

McIntosh, P. (1989, July/August). [White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack](#). Peace and Freedom.

OVERVIEW

It is easy for me to walk into a stationery store and find a greeting card appropriate for my family or most of my friends. But recently, my wife and I wanted to send a card to dear friends who just had a baby girl. But we had a challenging experience finding the right card. The problem was not in the lack of congratulatory messages, but in the lack of cards which properly identify with our friends. Our friends are African American. It is also heartbreaking to notice that their birth announcement portrays a sketch of a white baby; they, too, had a hard time finding an appropriate greeting.

This is white privilege.

According to Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the [Wellesley College Center for Research on Women](#), "white privilege" is "an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was meant to remain oblivious." This discovery came as she was preparing a research article concerning male privilege in America. She realized that while she was under the dominance of males, she had a dominance over other women who were of another ethnic origin, particularly black women.

The article begins with the author's reflections on male privilege; she then transitions into her personal reflections on its implications in race relations. After outlining several characteristics of white privilege, she relates several everyday examples of white privilege. For instance, McIntosh is assured that she can easily live anywhere her income allows her to live. Or she can find bandages which are "flesh" tone that actually match her skin color. Each of her anecdotes proves the reality of white privilege. She lists such examples in an activity that she refers to as "unpacking the invisible knapsack" of white privilege. It is important for people to actually see these things listed in order to realize their truth.

After the list, McIntosh outlines why she believes that "privilege" is too soft a word. She asserts that "dominance" is more appropriate; the mental control that a particular race has over another is a sort of dominance.

McIntosh suggests that no longer are the chains made of metal; rather, they are made of mental control devices such as the ones listed. But no one is held responsible because of the oblivious nature of the whole thing. She believes that it is perhaps as damaging as slavery.

The author wants to find a solution. She suggests that the answer lies in education. Individuals must understand what is happening and then make others aware. Once everyone understands white privilege, the issues of control can be addressed and eradicated.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- Do you agree that white privilege is prevalent in American society? Explain.
- What can you do to end white privilege?
- Do you unintentionally perpetuate white privilege? If so, how?
- Does white privilege affect other races as much as African Americans?
- Is white privilege a phenomenon in America, or is it international?
- How do African-Americans that you know feel about white privilege?

IMPLICATIONS

Though outright racism still exists, it occurs to a lesser degree than it did even thirty years ago. Though there are no longer U.S. slaves, people with light skin still dominate dark-skinned people in the mental obstacles that are ignorantly positioned. As a light-skinned American, it's easy to believe that anyone can achieve whatever they desire—and if they don't, it's their own fault because they didn't try hard enough.

When one recognizes the inherent advantages of being fair-skinned, one must adjust his or her thinking. But don't assume that race-based hiring is the immediate solution. If this age and society continues to prevent dark-skinned people from having a fair chance, then no government program will solve the deeper problem. However, if popular media and teachers join forces, then those in power will be forced to address their method of control, and the barriers may begin to crumble.

Here are several suggestions:

- The language of white privilege must be included in any education on

racism. Without understanding the underlying barriers, no one can address the real concerns. Few people will openly admit racist attitudes, but everyone with fair skin should at least admit that they have a privilege and consider relinquishing that privilege in the marketplace of ideas and money.

- Media personalities can lead in the breaking down of racial stereotypes. Racial identity may be an important factor for people, but perpetuating negative stereotypes does not break down walls. If media personalities such as TV and movie stars and respected news anchors and talk show hosts begin to address issues of white privilege, the masses will learn about the issues. This will allow us, as a society, to effectively deal with the problem of racism.

Matthew Furr cCYS