

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack

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"I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group"

By Peggy McIntosh

Through work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are overprivileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say they will work to women's statues, in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denials that amount to taboos surround the subject of advantages that men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking through unacknowledged male privilege as a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there are most likely a phenomenon, I realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of while privilege that was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks.

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in women's studies work to reveal male privilege

and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious. Then I remembered the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we are just seen as oppressive, even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways in which I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned into oblivion about its existence.

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an unfairly advantaged person, or as a participant in a damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on her individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow "them" to be more like "us."

Daily effects of white privilege

- I decided to try to work on myself at least by identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location, though of course all these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions.
- 1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- 2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
- 3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
- 4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- 5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- 6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- 7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- 8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- 9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.

for this piece on white privilege.

- 10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.
- 11. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person's voice in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her race.
- 12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
- 13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- 14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- 15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
- 16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.
- 17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.
- 18. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
- 19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
- 20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- 21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- 22. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- 23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
- 24. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my race.
- 25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race.
- 26. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
- 27. I can go home from most meetings of organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
- 28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her/his chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
- 29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or a program centering on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.

- 30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.
- 31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
- 32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other races.
- 33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my race.
- 34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
- 35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
- 36. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.
- 37. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me and advise me about my next steps, professionally.
- 38. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
- 39. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my race.
- 40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
- 41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
- 42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.
- 43. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
- 44. I can easily find academic courses and institutions which give attention only to people of my race.
- 45. I can expect figurative language and imagery in all of the arts to testify to experiences of my race.
- 46. I can chose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.
- 47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.
- 48. I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.
- 49. My children are given texts and classes which implicitly support our kind of family unit and do not turn them against my choice of domestic partnership.
- 50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

Elusive and fugitive

[continued, by Peggy McIntosh]

I repeatedly forgot each of the realizations on this list until I wrote it down. For me white privilege has turned out to be an elusive and fugitive subject. The pressure to avoid it is great, for in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have listed conditions of daily experience that I once took for granted. Nor did I think of any of these perquisites as bad for the holder. I now think that we need a more finely differentiated taxonomy of privilege, for some of these varieties are only what one would want for everyone in a just society, and others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant, and destructive.

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a patter of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turn, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any move I was educated to want to make. I could think of myself as belonging in major ways and of making social systems work for me. I could freely disparage, fear, neglect, or be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I could also criticize it fairly freely.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely being made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence, which I was being subtly trained to visit, in turn, upon people of color.

For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading. We usually think of privilege as being a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work systematically to over empower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance because of one's race or sex.

Earned strength, unearned power

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

We might at least start by distinguishing between positive advantages, which we can work to spread, and negative types of advantage, which unless rejected will always reinforce our present hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege for a few. Ideally it is an unearned entitlement. At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage for them. This paper results from a process of coming to see that some of the power that I originally say as attendant on being a human being in the United States consisted in unearned advantage and conferred dominance.

I have met very few men who truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so one question for me and others like me is whether we will be like them, or whether we will get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance, and, if so, what we will do to lessen them. In any case, we need to do more work in identifying how they actually affect our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, of our white students in the United States think that racism doesn't affect them because they are not

people of color; they do not see "whiteness" as a racial identity. In addition, since race and sex are not the only advantaging systems at work, we need similarly to examine the daily experience of having age advantage, or ethnic advantage, or physical ability, or advantage related to nationality, religion, or sexual orientation.

Difficulties and angers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantages associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage that rest more on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex, and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions are interlocking, as the members of the Combahee River Collective pointed out in their "Black Feminist Statement" of 1977.

One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the system won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitude. But a "white" skin in the United States opens many doors for whites whether or not we approve of the way dominance has been conferred on us. Individual acts can palliate but cannot end, these problems.

To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political surrounding privilege are the key political tool here. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subject taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to get into a position of dominance while denying that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, is kept strongly inculturated in the United States so as to maintain the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping most people unaware that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people props up those in power and serves to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already.

Although systemic change takes many decades, there are pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me if we raise our daily consciousness on the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

The Male Privilege Checklist

An Unabashed Imitation of an Article by Peggy McIntosh

By B. Deutsch

In 1990, Wellesley College professor Peggy McIntosh wrote an essay called *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*. McIntosh observes that whites in the U.S. are "taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group." To illustrate these invisible systems, McIntosh wrote a list of 26 invisible privileges whites benefit from.

As McIntosh points out, men also tend to be unaware of their own privileges as men. In the spirit of McIntosh's essay, I thought I'd compile a list similar to McIntosh's, focusing on the invisible privileges benefiting men.

Since I first compiled it, the list has been posted several times on internet discussion groups. Very helpfully, many people have suggested additions to the checklist. More commonly, of course, critics (usually, but not always, male) have pointed out men have disadvantages too - being drafted into the army, being expected to suppress emotions, and so on. These are indeed bad things - but I never claimed that life for men is all ice cream sundaes. Pointing out that men are privileged in no way denies that sometimes bad things happen to men.

In the end, however, it is men and not women who make the most money; men and not women who dominate the government and the corporate boards; men and not women who dominate virtually all of the most powerful positions of society. And it is women and not men who suffer the most from intimate violence and rape; who are the most likely to be poor; who are, on the whole, given the short end of patriarchy's stick. As Marilyn Frye has argued, while men are harmed by patriarchy, women are oppressed by it.

