

**“White Privilege: Unpacking the
Invisible Knapsack; Implications for
Social Workers and Others Working in
the Child Welfare System**

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OK, so what is “privilege”?

- In 1990 Peggy McIntosh, Associate Director of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, wrote an essay entitled “White Privilege : Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack”
- While I had often heard about “white privilege” I did not really “get it” until I read this article a few years ago

We are carefully taught....

- Whites are carefully taught not to to recognize white privilege
- Males are carefully taught not to to recognize male privilege
- Straight folks are carefully taught not to to recognize heterosexual privilege
- **We have been taught about various “isms” that that put others at disadvantage, but not the corollary aspects of various types of privilege that put us at an advantage**

What is it like to have White Privilege?

- It is 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, blank checks

Count the ways in which we enjoy unearned skin privilege and are conditioned into oblivion about its existence

- Whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative and average
- When we work to benefit others, this is seen as work that will allow “them” to be more like “us”
- This same theory can also be applied to straight people in relationship to GLBT people; men in relationship to women; low income in relationship to middle and upper income folks....

Daily effects of white privilege

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time
- I can avoid spending time with people whom I was trained to mistrust and who have learned to mistrust my kind or me
- If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or buying a home in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live
- I can be pretty sure my neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me

More Daily effects of white privilege

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assures that I will not be followed or harassed
- I can turn on the TV or open the paper and see people of my race widely represented
- When I am told about our national heritage or about “civilization” I am shown that people of my color made it what it is

More Daily effects of white privilege

- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race
- Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.

More Daily effects of white privilege

- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race
- I am never asked to speak for all the people in my racial group
- 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

More Daily effects of white privilege

- I will not list any more....but can you think of any?
- Take a few minutes to list some
- Think especially about your role in the child welfare system
- The article by McIntosh lists 50

Privilege Brainstorm



- White Privilege
- Heterosexual privilege
- Able-bodied privilege
- Class privilege

Elusive and fugitive

- The pressure to avoid the realization of privilege is great
- If we face it, we have to give up the myth of meritocracy...if these things are true, this is not such a free country and one's life is not what one makes it
- Many doors are open for certain people through no virtues of their own

Earned Strength, unearned power

- Conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or dominate
- Not all privilege is damaging...some should just be the norm in society (like neighbors being decent to you, or that your race will not count against you in court)

Positive Advantages vs.. Negative types of advantage

- We should work to spread positive advantages and reject negative types of advantage
- Will we get truly distressed, even outraged, about unearned race advantage and conferred dominance? What will we do to lesson them?

Other forms of privilege

- What are other examples? (privilege based on gender, sexual orientation, class, religion)
- Can you think of ways one might have privilege based on these factors?

OK,OK,OK so now I “get it”; Now What?

- Be an ally...there is no one correct way to be an ally
- Being an ally means to be there all the time, for the long term, committed and active
- Because this is hard, challenging work, we often look for ways to justify not doing it

How can I be an “ally”?



- White people can be allies to people of color
- Straight people can be allies for GLBT people
- Able-bodied people can be allies for those with disabilities

Basic Tactics

-Paul Kivel

- Assume racism is everywhere, every day
- Notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power
- Notice how racism is denied, minimized and justified
- Understand and learn from the history of whiteness and racism
- Understand the connections between racism, economic issues, sexism and other forms of injustice

Basic tactics..continued

- Take a stand against injustice
- Be strategic
- Don't confuse a battle with a war
- Don't call names or be personally abusive
- Support the leadership of people of color
- Don't do it alone
- Talk with your children and other young people about racism
- Show up, even when you are tired

OK, make a plan...

- As a social worker
- As a parent
- As a foster parent
- As a care provider
- As a community member

