

Shelley E. Bland, "White Privilege: Review of Peggy McIntosh's '[Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)'", CYS, May08

OVERVIEW

Peggy McIntosh, author of "[Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#)," (1989) writes about a convicting and challenging notion of racism in white privilege. Her studies in this field were rooted in findings of men's unwillingness to grant their over-privileged status, though they would admit the disadvantaged state of women. These denials, in essence, protected male privilege from being acknowledged, decreased, or curtailed. Calling out this unacknowledged male privilege phenomenon, McIntosh knew that since hierarchies in the society of the United States were interlocking, her finding of unattended white privilege might be a key to racism as well.

For McIntosh, racism is taught as something which puts another at a disadvantage. In light of the preceding, she realized an erroneous omission in the teaching of racism: if some are disadvantaged, a significant corollary must be that another is placed in a position of advantage. Specifically, white privilege must be the translated position of advantage.

McIntosh describes white privilege vividly and powerfully as the idea of an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions and more. In other words, a white person in the United States has on his or her back an invisible weightless knapsack granting favored positions, status, acceptance, and more.

Following up on how racism is taught, McIntosh finds that whites are taught "to think of their lives as a morally neutral, normative, and average ideal, so that when [we] work to benefit others, it's seen as work allowing "them" to be more like "us." This kind of teaching establishes a silent, but strong belief that the white is superior, even deserving our advantages.

FINDINGS

In wading through the disillusionment the reality of realized white privilege brings upon one's life, McIntosh understood that it then made one newly

accountable. McIntosh began working through this issue first in herself through accountability in counting the ways in which she enjoyed “unearned skin privilege;” possibly even more grievous, she noted that she had been conditioned into oblivion of its existence. Likely, many whites operate in such oblivion.

Here are some of the items that she found to compose an invisible white knapsack:

1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
3. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
4. When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization,” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
5. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
6. 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 ...
7. 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.
8. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
9. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
10. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
11. 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.
12. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children’s magazine featuring people of my race.
13. 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.
14. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-

workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.

15. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

These few components of the invisible white knapsack encompass social, emotional, mental, and physical aspects of one's life. This means, therefore, that the invisible white knapsack serves holistically for the unearned privilege of one, and contributes towards holistic injustice of another.

CONCLUSIONS

After such discoveries, McIntosh's realizes how short the word "privilege" fall. We are really talking about "power." The conditions above allow for the systematic over-empowerment of certain groups. In short, such privilege "confers dominance because of one's race or sex." Such dominance, whether intentional or unintentional, is embedded in white privilege. McIntosh goes on to say that disapproving of racist systems will not be enough to change them. However, systemic change can begin with the acknowledgment, identification of, and teaching of white privilege for oneself and then others. Late, after persistent and patient work, may one hope for system changes.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Do you agree with McIntosh about the concept, and reality, of the 'invisible knapsack?' Do you see how this invisible knapsack can also express itself in terms of religion or age? If not, how would you interpret her findings?
2. Have you listened to the stories of people of color disadvantaged when they drive, when they go into a store, and in many other daily experiences?
3. How does the matter of an unfair playing field make you feel if you are a 'wearer' of such a 'knapsack' - Distressed? Outraged? Indifferent? Hopeless in bringing change? If you are one oppressed by the 'knapsack' others seem to have, what are your feelings: - Angry? Saddened? Justified? More isolated?
4. What are some things you can add to McIntosh's list as examples of your own 'invisible knapsack' if you believe yourself to wear one?
5. How were you taught about racism, through your family, peers, media

and educational system?

6. What can you do to lessen the effect or remove the 'invisible knapsack' if you believe yourself to wear one?
7. Will you continue to identify how unearned race advantage and conferred dominance affects your daily life if you are in such the position of 'favor'?
8. Do you think others in your surrounding sphere understand this view of racism? Are there positive ways you can discuss it with them?

IMPLICATIONS

1. Despite all talk of "the end of racism," people of color experience, on personal and systemic levels, the powerful effect of something.
2. Difficult as it may be, we deal best with racism and other kinds of discrimination by listening and responding to one another.

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