

## **Excerpt: *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack***

Peggy McIntosh 1989

I have noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. Men might say they will work to improve women's status, in society, the university, or the elsewhere, but they can't—or won't—support the idea of lessening their own. Denials surround the subject of advantages which men gain from the disadvantages of others. 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 was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism as something which puts others at a disadvantage, but had never been taught to see my own white privilege as an advantage.

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

Describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. In academics, as we work to reveal sources of privilege and ask the privileged to give up some of their power, we must ask, "If I have been privileged, what am I willing to do to share it?"

After I realized the extent to which some groups in our society work from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of the oppressiveness of privileged groups was unconscious. Then I remembered, from lessons on feminism and feminist theory, the charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. I began to understand why we, white women, are justly seen as oppressive to women of color, 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 my damaged culture. I was taught to see myself as an individual whose moral state depended on my own individual moral will. My schooling followed the pattern my colleague Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: whites are taught to think of their lives as a morally neutral, normative, and average, also ideal, so that when we work to benefit others, this is seen as work which will allow "them" to be more like "us."

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 which I think in my case attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though of course all of these other factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can see, my African American co-workers, friends and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place, and line of work cannot count on most of these conditions:

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- When I 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. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me.

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- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by others or security.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented in non-stereotypical ways.
- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
- I can be sure that my children will be given classroom materials that testify to the importance of their race.
- If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
- 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.
- Whether checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- 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.
- I can speak in public to a powerful white male group without putting my race on trial.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world’s majority without feeling any penalty for my ignorance.
- I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
- I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to “the person in charge,” that person will be someone “like me.”
- If a cop pulls me over I can be pretty sure I haven’t been singled out because of my race.
- I can easily buy books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and magazines featuring people of my race.
- 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.
- I can get a job without co-workers on the job suspecting that I got it because of race.
- I can be in public without fearing that others of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in these places.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
- If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each situation whether it has racial overtones.
- I can choose band-aids or ace bandages in “flesh” color and have them more or less match my skin.

I repeatedly forgot each realization 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; in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If white privilege is true, this is not such a free country;

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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 backpack of white privilege, I listed above the conditions of daily experience which I have taken for granted. Prior to making this list, I did not think of any of these things as bad for me to have and use. I now think that we need a much better understanding of invisible privilege and how it works. Don't we want to live in a just society? We do not want to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant or destructive, do we?

I see a pattern running through the matrix of white privilege, a pattern of assumptions which were passed on to me as a white person: there is one main piece of cultural turf; it is my own turf, and I am the right color to control the turf. My skin color is an asset for any move I 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 my dominant cultural turf. I could also criticize it fairly free.

In proportion as my racial group was being made to feel confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were being made to feel unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protects me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence; and I was being subtly trained to turn my confidence, comfort and oblivion upon people of color. The privileged gain power from their ability to do so.

Power from unearned 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 damaging. For example, the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against you, should be the norm in a fair and just society.

Others however are damaging, like the privilege to ignore those less powerful, distorting the humanity of us all.

We could start to fix this invisible problem by distinguishing between positive advantages which we can work to spread, and negative advantages which reinforce our social hierarchies. For example, the feeling that one belongs within the human circle, as Native Americans say, should not be seen as privilege of a few—ideally, we all should have the same sense of belonging to our society.

I have met very few men who seem distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance.

So one question that I have is whether we will be distressed, even outraged, when we acknowledge unearned race advantage and the dominance it gives whites. If so, what we will do to lessen it? Even if not willing to do anything, we need to be willing to identify how race affects our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, white students in the US 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 dangers surrounding the task of finding parallels are many. Since not all -isms (racism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.) are the same, the advantages associated with are not the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle aspects of unearned advantage which are entwined with our social class, economic class, race, religion, ethnic identity and so on—just as systems of privilege are interlocking, so are systems of oppression.

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One factor seems clear about all of the interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms which we can see and embedded forms which privileged groups and individuals are 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 as a series of invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of our systems won't be enough to change them. I was taught to think that racism could end if white individuals changed their attitudes. 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 ease, 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 tool here—this kind of denial keeps the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these taboo subjects to discuss. 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 enculturated 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 choice and 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.

Though systematic change takes many decades, these are pressing issues for me and I imagine for some others like me if we earn some of our daily consciousness about our own selves on the prerequisite of being light-skinned.

What will we do with this knowledge? It is a choice whether we choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, or whether we use our arbitrarily-awarded power and privilege to try to reconstruct systems of power to be equitable and just.