UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

(Editor's note: The theme of our 1988 staff and volunteer retreat was "The Challenge of Racism in a Multicultural Society." During the weekend, we explored the rapidly changing composition of the U.S. population, the personal and political impact of racism, and what AFSC [American Friends Service Committee] has done and is doing now to address these problems. Below are excerpts from a presentation, "Understanding Correspondences Between White Privilege and Male Privilege Through Women's Studies Work," written by Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. These excerpts convey some of the ideas and personal experiences shared during the retreat. Our special thanks to Mariagnes Medrad for using McIntosh's questions in her own presentation.)

Through work to bring materials and perspectives from Women's Studies into the rest of the curriculum, I have often noticed men's unwillingness to grant that they are over privileged in the curriculum even though they may grant that women are disadvantaged. The denial, almost amounting to taboo, surrounding this subject - the existence of advantages which men gain from women's disadvantages - protect male privilege from being seen, acknowledged, lessened, or ended.

Thinking about male privilege as a phenomenon with a life of its own, 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, but alive and real in its effects. As a white person, I realized I had been taught about racism, which puts others at a disadvantage, but had never been taught to see its other side, white privilege, which puts me at an advantage.

I think Whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege. So I began in an unuttered way to ask what it is like to have white privilege. I have come to see it as an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in on each day, but about which I was "meant" to remain oblivious. In fact, white privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear and blank checks.

Since I have trouble facing white privilege, and describing its effects on my life, I saw parallels here with men's reluctance to acknowledge male privilege. Only rarely will a man go beyond acknowledging that men have unearned advantages, or that unearned privilege has not been good for men's development, or that privilege systems might ever be challenged and changed.

Writing this paper has been difficult, despite warm receptions for the talks on which it is based, for describing white privilege makes one newly accountable. As we in Women's Studies work reveal male privilege and ask men to give up some of their power, so one who writes about having white privilege must ask, "Having seen it, what will we do to lessen it?"

My schooling gave me no training in seeing myself as an oppressor, as an over rewarded 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 oral will. At school, if we had been taught about slavery, which we were not, we probably would not have been taught that the institution of slavery damaged slaveholders. Slaves would have been seen as the only group at risk of being dehumanized. My schooling followed the pattern which Elizabeth Minnich has pointed out: Whites are 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 think many (women) know how obnoxious this attitude can be in men.

After frustration with men who would not face male 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 will give here a list of special circumstances and conditions I experience in my particular existence, which I did not earn but which I have been made to feel are mine by birth and by virtue of being a conscientious law abiding "normal" person of good will. I have chosen those conditions which I think in my case attach somewhat more to color privilege than to class or ethnic status or geographical location, through of course all the 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.

1. I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me.
3. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing a dwelling on an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
4. I can be pretty sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.
5. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
6. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my race widely represented.
7. When I am told about our national heritages or about "our civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
8. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
9. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this piece on white privilege.
10. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group of which I am the only member of my race.
11. I can choose whether or not to hear another woman's voice in a group in which she is the only member of her race.
12. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the food I grew up with, into a hairdresser's shop and find someone who can deal with my hair.
13. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial ability.
14. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.
15. I do not have to educate my children to be aware of systemic racism for their own protection.
16. I can be pretty sure that my children will be well liked by their teachers, if they are obedient children; my chief worries about them do not concern societal attitudes toward their race.
17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my skin color.

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18. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute those choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
19. I can speak in public to a powerful male group without having my race on trial.
20. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
21. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
22. 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.
23. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
24. 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.
25. If a traffic cop pulls me over or the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been single out because of my race.
26. I can easily buy pet food, greeting cards, picture books, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
27. I can go home from most meetings of the organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, outnumbered, unheard, feared, or hated.
28. I can be pretty sure that an argument with a colleague of another race is more likely to jeopardize her chances for advancement than to jeopardize mine.
29. I can be pretty sure that if I argue for the promotion of a person of another race, or for a program centered on race, this is not likely to cost me heavily within my present setting, even if my colleagues disagree with me.
30. If I declare there is a racial issue at hand, or there isn't a racial issue at hand, my race will lend me more credibility for either position than a person of color will have.
31. I can choose to ignore developments in minority writing and minority activist programs, or disparage them, or learn from them, but in any case, I can find ways to be more or less protected from negative consequences of any of these choices.
32. My culture gives me little fear about ignoring the opinions of women and men who are not of my race.
33. I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken as a reflection of my race.
34. I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
35. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having my co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of my race.
36. I can be pretty sure of finding people who would be willing to talk with me on or advise me about next steps, professionally.
37. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative, or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
38. I can expect to find in the grocery store staple foods which fit in with my cultural traditions.
39. I can be late to a meeting without having my lateness reflect on my race.
40. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated.
41. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
42. I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing my race.
43. If I have low credibility as a leader in the dominant society I can be sure that my race is not the problem.
44. I can only choose bluish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

In this potpourri of examples, some privileges make me feel at home in the world. Others allow me to escape penalties or dangers which others suffer. Some keep me from having to hide, to be in disguise, to feel sick or crazy, to negotiate each transaction from the position of being an outsider or, within my group, a person who is suspected of having too close links with a dominant culture.

In proportion as my racial group was being made confident, comfortable, and oblivious, other groups were being made proportionately innocent, uncomfortable, and alienated. My whiteness protected me from many kinds of danger, distress, criticism, violence, and hatred which I was being subtly trained to visit in turn upon people of color. Just as Women's Studies courses indicate that women survive their victimization to lead effective lives holding the human race together, so I have come to see that people of color who are really the world's majority, have survived their victimization and lived strong lives, from which global minority can learn and must learn. My reflections here do not suggest that privilege produces genuine superiority or moral strength. It often produces carelessness, thoughtlessness, ignorance, and fear and hatred of the unknown. In many ways, those dominated have actually become strong through not having all of these unearned advantages, and this is one reason why they have a lot to teach....

Since race and sex are not the only privilege systems at work, I think we need to similarly examine the actual effects of having age privilege, or ethnic privilege, or physical ability, or privilege related to sexual orientation....

It seems to me that obviousness about white privilege, like obviousness about male privileges, is kept strongly insurged to so as to maintain our myth of meritocracy, the myth that democratic choice is equally available to all. Keeping everybody oblivious is to the fact that freedom of confident action is there for just a small number of people prop up those in power and serve to keep power in the hands of the same groups that have most of it already. A pressing question for me that others like me as we embark on this work is what we will do with such knowledge - whether we will determine to find ways to use privilege to share privilege or weaken privilege systems - and whether we will use any of our unearned power to reconstruct power systems on a more humane basis.