
WHITE PRIVILEGE: UNPACKING THE INVISIBLE KNAPSACK

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

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 over privileged, even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. They may say 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. 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 was most likely a phenomenon of white 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 justly 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 line 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. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area that I can afford and in which I would want to live.
3. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
4. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
5. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
6. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
7. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
8. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
9. 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.
10. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
11. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
12. 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.
13. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting my race on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
16. 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.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider. 18. 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.
18. 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.
19. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
20. 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.
21. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
22. 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.
23. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me.
24. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
25. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less match my skin.

Elusive and fugitive

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 pattern of assumptions that were passed on to me as a white person. There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could control the turf. My skin color was an asset for any more 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 overempower 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 systemically. 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 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 saw 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 are 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 dangers 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 group 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 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. They keep the thinking about equality or equity incomplete, 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 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 to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.

In his 2004 article, The Color of Supremacy, Leonardo builds on McIntosh’s work:

…The sheer amount of acts of violence or terror by whites toward racial minorities is overwhelming. However, following the format used by McIntosh, it is helpful to create a selective list of acts, laws, and decisions, if only to capture a reliable portrait of white supremacy.

1. In order to promote the ‘purity’ of the white race, anti-miscegenation laws prevent diversification of the gene pool (Davis, 2001; Alcoff, 2000). White racism’s claims to purity are an instance of its problematic humanist essentialism (Balibar, 1990).
2. Housing segregation limits black mobility and access to jobs and other kinds of networks. Abandoned in inner cities, blacks suffer the most enduring and complete ghettoization in American history (Massey & Denton, 1993).
3. The rule of hypodescent, or the ‘one drop rule,’ allows the creation of more blacks and hence more slaves, increases scarcity of white identity, and provides an ‘out’ for white rapists of black women to disclaim responsibility for their children (Davis, 2001; hooks, 1981).
4. Segregated education for students of color creates substandard schools,
lack of resources, and inferior education (Spring, 2000). Even after the 1954 decision following Brown vs. Board of Education in Topeka, Kansas ruled that ‘separate is inherently unequal,’ second generation, or de facto, segregation still mars the educational experience of many students of color in the U.S. (Kozol, 1991).

5. Anti-immigrant Laws and Exclusion Acts curtail the rights of many Asian immigrants on U.S. soil and place limitations or quotas on immigration from their home nation (Takaki, 1993). These laws negatively affect family development and life, psychological wellness, and increase experiences of exile in Asian immigrants.

6. Colonization of third world nations establishes white global supremacy and perceived white superiority (Fanon, 1963; Memmi, 1965). Much of the continents of Africa, South America, North America, Australia, frigid Greenland and New Zealand, and large chunks of tropical Asia and the Pacific Islands succumbed to the expansion of the white race (see Jordan, 1968).

7. The Occident creates its infantilized other through methods of cultural imperialism whereby the other is constructed, controlled, and written into inferiority (Said, 1979, 1994). Through cultural imperialism, ideologies of the West make their way to the shores of the ‘heart of darkness’ (Conrad’s terminology), where the culture of the white race is consolidated into a dominant frame of reference for civilization, moral development, and rationality.

8. Job discrimination limits the upward mobility of workers of color and their access to productive networks (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Feagin, 2000).

9. Whites’ genocidal efforts against Native Americans facilitated takeover of Northern American soil and the attempt to eliminate its indigenous population. Where a policy of elimination was not possible, whites produced a form of education violent to Native Americans (Dog & Erdoes, 1999).

11. U.S. internment camps for Japanese target an Asian group as ‘traitors’ of the nation state and brand them as ‘forever foreigners’ on American soil. The same treatment did not fall on other ‘enemies of the state’ during World War II, such as Germans or Italians (Houston & Houston, 1973).

12. Exoticization of the other, which masks the colonial policy of the degradation of indigenous culture, has turned colonial posts into commercial artifacts to be enjoyed by the white imagination. Colonized lands, like Hawaii, are now places thoroughly ‘tourified’ for the pleasure of visitors to partake in its stereotypical, prostituted, cultural forms (Trask, 1999).

