

# Understanding & Dismantling Privilege

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## **Silence is Violence and Inaction Gives Traction to White Supremacy**

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### **Abstract**

This article sets forth key concepts and steps in building accountability for action among those who wish to dismantle structures of oppression. Accountability for action is defined as an agreement to behave in a specific and intentional way so as to challenge the status quo and dismantle systemic privilege. The national White Privilege Conference (WPC) is used as a case example of how accountability for action can be implemented in a structured learning environment with a large group of people. The intent of this article is to emphasize the urgency for action, provide tools to guide action, and motivate people to move from silence to action.

*Keywords:* Accountability for action; Accountability programs; White privilege; Dismantling privilege

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Lila Cabbil, President Emeritus at Rosa Parks Institute, has focused her 35 years of her professional career and volunteer commitments on programs and issues for vulnerable populations. She spent over 30 years serving community with Mrs. Rosa Parks. Her passion is promoting relationship building by serving as a learning facilitator and a change agent with inclusion of the expertise of persons with the lived experience. Because she believes that action with accountability is core to changing the system of white supremacy she accepted leadership for establishing an initiative for the White Privilege Conference in 2007. Lila has co-edited books and founded several social justice organizations. Since 2003, she has been leading a national and international awareness campaign on clean, safe, accessible and affordable water as a human right.

### Why Accountability?

Perhaps the most critical element of any good training program or professional development process is the transfer of learning from ideas in a workshop to meaningful action in family and social spaces, workplaces, and communities. Gaining new information is a necessary first step, but it is not enough to produce change. We must go further and determine: What are the training impacts? What do people have to show for their time? And, how do they bring new learning to bear? For without application of new learning, we perpetuate the status quo.

Nowhere is accountability for action more important or urgent than in the work of dismantling the structures of privilege and white supremacy. The current reality in the United States is one in which unprecedented attacks, organized assaults, daily violence, bullying, and the demolition of protection of the fundamental rights and government services for the most vulnerable among us are emanating from the highest levels of leadership and authority. The growth of new movements, as well as antiracist organizations and conferences, suggests that more people are educating themselves and others about these conditions and the surrounding context. How, then, are people using what they learn to center the intersectionality of race with all oppression and to take action against the inhumanity?

The national White Privilege Conference (WPC) serves as a case in point. The WPC provides a challenging, collaborative, and comprehensive experience in which diverse participants are called to examine and challenge systems of oppression. As the conference grew in size

and impact, the WPC committed to become a “community of action,” where every participant would be equipped and empowered to translate their conference learning into meaningful, year-round action. The WPC is now in its 19th year.

The WPC began to formally integrate this call to action into its programming six years ago (2012). At that time, Lila Cabbil offered an initial accountability workshop to introduce the concept that application of learning from the conference was an expectation of participants. After the first two years, a formal team was established to promote accountability-focused workshops intended to cultivate the WPC’s growth into a “community of action.” The following year, 13 such groups were conducted to begin to evaluate actions coming out of conference learning. This work has come to be known as the Accountability for Action Initiative, or #A4A. The goal, described in a report of the work by Alyn and Roberts (2015), was to create a replicable format by which accountability and action would be integrated into every session and the entire conference.<sup>1</sup>

### Defining Key Terms

Any successful change process requires a common vocabulary. Alyn (2016) notes, the word “accountability” shows up a fair amount, especially in work settings. “Accountability” is sometimes used interchangeably with the word “responsibility,” which means being dependable. But accountability comes first; dependability is demonstrated through “account-giving.” Accountability requires being answerable to others.<sup>2</sup>

Alyn (2017) says, “accountability means making clear agreements about what’s expected and about what happens as a result of actions we do or do not take,” and lists four requirements for successful agreements.<sup>3</sup> On the WPC website, accountability has also been described as “a commitment to taking action in an intentional way.”<sup>4</sup> In the #A4A initiative, accountability was ultimately defined as both agreement and intention: “An agreement to behave in a specific and intentional way so as to challenge the status quo and dismantle systemic privilege.”<sup>5</sup>

