



# Head, Heart & Hands: I-MERIT Tips for Cultural Competence

“Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.” Martin Luther King, Jr., 1963

## Resisting Racism

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In the April 2009 issue of this publication, Sheila Henderson discussed “microaggressions” – small acts of bias that are more subtle than blatant racism but still upsetting. She used the example of a woman of color who was wrongly accused of stealing an item from a yard sale. Her European-American friend was first unable to acknowledge the probable racism in this incident and its harmful effect. Questioning, denying, and minimizing her friend’s experience simply added another layer of hurt. After a subsequent talk about the situation, fortunately the European-American was able to acknowledge her misstep and their friendship remained intact.

The focus of this issue is white privilege and how European-Americans can overcome such ignorance and insensitivity about other cultures as described above. The concept of white privilege was probably best explained by Peggy McIntosh in her classic article *Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. She views privilege as an unseen package of unearned assets that the privileged can count on cashing in each day. McIntosh provides many examples, including:

- Never being asked to speak for all the people of your racial group.
- Being sure that if you need legal or medical help, your race will not work against you.
- Can go shopping alone...pretty sure you will not be followed or harassed.

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The initial step on this journey is to develop an awareness of one's own race and the impact that European-American culture has had on others. For several reasons, Euro-Americans typically give little thought to their own culture. It is easy to take for granted because it is the dominant culture, like the air that surrounds us. In addition, European-Americans are hard-pressed to identify their own race or culture, due to the process of assimilation that has erased awareness of their particular European heritage. Finally, many find it uncomfortable to ponder whiteness because that would require recognition of privilege and the unearned advantages that are denied to people of color.

European-Americans who aspire to live more consciously and multi-culturally will need to "unlearn" racism. There are many ways to proceed, such as:

- Learn about the development of race, racism, and white privilege by browsing the Internet and by borrowing books and DVDs from the library. (See the end of this article for a list of suggested titles.)
- Find historical role models, such as those who actively resisted slavery. One example is Viola Liuzzo, white mother of five, who in 1965 was murdered while assisting with the voting rights march in Alabama. Another is Bacon's Rebellion, when in 1676 indentured servants both black and white rose up together against exploitation in the Virginia Colony.
- Diversify one's circle of friends, spending time with people of color and learning about other cultures. Attend cultural and educational events led by minority communities.

Unlearning racism also means noticing the possibility for direct action against discrimination in one's everyday life. Shelly Tochluk, professor of educational psychology at Mount Saint Mary's College and author of *Witnessing Whiteness*, proposes the idea of *witnessing*, or speaking up about incidents of racism. She recommends practicing a repertoire of responses so we will not become immobilized and speechless in those crucial moments. Here are some approaches, used with permission by the author:

## 1. Questioning

Give people the benefit of the doubt, as though you cannot believe an intelligent person would really say or do something racist. For example, "When you say \_\_\_\_, it sounds like you're saying \_\_\_\_, but I'm not sure that's what you mean." This may not change the speaker's mind, but at least it will signal where you stand on the issue.

## 2. Educating

Make use of your knowledge and tell the speaker why their statement is troubling. “Hey, I know the media makes it seem that way, but I found out recently that \_\_\_\_.” This approach avoids labeling the person as racist so they may remain engaged in discussion...or maybe not.

## 3. Expressing Emotion

Tell the speaker how it is for you to hear such comments. “When you say that, I feel \_\_\_\_ and it’s hard for me to be here with you.” You avoid challenging the content and instead ask the person to respect your position. This is especially effective with those you are close to, who are presumably motivated to maintain the relationship.

## 4. Empathic Relating

Invite the speaker to put him or herself in the other’s shoes. “When you say that, I can’t help wondering how those folks would feel if they heard that. How would you feel if people talked about us that way?”

## 5. Repeated Opportunities

Even with practice, one might get confused or scared and miss an opportunity to address racism. When this happens, it is possible to later say to the person, “You know, yesterday you said \_\_\_\_, and I just want to ask what you meant.”

Why should a European-American bother to resist the racial oppression that continues to pervade society? I would like to address this question from my own experience. Living in the Midwest, I witnessed many incidents of racism, both individual and institutional. One night I was riding on a deserted street with an African-American friend, when he was pulled over and cited with changing lanes in an intersection. I felt bad and was struck by the ridiculous nature of this charge, having often done the same thing without consequence. Clearly, my friend was guilty of “driving while black” while I had been guilty of unconsciously benefitting from white privilege. Over time, I came to see the racism that pervaded my city as harmful to everyone, including European-Americans like me. In learning to speak out and take positive action, I found a sense of satisfaction and greater meaning in my life. So **my** answer to the question above is that resisting racism is the right thing to do, and it also feels good and benefits the doer.

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For further unlearning of white privilege and racism, the following books & DVDs are available in the Alliant Library:

[Home of the brave](#) [videorecording] / Counterpoint Films ; directed, produced, and written by Paola di Florio ; produced by Nancy Dickenson. DVD/E 185.98 L58 H66 2005 (74 min.)

[Mirrors of privilege](#) : [videorecording]: making whiteness visible / directed by Shakti Butler and Rick Butler ; produced by Rick Butler. (50 min.) 2006

[Pathology of privilege](#) [videorecording]: racism, white denial & the costs of inequality / Tim Wise; produced by Sut Jhally. DVD/E 185.615 T55 2008 (57 min.) (also titled Tim Wise: On White Privilege)

[Racism without racists : color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in the United States](#) / Eduardo Bonilla-Silva. E 184 A1 B597 2006

[Silent racism : how well-meaning white people perpetuate the racial divide](#). Barbara Trepagnier. E184 A1 T695 2007

[Understanding white privilege : creating pathways to authentic relationships across race](#) / Frances E. Kendall. HT 1575 K456 2006

[Uprooting racism: how white people can work for racial justice](#) / Paul Kivel. E 184 A1 K477 2002

[White like me : reflections on race from a privileged son](#) / Tim Wise. E 185.615 W565 2008

White racial identity development : therapeutic implications, chapter 11 in [Counseling the culturally diverse : theory and practice](#) / Derald Wing Sue, David Sue. BF 637 C6 S85 2008

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