures our organisation can be assured that the meetings will be conducted in a manner which reflects our cultural approach to meeting procedure.
6. When service delivery issues arise for our organisation we know we will not be judged through a lens of culture.
7. Our organisation can choose when, where and with whom we consult regarding working with other cultures.
8. Our organisation can achieve quality assurance accreditation without paying particular attention to organisational white privilege or racism.
9. Our organisation can choose whether to and/or when to implement a policy on employment of staff from other cultures.
10. Our organisational policy and procedure on employment of staff from other cultures can be written by someone from our culture or without consulting people of other cultures.
11. Our organisation can shift responsibility for agency participation in reconciliation activities to Aboriginal workers within our agencies and know that we will not be challenged about this from external auditors, funders or other mainstream agencies.
12. When our organisation commits to a program of cultural safety in our organisation we are seen to be 'innovative' and 'ground-breaking'.
13. When our organisation commits to a program of cultural safety it will make us 'look good'.
14. When our organisation commits to a program of cultural safety within quality assurance standards we will be seen to have 'excelled'.
15. Our organisation can have our organisational practices and procedures that relate to working with other cultures reviewed in the knowledge that will not be a regular occurrence.
16. Our organisation can choose whether or not to have a Reconciliation Action Plan.
17. If our organisation develops a Reconciliation Action Plan or shows symbols of Aboriginal culture within our offices we can be assured that we will meet the standards for Aboriginal cultural competence.
18. Our organisation can develop a Reconciliation Action Plan without consulting the Aboriginal community.

19. As a mainstream organisation we can reasonably expect that MOU's with organisations from other cultures will be written in a form that reflects our cultural lens and approach to partnerships.
20. Our staff and leaders can be reasonably confident that in our organisation mainstream culture and world view will be in the majority.
21. Our organisation can choose and/or be casual about whether or not to listen to the voices of Aboriginal people.
22. Our organisation will suffer no consequence for ignoring the perspectives of Aboriginal people and/or other ethnic groups.
23. Our organisation can operate without educating staff about racism (both covert and overt) and the impact of racism on Aboriginal people and/or other ethnic groups.
24. Our organisation leaders can speak in public knowing that our organisation will not be judged through a lens of race.
25. When our leaders speak they are assumed to be speaking only on behalf of their organisation, not their (mainstream) culture.
26. When our organisational leaders speak publicly they will mostly be speaking to people of their race.
27. Our staff can be late to work or a meeting without this behavior being seen as a reflection of their race or as a reflection of our organisation's mainstream culture.
28. Being from a mainstream organisation works for us when we need support as we will not be judged through a lens of race.
29. Our organisation can choose not to employ staff with culture-specific roles and duties.
30. Our organisation can tender for or deliver a Government program knowing that the design of the service reflects our mainstream cultural approach to service delivery.
31. Our organisation can be confident that when preparing a funding submission the format and language of the application form will reflect our mainstream cultural lens.
32. Our organisation can be confident when preparing a submission that the language and terms we use to describe our approach to service delivery will be accepted and understood by the funding body.
33. Our organisation can criticise and challenge Government Departments without being seen as a cultural outsider.

34. Our staff can go home from most meetings held within our organisation with the feeling that they were culturally safe rather than with the feeling of being isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, and culturally unsafe.
35. Our organisation does not have to educate our staff to be aware of systemic and covert racism in their interactions with other organisations.
36. When we co-locate staff in other organisations our organisation does not have to be conscious of their cultural safety.
37. Our organisation can ask our Aboriginal staff to take responsibility for the organisation's response to reconciliation or the building of cultural competence without this being challenged by funding bodies, quality assurance auditors or other mainstream organisations.
38. Our organisation's recruitment, orientation and supervision processes are based on our mainstream cultural approaches to staff management and reflect the culture of most of our staff.
39. Our organisation can ask clients if they are from an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background without the need for any explanation of the reasons for this request or to take any further action.

#### **4. Reflecting on organisational white privilege**

The benefits that exist for mainstream organisations through organisational white privilege present a challenge and responsibility for organisations to embark on an examination of their white privilege and the impact this has on the organisation's relationship with Aboriginal people and organisations. It is not the role of Aboriginal people or organisations to educate mainstream organisations on white privilege or racism. It can be said that the tendency for mainstream organisations to look to those who have been impacted by white privilege to educate organisations on white privilege and racism is a demonstration of cultural incompetence. Asking Aboriginal people to take on this role shows disregard to their experiences of racism and white privilege and can be considered to be the embodiment of entitlement.

Mainstream organisations need to take responsibility for examining its organisational white privilege and be willing to go on journey of self-examination and reflection on their cultural values and beliefs and on the role they may play in maintaining covert racism and white privilege.

Questions which can help organisations start this journey include:

1. Has your organisation ever considered the issue of organisational white privilege? What helps or hinders your organisation from undergoing this examination?
2. Does your organisation have in place a process for self-reflection that enables staff to reflect on their cultural values and beliefs, and the issues of racism and white privilege?

3. Has your organisation ever examined how it may (knowingly or unknowingly) participate in or perpetuate covert racism through the way the organisation is run and delivers services? If so what was learnt and what was changed in your organisation as a result of this examination?
4. Has your organisation ever examined the cultural lens and world view through which the organisation is run and delivers services?
5. Can your staff or organisation identify what has been learnt from Aboriginal cultures and how these learnings have changed your organisation and models of service delivery?
6. Does your organisation expect Aboriginal staff to lead the organisation in the development of its cultural competence, NAIDOC week participation and reconciliation activities?
7. How would a person from the Aboriginal community know that your organisation operates in a culturally safe manner?
8. Does your organisation have in place processes and supports that ensure the cultural safety of Aboriginal staff?
9. What does your organisation know about its historical role (perhaps in its original/founding form) during the stolen generation period?
10. Does your organisation have a RAP? Who did you consult when developing your RAP? Does the RAP include an examination of organisational white privilege and racism?

It is recommended that organisations develop a process for the examination of its organisational white privilege. A starting point for this process can be a reflection by the leadership of the organisation on organisational white privilege using the questions detailed above. This can be followed by the development of self-reflection sessions across the whole organisation using the outlined 39 benefits of organisational white privilege as the basis for these discussions.

## **5. Further information**

For further information on this paper, support in using this paper within an organisation and for other resources please contact:

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