Unpacking the Knapsack of White Privilege

by Peggy McIntosh

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In my efforts to incorporate materials and philosophical attitudes from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to concede that they are over-privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say that they will work to improve women's status in the society, the university, or the curriculum, but they can't or won't support the idea of lessening men's. Denial, amounting to a kind of taboo, surrounds the subject of the advantages men gain from women's disadvantages. These denials protect male privilege from being fully acknowledged, lessened or ended.

In examining the phenomenon of unacknowledged male privilege, I realized that, with our society's system of interlocking, there was most likely a phenomenon of white privilege which was similarly denied and protected. I realized that, as a white person, I had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to recognize a corollary aspect, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, just as males are taught not to recognize male privilege. So I have begun in an untutored way to ask, What it is like to possess white privilege? I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets, assets which I can cash-in each day but about which I am "meant" to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, code books, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks.

Revealing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work to reveal male privilege and ask men to surrender some of their power, so one who writes about white privilege must ask, "Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?"

After I realized the extent to which men operate 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 justly seen as oppressive even when we don't see ourselves that way. I began to count the ways I enjoy unearned skin privilege and have been conditioned to be oblivious to 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 pointed out by my colleague Elizabeth Minnich:

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 which will allow "them" to be more like "us."

I decided to try to train myself by at least identifying some of the daily effects of white privilege in my life. I have chosen those conditions that, in my case, attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographical location, though these other privileging factors are intricately intertwined. As far as I can tell, my African American co-workers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into 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.
- 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.
- I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
- I can go shopping alone most of the time, fairly well assured that I will not be followed or harassed by store detectives.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.
- 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 curricular materials that testify to the existence 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 that fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the assumption that I am financially reliable.
- I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
- I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
- I can do well in challenging situations 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 to the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling within my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
- 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," I will be facing a person of my race.
- 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.
- I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
- I can go home from most meetings of organizations in which I hold membership feeling somewhat connected to the group, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
- I can take a job with an affirmative-action employer without having my co-workers suspect that I got the job because of my race.
- I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race will be refused admittance or will be mistreated.
- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, others' attitudes about my race will not work against me.
- If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
- I can choose blemish-cover or bandages in "flesh" color and find that they more or less match my skin.

In creating this list, I repeatedly forgot each of these realizations 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. For if these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors are opened for certain people through no merit or action of their own.

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 primary piece of cultural turf; it is my own turf; and I am 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 remain oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms. Being of the main culture, I was also fairly free to criticize it.

In proportion, as such assumptions of privilege made my racial group confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were likely made unconfident, uncomfortable, and alienated. Whiteness protected me from many kinds of hostility, distress, and violence which I was subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color. I have not previously imagined these perquisites [something held or claimed as an exclusive right or possession] to have any bad effect on the holder. But I now think that we need a more finely-differentiated taxonomy of privilege, distinguishing the beneficial from the destructive privileges: some of these varieties of privilege are nothing other than what one would want for everyone in a just society, while others give license to be ignorant, oblivious, arrogant and destructive. For this reason, the word "privilege" now seems to me misleading.

In unpacking this invisible knapsack of white privilege, I have discovered conditions of daily experience which once I took for granted. We ordinarily think of being privileged as a favored state, whether earned or conferred by birth or luck. Yet some of the conditions I have described here work to systematically overempower certain groups. Such privilege simply confers dominance. I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power conferred systematically. Power resulting from unearned privilege can be mistaken for strength, when in fact it is 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 the less-powerful, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

In combating white privilege, we might at least start by distinguishing between those positive advantages we can work to

spread and the negative types of advantages which, unless rejected, will continue to 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, granted only to a few, it is an unearned advantage for them. This paper results from my growing recognition that some of the power I originally saw as a function of being human in the US resulted in fact from unearned advantage and conferred dominance.

I have met very few men who are truly distressed about systemic, unearned male advantage and conferred dominance. And so I and others like me must consider whether we will be like them or whether we will allow ourselves to become 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 to identify for ourselves the ways in which this system of privilege actually affects our daily lives. Many, perhaps most, white students in the US think that racism doesn't affect them, since 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 systems of advantage 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 racism, sexism, and heterosexism are not the same, the advantaging associated with them should not be seen as the same. In addition, it is hard to disentangle those aspects of unearned advantage that rest on social class, economic class, race, religion, sex and ethnic identity than on other factors. Still, all of the oppressions interlock.

One factor seems clear about these interlocking oppressions: they take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which members of the dominant group are taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as racist; 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.

To disapprove of the 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 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 tool here. This denial prohibits rethinking about equality or equity, protecting unearned advantage and conferred dominance by making these subjects taboo. Most talk by whites about equal opportunity seems to me now to be about equal opportunity to try to achieve a position of dominance while maintaining the denial that systems of dominance exist.

It seems to me that obliviousness about white advantage, like obliviousness about male advantage, remains strongly inculcated in the United States, enabling the retention of the myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. To maintain silence about the truth that true freedom of action is a privilege of the few is to sustain those in power and to retain the majority of power in the hands that have long held it.

Though systemic change takes many decades, these issues raise pressing questions for me and, I imagine, for some others like me, once we raise our daily consciousness about the perquisites of being light-skinned. What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from the history of male privilege, it remains unanswered whether we will use such unearned advantages to undermine these hidden systems of advantage and exploit any of our arbitrarily-awarded power to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.