Several critics have also argued that the list somehow victimizes women. I disagree; pointing out problems is not the same as perpetuating them. It is not a "victimizing" position to fight against injustice; we can't fight injustice if we refuse to acknowledge it exists.

An internet acquaintance of mine once wrote, "The first big privilege which whites, males, people in upper economic classes, the able bodied, the straight (I think one or two of those will cover most of us) can work to alleviate is the privilege to be oblivious to privilege." This checklist is, I hope, a step towards helping men to give up the "first big privilege."

The Male Privilege Checklist

- 1. My odds of being hired for a job, when competing against female applicants, are probably skewed in my favor. The more prestigious the job, the larger the odds are skewed.
- 2. I can be confident that my co-workers won't think I got my job because of my sex - even though that might be true.
- 3. If I am never promoted, it's not because of my sex.
- 4. If I fail in my job or career, I can feel sure this won't be seen as a black mark against my entire sex's capabilities.
- 5. The odds of my encountering sexual harassment on the job are so low as to be negligible.
- 6. If I do the same task as a woman, and if the measurement is at all subjective, chances are people will think I did a better job.
- 7. If I'm a teen or adult, and if I can stay out of prison, my odds of being raped are so low as to be negligible.
- 8. I am not taught to fear walking alone after dark in average public spaces.
- 9. If I choose not to have children, my masculinity will not be called into question.
- 10. If I have children but do not provide primary care for them, my masculinity will not be called into question.
- 11. If I have children and provide primary care for them, I'll be praised for extraordinary parenting if I'm even marginally competent.
- 12. If I have children and pursue a career, no one will think I'm selfish for not staying at home.
- 13. If I seek political office, my relationship with my children, or who I hire to take care of them, will probably not be scrutinized by the press.
- 14. Chances are my elected representatives are mostly people of my own sex. The more prestigious and powerful the elected position, the more likely this is to be true.
- 15. I can be somewhat sure that if I ask to see "the person in charge," I will face a person of my own sex. The higher-up in the organization the person is, the surer I can be.
- 16. As a child, chances are I was encouraged to be more active and outgoing than my sisters.
- 17. As a child, I could choose from an almost infinite variety of children's media featuring

positive, active, non-stereotyped heroes of my own sex. I never had to look for it; male heroes were the default.

- 18. As a child, chances are I got more teacher attention than girls who raised their hands just as often.
- 19. If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether or not it has sexist overtones.
- 20. I can turn on the television or glance at the front page of the newspaper and see people of my own sex widely represented, every day, without exception.
- 21. If I'm careless with my financial affairs it won't be attributed to my sex.
- 22. If I'm careless with my driving it won't be attributed to my sex.
- 23. I can speak in public to a large group without putting my sex on trial.
- 24. If I have sex with a lot of people, it won't make me an object of contempt or derision.
- 25. There are value-neutral clothing choices available to me; it is possible for me to choose clothing that doesn't send any particular message to the world.
- 26. My wardrobe and grooming are relatively cheap and consume little time.
- 27. If I buy a new car, chances are I'll be offered a better price than a woman buying the same car.
- 28. If I'm not conventionally attractive, the disadvantages are relatively small and easy to ignore.
- 29. I can be loud with no fear of being called a shrew. I can be aggressive with no fear of being called a bitch.
- 30. I can ask for legal protection from violence that happens mostly to men without being seen as a selfish special interest, since that kind of violence is called "crime" and is a general social concern. (Violence that happens mostly to women is usually called "domestic violence" or "acquaintance rape," and is seen as a special interest issue.)
- 31. I can be confident that the ordinary language of day-to-day existence will always include my sex. "All men are created equal..." mailman, chairman, freshman, he.
- 32. My ability to make important decisions and my capability in general will never be questioned depending on what time of the month it is.
- 33. I will never be expected to change my name upon marriage or questioned if I don't change my name.
- 34. The decision to hire me will never be based on assumptions about whether or not I might choose to have a family sometime soon.
- 35. Every major religion in the world is led primarily by people of my own sex. Even God, in most major religions, is usually pictured as being male.
- 36. Most major religions argue that I should be the head of my household, while my wife and children should be subservient to me.
- 37. If I have a wife or girlfriend, chances are we'll divide up household chores so that she does most of the labor, and in particular the most repetitive and unrewarding tasks.
- 38. If I have children with a wife or girlfriend, chances are she'll do most of the childrearing, and in particular the most dirty, repetitive and unrewarding parts of childrearing.
- 39. If I have children with a wife or girlfriend, and it turns out that one of us needs to make career sacrifices to raise the kids, chances are we'll both assume the career sacrificed should be hers.
- 40. Magazines, billboards, television, movies, pornography, and virtually all of media is filled with images of scantily-clad women intended to appeal to me sexually. Such images of men exist, but are much rarer.
- 41. I am not expected to spend my entire life 20-40 pounds underweight.
- 42. If I am heterosexual, it's incredibly unlikely that I'll ever be beaten up by a spouse or lover.
- 43. I have the privilege of being unaware of my male privilege.

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