13. California’s Proposition 227, and others like it, impose English as the only legitimate language in schools and the workplace, thereby devaluing non-white cultures (Nieto, 2000). Although other European languages, such as French and German, are also unofficial, groups associated with them are not conveniently constructed as ‘aliens,’ or the common insult for Mexicans and other Latinos.

14. Appropriation of third world labor exploits the global work force for the profit of (post)industrial first world nations and the benefit of the white global bourgeoisie. This increases alienation for both groups, with the third world suffering the brutal structures of exploitation, unsafe work conditions, and an imbalance in relations of power between nations (Davis, 1997).

15. Military installation of naval and army bases to ‘protect’ third world nations from external aggression promotes a condescending and patronizing relationship between the protectorate first world nation and third world nation whose sovereignty is compromised (Enloe, 2001).


17. Forced sterilization of women of color continues the curtailment of their human and reproduction rights (Roberts, 1999).

18. The Tuskegee syphilis study, and other unethical medical research projects like it, use minority bodies for medical experimentations without the participants’ full awareness and consent. In this case, the U.S. government deceived 400 blacks by promising free treatment for their syphilis. Between 1932 and 1972, the researchers conducted their disguised study of untreated syphilis, from which 100 black men died (Spina, 2000).

19. Jim Crow laws create American apartheid whereby blacks and whites are treated unequally under the auspices of the judicial system (Morris, 1984).
20. Inheritance laws favor whites, whose families benefit from free black labor during slavery. Centuries later, their children retain their parents’ wealth. In general, whites bequeath wealth onto their children, whereas blacks often bequeath debt to theirs (Oliver & Shapiro, 1997).


22. Tracking practices in schools limit the educational mobility, curricular offerings, and positive interactions with teachers of black and Latino students (Oakes, 1985).

23. The systematic lynching of African Americans served as a tool of social control. Often couched in the fears of miscegenation, lynching was thought to be justified because African Americans violated the racial and social etiquettes of the South or in order to deter their civil rights activism, such as registering to vote (Davis, 1981).

24. Race riots against blacks were used as tools by whites to destroy black property and business districts, especially when they were flourishing. Riots were also used to enforce neighborhood boundaries that maintained racial segregation. Reparations to blacks, who lost their property during the riots, were never made. Moreover, city governments often never officially acknowledged that the riots occurred (Massey & Denton, 1993; Roediger, 1991).

25. Women of color are more likely to be raped than white women, but less likely to be believed. The U.S. has a long history of sexual abuse of women of color, largely because of their lack of power and whites’ hypersexualization of them. Sexual abuse and rape of women of color create a culture of violence (Davis, 1981).


27. Whites subverted community reading programs and other educational practices by blacks, forcing them to create clandestine literacy programs (Holt, 1990).

28. Union exclusion of blacks from the working-class movement or from leadership positions in proletarian groups (West, 1999b).

29. Many blacks and Latinos live in forsaken neighborhoods with high levels of toxic pollution. As a result, they suffer from diseases related to these forms of environmental racism (Lipsitz, 1998).

Privilege is the daily cognate of structural domination. Without securing the latter, the former is not activated. A few examples should suffice: Whites have ‘neighbors … [who] are neutral or pleasant’ (McIntosh, 1992, p. 73) to them because redlining and other real estate practices, with the help of the Federal Housing Agency, secure the ejection of the black and brown body from white spaces. Whites can enter a business establishment and expect the “‘person in charge’ to be white’ (McIntosh, 1992, p. 74) because of a long history of job discrimination. Whites are relatively free from racial harassment from police officers because racial profiling strategies train
U.S. police officers that people of color are potential criminals. Finally, whites ‘can choose blemish cover or bandages in “flesh color’ to match their skin (McIntosh, 1992, p. 75) because of centuries of denigration of darker peoples and images associated with them, fetishism of the color line, and the cultivation of the politics of pigmentation. We can condense the list under a general theme: whites enjoy privileges largely because they have created a system of domination under which they can thrive as a group. The volumes of writing on the issue of domination testify that the process is complex and multi-causal. But the enactment is quite simple: set up a system that benefit the group, mystify the system, remove the agents of actions from discourse, and when interrogated about it, stifl the discussion with inane comments about the ‘reality’ of the charges being made…