One of the challenges of this work is that people think they know what words mean when, in fact, there may be no shared understanding or clear definition. In his forward to *Accountability and White-Anti-Racist Organizing*, Ronald Chisom says, “the question of accountability is still not clear; not fully understood. We don’t need to have one way to deal with it but there has to be some consistency in what we are talking about.” While it is possible to adopt definitions that others have used, it is necessary to the success of any new initiative that key stakeholders be engaged in conversations about terminology. Whether in a survey, focus group, or board meeting, it is important to begin a dialogue with questions like those posed by Lila Cabbil in the first WPC Accountability 101 workshop: “What does accountability with regard to white privilege mean to you?” “What challenges around this accountability have you experienced or observed?” and “Where have you seen accountability for white privilege in action or noticed success?”

People can be in different places without knowing it, especially on topics like accountability for action. Individuals have different experiences, understanding, and

psychological processes that they bring to this work. Chisom warns that white people doing social justice work without understanding accountability may only add to the oppression they are trying to alleviate. Discussion and agreement on key concepts are important first steps to building engagement among those committed to achieving results. It will also help define why the work is needed, as well as how and where to begin.

### **Levels of Learning: A Theoretical Model of Action**

Multicultural competence training models such as those developed by Paul B. Pederson and Derald Wing Sue, have long identified three levels of personal and organizational development needed to work effectively across cultural differences: awareness, knowledge, and skill.<sup>6</sup> It is believed, however, that these models originated, quite before they were formalized and published, in community organizing and activist circles. Within each level in any case, behavioral competencies may be identified and assessed. To move from multicultural competence to an active dismantling of systems of privilege, a fourth level is required: action. We define these levels as follows:

**Awareness.** Refers to developing a personal consciousness of differences and culturally learned assumptions.

**Knowledge.** Means gaining accurate information about different communities, cultures, histories, cultural practices, and lived experiences. Specifically, this knowledge is cross-cultural and requires connecting in relationships as a way of life.

**Skills.** Encompass the transformation of thoughts and behavior into a cross-

cultural repertoire that is consistently integrated into our everyday way of life and reconnects us to our humanity.

**Action.** Is applying awareness, knowledge, and skills in an accountable way, with deliberate intention and repeated practice. Action is a response to learning and a desired outcome in itself.

When participants, facilitators, organizers, and others involved in training and professional development processes understand and adopt this theoretical model, it becomes easier to break down complex educational content and translate it into actionable ideas.

Action has several entry points.

### Entry Points for Action

Integrating accountability for action into the important work of dismantling white supremacy, white privilege, and systems of oppression requires us to recognize that each person has an individual level of comfort with, and experience in, translating concepts about privilege, inclusion, and equity to specific action.<sup>7</sup> This work can be exceptionally difficult. It is fraught with challenges. Therefore, each person needs a way to start with where they themselves are personally at any point and to build their resources, confidence, and skills from there.

Building on work developed by Lila Cabbil, WPC's #A4A team illuminated different paths to action by describing three target areas, or levels, of accountability. The personal level refers to acts of mindfulness, personal assessment, and ownership. The group level references those things we do with others as a collective, in a community, or in an organization. The systemic level involves coordinated action over time to

create policies and other influencers for structural change within institutions.

Each of these levels requires continual practice and intentional activity, particularly around policy. Action at each level has different consequences and emotional impacts for white people and people of the global majority, a term we use to call attention to the actual make-up of the world's population and to challenge power assumptions. Furthermore, we must understand that personal behavior is the locus of white supremacy for all people. Everyone has been socialized in the white racial frame.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, personal change is foundational to the other components. Lila Cabbil gives the bottom line, "There is no institutional or systemic change without personal change."

**Personal action.** These are activities that expand personal reflection; capacity for insight; the ability to examine one's own strengths, challenges, and implicit biases; and the recognition of environmental influences and other behaviors undertaken as an individual. This entry point requires a commitment "to learn, change and act within yourself and your life; to create time and practices that integrate new behaviors into a committed lifestyle."<sup>9</sup> Lila notes, "Personal action is critical because structures are defined and upheld by both the active and passive behavior of people." Everyone carries their ongoing, conscious and unconscious personal activities into other levels.

