

Comments by Julia Wade on
White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack
By Peggy McIntosh

Peggy McIntosh was an associate director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988), by Peggy McIntosh.

Professor Peggy McIntosh was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on a particular group. Through her work to bring materials from women's studies into the rest of the curriculum, she 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 women's statues, 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.

She realized that, since hierarchies in our society are interlocking, she thought white privilege must be similarly denied and protected. As a white person, she realized she had been taught about racism as something that puts others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not to see white privilege, had put her at an advantage.

Having been taught not to recognize white privilege, she began to ask what it is like to have white privilege. She had come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that she could 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.

Because she understood that much of the oppressiveness that men directed towards women was unconscious, she understood that white privilege might also be unconscious. She also had a renewed interest in the frequent charges from women of color that white women whom they encounter are oppressive. She began to count the ways in which she enjoyed unearned skin privilege without recognizing it as such. She was taught to think of her life 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."

Activity: Vestry members were asked to score and tally their responses on a 1 to 5 scale with 5 being in most agreement. Vestry scores ranged from 73 to 100 (maximum number possible). The numbers associated with each question below correspond to the actual survey number.

Explanation: I work with many people of color who are my age and decades younger. Some were raised in Stamford, while others grew up in other parts of the country. Over the years Domus employees have been given the 50 question survey. The scores I shared were 0, 3, and 11, a representative sample. It is important to note that this survey was created in 1988 by Dr. McIntosh; and while strides have been made in ending overt racism, the invisible nature of systemic racism allows it to continue to flourish.

Recognizing that one benefits from white privilege makes one newly accountable. But what to do with that information? There are a couple of activities coming up that are both instructive, enlightening, and worth attending.

HANDOUTS: Decentering Whiteness; I Am Not Your Negro; Peggy McIntosh article.

TAKE THE SURVEY BELOW TO SEE HOW YOU SCORE.

Daily effects of white privilege

Dr. McIntosh identified 50 conditions that attach somewhat more to skin-color privilege than to class, religion, ethnic status, or geographic location. Your packet lists all 50, but below is a representative sample. On a scale of 1-5 with 5 being in complete agreement rate your experience and total them at the bottom of the page and put on the sticky note and hand to me. Ignore the numbering as it connotes the number of the question in the larger survey.

___1. I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.

___3. 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.

___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.

___7. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization," I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.

___13. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

___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 daily physical protection.

___16. I can be pretty sure that my children's teachers and employers will tolerate them if they fit school and workplace norms; my chief worries about them do not concern others' attitudes toward their race.

___17. I can talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my color.

___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.

___25. 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.

___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.

___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 to my race.

___46. I can chose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

___47. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting embarrassment or hostility in those who deal with us.

___50. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.