

Confronting the Racism of White Privilege

Consider the following statements:

- I can criticize the government and talk about how I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
- I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
- I can take a job with an affirmative-action employer without having my co-workers suspect that I got the job because of my race.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- If a traffic cop pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my skin color.
- I am rarely asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
- 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.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

If you can agree with all or most of these statements, you are most likely light-skinned with northern European ancestry. There's nothing wrong with being light-skinned with northern European ancestry, as long as you are aware of the privileges and advantages you have because of it.

Most persons of the white, dominant culture are oblivious to the privileges of our birth. Even those of us who are "culturally sensitive" and who encourage and espouse multiculturalism are largely unaware of how great the institutional challenges and barriers are for persons who are not light-skinned. It's not just an individual matter; racism is deeply embedded in our culture and our society. We in the dominant culture just don't notice it.

Over the past four decades, we were taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not of invisible systems conferring power and dominance on our group. Yet those very systems ensure that persons who are not light-skinned will continue to be oppressed by the dominance of white society.

Whites are taught to think of our lives as morally 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". We do not even perceive "whiteness" as a racial identity; it is just "what is." That racial smugness carries the strong connotation that white culture is superior and that other cultures are inferior based on race alone.

To be sure, our dominant culture is a complex system with many variables. Age advantage, income advantage, physical ability, and advantages of sex, nationality, ethnicity, religion or sexual orientation are also factors. Yet the current trend in social and political debate centers more and more on racial differences.

Recent calls for strengthened U.S. border security focus only on our southern border. Thousands of illegal aliens from Canada and Europe enter our country each year yet, as long as they are members of the dominant white culture, we remain unaware and unconcerned about their presence. They come entitled with white privilege.

It will take decades to dismantle the deeply ingrained systems of institutional racism and white privilege in America. There is little popular will to recognize the problem, and even less to confront it. Awareness of the innate advantages of white privilege is only the beginning.

Note: The author is indebted to the work of Peggy McIntosh in preparing this article.