**Group organizational action.** The hallmark of group action is relationship building and working collectively. Power dynamics are examined at this level, which includes the seeking and building of partnerships and collaboratives that foster cross-cultural relationship building, critical

conversations, and ongoing interactive dialogue. These actions involve people who are most impacted by white supremacy

**Structural action / systemic change.** This level of action includes critical institutional self-assessment of policies, practices, and leadership representation, as well as the inclusion of those most impacted by who decides, who controls, and who benefits in and from the system. It requires examination, analysis, and correction of those things that undergird white privilege: power imbalances; inequitable structures; biases, implicit and explicit; pervasive prejudices in media and communications; and other sources of white racial framing and oppression

### **Putting Theory to the Test: A Pilot Project**

At its 16th annual conference in Louisville, Kentucky, the #A4A team put this theoretical model to the test. This team had previously established a protocol for accountability sessions through facilitator training meetings and materials. These included a discussion of accountability; the connection between accountability and the WPC mission; goals for accountability sessions and suggestions for structuring these sessions to allow for different engagement styles; accountability planning; and structure for follow-through. For the WPC 16, the team distributed a short questionnaire and collected brief written narratives from accountability session participants to evaluate the focus and impacts of the WPC's accountability sessions.

In contrast to the standard post-conference evaluation, graduate student volunteers handed out this questionnaire in 11 accountability sessions, then collected

these handouts after each session. The questionnaire asked about previous conference attendance and WPC's impacts.

Participants answered two questions about action: "What specific actions have you taken in your work/life as a result of the impact of the WPC?" and "What concrete action will you take as a result of participating in the WPC?" Two experienced #A4A team members then identified response themes and frequencies for these questions.

Responses to these questions fell into three theme categories that aligned with the "action entry points" described above. Within these theme categories of "personal action," "community building," and "institutional/systemic action, 10 specific types of action emerged. These action themes and sample responses are described in a companion article, "Accountability for Action: Moving from Conference to Community," by Alyn and Roberts in this issue of *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege*. The full results of this pilot project can be found in the White Privilege Conference Action/Accountability Report, July 2015.<sup>10</sup> Overall, the results indicate that accountability-focused programs can provide conference participants with important content and build skills that they can effectively translate into positive action at multiple levels.

### **Building Capacity**

Waking people up to accountability for action goes beyond the idea of a specific conference or initiative. The WPC is an example of a structured learning environment where a large group of people comes together from across the United States and from other nations for the express purpose of learning about white privilege

and oppression. If that large group was fully committed and equipped to take sustained action over time, there would be change. But if people attend conferences, read books, hear speakers, watch the news—learn about the privilege, injustice, and oppression in whatever ways—and remain silent without taking action, then life-threatening policies and situations will continue to escalate.

Accountability-focused programs and initiatives can provide people with concepts and motivation to help them engage in effective action to interrupt oppression. The impacts of good training and programing, however, are amplified when accountability for action is fully implemented and embedded into all operations of an organization rather than charged to just a few designated sessions or departments. Groups and organizations must also be accountable to support their people, if sustainable change is to happen. The following practices have been used successfully to build personal and organizational capacity for accountability.

**Engage leaders.** Understanding of the concepts and requirements of accountability for action by decision makers and/or organizers is imperative. Challenges to this work abound. Some organizations claim resource restrictions, which must be examined in the context of commitment. Others struggle to build a diverse team where there is no shared understanding of what accountability for action means regarding white privilege. The work is long term and deeply personal; it doesn't always match people's expectations. But the biggest challenges are consistent understanding, attention, and follow-through from the top. Leadership commitment must be unwavering and long term.

**Examine the leadership profile.** This requires us to ask critical questions of who is included, who decides, who controls, and who benefits. Typical leadership structures reflect the dynamics of white supremacy. Accountability for action requires disruption of that structural power imbalance and taking leadership from those whose experience provides specific expertise for more meaningful solutions. For example, if environmental efforts were being led by the indigenous community, with their expertise, solutions would be based on taking responsibility for protection of the earth and its inhabitants.

