

# Privilege as a Social Issue

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**T**rying to discuss privilege as a social issue is like walking into a mine field. If you walk into it without a 'map,' you may cause an explosion which you have not anticipated and for which you are not prepared. Yet, it seems to me that the field of psychology and individual psychologists have both tools and a responsibility to weigh in on this topic. In the 2018 world of political extremes and conflict and instantaneous social media disruption, any discussion of privilege risks being more destructive than productive unless two conditions are met. The first condition is a group responsibility for a set of ground rules for that discussion, and the second is an individual's personal responsibility to examine one's own awareness of privilege.

## Ground Rules

Many 'discussions' today turn into debates with winners and losers. These 'debates' include competitive claims of even greater disadvantage; reluctance to accept privilege that should be self-evident but is not even seen; and less listening and even less understanding. What may have begun as a well-intentioned effort at developing a better understanding may result in an opposite impact – a wider distance, additional personal wounding, and a decreased interest in the original goal. Part of the difficulties is that the discussion about privilege is often framed in a binary, yes-no, right-wrong, either-or context. This is a simplistic reduction of a complex issue. In addition, by nature of the content, the discussions often become personal. This is a sure formula to stir up defensiveness, the effect of which is to increase the distance between or among individuals.

Because of the potential volatility of this subject, a first challenge to be negotiated is an agreement about the conditions that help to transform a discussion into a dialogue rather than a debate. This task is often best accomplished by a facilitator whose primary role is to structure and

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monitor the nature of the interactions in ways that respect the guidelines. The guidelines can be suggested by a facilitator, or they can be the content of a first meeting and generated by the participants. One way to start might be to identify the goals of the meeting (mutual understanding, for example) and then explore what guidelines would support those goals. Examples of these guidelines could include mutual respect, speaking for oneself, being open to others' views and experiences, and confidentiality. One approach to this goal is Transformational Intergroup Dialogue<sup>1</sup> which emphasizes structure, support and sustained interaction. For facilitators to be effective, they need to be authorized and prepared to intervene when guidelines are not followed. The goal is to create and maintain an emotionally safe container for these discussions to occur.

## Personal Work

White Privilege is the ultimate redundant expression! Simply put, to be white, especially in the United States, is to be privileged! And no matter how aware I may be about my privilege, I will never be fully aware because I will never know all the situations where a person of color encounters barriers or pre-judgments or other disadvantages and I do not. This is also true about being physically intact and whole, being heterosexual, and being male among other privileged classes – and for the purposes of this paper, we can substitute any of these classes for color.

Privilege is about the experiences we do not encounter. Privilege is also about advantage that is not earned. Whites can never have direct personal experience of racial discrimination; while we might directly observe situations where we have privilege and other do not, our awareness of its impact can never be first hand. It's not that whites don't know disadvantage; it's that whites cannot know the cumulative impact of continuous, and at times institutional disadvantage due to racial discrimination throughout a lifetime.

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I have written in these pages about white privilege several times previously (Sternlieb, 2005; 2006a; 2012a; 2012b). In some ways these articles document parts of my own journey, from discovery to increased awareness to becoming an ally. One paper in particular listed a number of suggestions for personal exploration (Sternlieb, 2009). An additional approach to personal exploration that I have more recently discovered and used for myself is described by the cultural anthropologist, Angeles Arrien (1993). She uses our heart in a metaphorical way suggesting that there are four "chambers" by which we can understand ourselves. The four chambers represent the full heart, the open heart, the clear heart, and the strong heart.

This challenge is to consider my own awareness of and exploration about privilege (and how can I expect anyone else to do this work if I'm not doing it myself?),

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in the context of these chambers of my heart. The full heart is about authenticity and commitment and is a source of generosity. How full hearted am I in this journey or have I been half hearted? The open heart reflects my capacity to trust in myself. How open am I to what emerges from my explorations, or do I become aware of circumstances that contribute to a closed or closing heart? The clear heart is a reflection of my values and principles in contrast to the doubting heart's confusion. Am I clear about where I stand or do I waver in the face of uncertainty and ambivalence? What work do I need to do to become less confused and more clear? Finally, the strong heart is the seat of courage. Do I have the courage of my convictions, or do I avoid making difficult choices? In what ways might I look inside to identify my strengths and the work I still need to do.

There are certainly many additional ways that psychology and psychologists can use our knowledge and our skills to further goals of equality and justice for all. We are regularly faced with opportunities to apply what we know and who we are. It is up to each one of us to decide what that will look like. 📖

**References**

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# PPA Member Spotlight

## Pauline Wallin, PhD

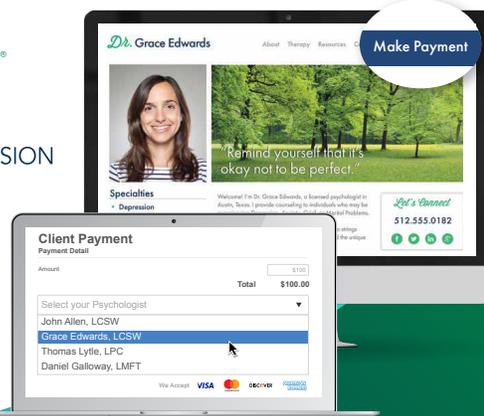


Congratulations to long-time PPA member Dr. Pauline Wallin on being awarded APA's Division 46 Distinguished Lifetime Contributions to Media Psychology & Technology Award. Dr. Wallin was presented this 2018 award at the APA conference in August. This award is given for a sustained body of work in developing, refining and/or implementing applications, procedures and methods that have had a major impact on the public and the profession of media psychology and technology. Dr. Wallin is a past President of the Pennsylvania Psychological Foundation. She has a private practice in Camp Hill, PA with over 30 years of experience working with individuals, couples, families, businesses and courts.



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