**Create space for building authentic cross-cultural relationships.** White privilege approaches action as “doing for” rather than “doing with,” a distinction Lila developed in her original training modules on white privilege and white supremacy.<sup>11</sup> Accountability for dismantling white supremacy calls for a shift in role and approach, to one of accepting leadership from those most impacted, who provide solutions and strategies from their lived experience. It can be uncomfortable for people with privilege to follow or work alongside. There are many different consequences and emotional effects for people of the global majority and white people. It is essential to recognize that white privilege includes choice in when, how, and whether to take action. However, genuine relationships are the foundation for meaningful outcomes of mutual benefit.

**Communicate the expectation.** Bringing accountability and action forward as a deliberate intention of an entire organization requires clear, consistent, and repeated communication. Messaging about action must come from multiple sources, in multiple media, formats and language that reach all stakeholders at all levels, and it

must be specific. People are better able to meet behavioral expectations when these expectations are well defined and communicated.

**Follow up.** People are more likely to fulfill their commitments to take action when they share these commitments with someone else and agree to regular check-ins on their progress. For the ongoing and challenging work of dismantling white supremacy and structures of privilege, accountability partners may be friends or relatives, peers or superiors. Groups and networks may also serve the purpose of supporting and encouraging specific action commitments. To fully accomplish the interruption of oppression, the accountability partner will represent the group with whom the work is being done. See examples and specific stories of accountability in Cushing (ed.) with Cabbil, Freeman, Hitchcock, and Richards (2010).

**Measure what you want to see.** Metrics and measures can be important means for adding focus, evaluating outcomes, and giving feedback on all efforts. Before allocating resources to measurement, however, definitions and measures of change must be clearly aligned with desired outcomes. Measurement can then be used for continual improvement and follow-through. Sharing results from meaningful metrics can be encouraging and can lift solutions and record progress.

**Celebrate steps along the way.** The nature of dismantling white supremacy is arduous. It can be all-encompassing. Typically, the work for white people is optional. Frequently they are paid. For people of the global majority, there is often no option. The urgency for change may be a matter of survival. Being accountability partners with white people is a unique kind of

commitment that can demand an extraordinary expenditure of energy. The celebration of small victories by all involved and the recognition of what's been contributed can promote healing, inspire hope, and draw others into accountability partnerships.

The theory, model, and specific steps of an accountability for action initiative give people ways to honor different entry points and move into an action orientation. Organizations can then build capacity by promoting wide engagement; communicating expectations; and providing feedback, measures of change, and recognition of accomplishments.

Yet, the decision to act remains with each person. Each person has the option to act or not to act. If you've learned it and you don't use it, what difference does it make that you have undertaken the learning? Without action, there is no change. There is no interruption of the transgression. Remaining silent and not taking action invites the cruelty and oppression to intensify. This is why we say, "silence is violence and inaction gives traction to white supremacy."

### **Statement/Restatement of the Imperative**

Consistent, ongoing action to dismantle systemic privilege and white supremacy has never been more urgent. Unprecedented assaults, "alternate facts," and the allowance of these things—originating with lawmakers, government agencies, and the highest political and business leaders in the land—have thrown us into a different reality. Extraordinary levels of brutality are being modeled as normal. This acceleration calls out for us to notice the lack of a massive outcry about what is happening. Violence—especially toward

people of the global majority—is increasingly being called justified, the taking of life is increasingly tolerated, and principles of democracy are increasingly defied. All of this occurs against a back drop of white silence.

If we are not able to understand how silence is participation and how inaction makes us complicit in the systems and structures of oppression, then we become partners in maintaining those systems and structures. We, too, become models for a “normal” that dehumanizes and delegitimizes us and all members of our human families and communities.

Informed by her 30-plus-year relationship with Rosa Parks, Lila asks us to remember Mrs. Parks’ words to the policeman who was arresting her.

“Why do you treat us this way?” Mrs. Parks asked. She did not speak in the first person, as an individual. She spoke as the “we,” as the collective.

When human lives are increasingly at risk because those in positions of greatest authority incite and endorse violence directed to targeted populations; put forth policies that unjustly marginalize and penalize people based on bias, bigotry, and hatred; and instigate overt expressions/demonstrations of white supremacy with a sense of pride, we are called to come together in accountable relationships, as the “we,” in opposition. We are obliged to enter action at all levels. And we are compelled to place accountability for action in the center of our work, with utmost urgency.

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