

Original_Sender: ALAN MOOMAW <MOOMAW.ALAN@epamail.epa.gov>
Subject: A way to think about white privilege -Forwarded -Forwarded

White people need to acknowledge
benefits of unearned privilege

By Robert Jensen

BALTIMORE: Here's what white privilege sounds like: I'm sitting in my University of Texas office, talking to a very bright and very conservative white student about affirmative action in college admissions, which he opposes and I support. The student says he wants a level playing field with no unearned advantages for anyone. I ask him whether he thinks that being white has advantages in the United States. Have either of us, I ask, ever benefited from being white in a world run mostly by white people? Yes, he concedes, there is something real and tangible we could call white privilege.

So, if we live in a world of white privilege - unearned white privilege - how does that affect your notion of a level playing field? I asked. He paused for a moment and said, "That really doesn't matter." That statement, I suggested to him, reveals the ultimate white privilege: the privilege to acknowledge that you have unearned privilege but to ignore what it means.

That exchange led me to rethink the way I talk about race and racism with students. It drove home the importance of confronting the dirty secret that we white people carry around with us every day: in a world of white privilege, some of what we have is unearned. I think much of both the fear and anger that comes up around discussions of affirmative action has its roots in that secret. So these days, my goal is to talk openly and honestly about white supremacy and white privilege.

White privilege, like any social phenomenon, is complex. In a white supremacist culture, all white people have privilege, whether or not they are overtly racist themselves. There are general patterns, but

such privilege plays out differently depending on context and other aspects of one's identity (in my case, being male gives me other kinds of privilege). Rather than try to tell others how white privilege has played out in their lives, I talk about how it has affected me.

I am as white as white gets in this country. I am of northern European heritage and I was raised in North Dakota, one of the whitest states in the country. I grew up in a virtually all-white world surrounded by racism, both personal and institutional. Because I didn't live near a reservation, I didn't even have exposure to the state's only numerically significant nonwhite population, American Indians.

I have struggled to resist that racist training and the racism of my culture. I like to think I have changed, even though I routinely trip over the lingering effects of that internalized racism and the institutional racism around me. But no matter how much I "fix" myself, one thing never changes - I walk through the world with white privilege.

What does that mean? Perhaps most importantly, when I seek admission to a university, apply for a job, or hunt for an apartment, I don't look threatening. Almost all of the people evaluating me look like me - they are white. They see in me a reflection of themselves - and in a racist world, that is an advantage. I smile. I am white. I am one of them. I am not dangerous. Even when I voice critical opinions, I am cut some slack. After all, I'm white.

My flaws also are more easily forgiven because I am white. Some complain that affirmative action has meant the university is saddled with mediocre minority professors. I have no doubt there are minority faculty who are mediocre, though I don't know very many. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. once pointed out, if affirmative action policies were in place for the next hundred years, it's possible that at the end of that time the university could have as many mediocre minority professors as it has mediocre white professors. That isn't meant as an insult to anyone,

but it's a simple observation that white privilege has meant that scores of second-rate white professors have slid through the system because their flaws were overlooked out of solidarity based on race, as well as on gender, class and ideology.

Some people resist the assertions that the United States is still a bitterly racist society and that the racism has real effects on real people. But white folks have long cut other white folks a break. I know, because I am one of them. I am not a genius - as I like to say, I'm not the sharpest knife in the drawer. I have been teaching full time for six years and I've published a reasonable amount of scholarship. Some of it is the unexceptional stuff one churns out to get tenure, and some of it, I would argue, is worth reading. I worked hard, and I like to think that I'm a fairly decent teacher. Every once in a while, I leave my office at the end of the day feeling like I really accomplished something. When I cash my pay check, I don't feel guilty. But, all that said, I know I did not get where I am by merit alone. I benefited from among other things, white privilege. That doesn't mean that I don't deserve my job, or that if I weren't white I would never have gotten the job. It means simply that all through my life, I have soaked up benefits for being white.

All my life I have been hired for jobs by white people. I was accepted for graduate school by white people. And I was hired for a teaching position by the predominantly white University of Texas, headed by a white president, in a college headed by a white dean and in a department with a white chairman that at the time had one nonwhite tenured professor. I have worked hard to get where I am, and I work hard to stay there. But to feel good about myself and my work, I do not have to believe that "merit" as defined by white people in a white country, alone got me here. I can acknowledge that in addition to all that hard work, I got a significant boost from white privilege.

At one time in my life, I would not have been able to say that, because I needed to believe that my success in life was due solely to my individual talent and effort. I saw myself as the heroic American, the rugged

individualist. I was so deeply seduced by the culture's mythology that I couldn't see the fear that was binding me to those myths.

Like all white Americans, I was living with the fear that maybe I didn't really deserve my success, that maybe luck and privilege had more to do with it than brains and hard work. I was afraid I wasn't heroic or rugged, that I wasn't special.

I let go of some of that fear when I realized that, indeed, I wasn't special, but that I was still me. What I do well, I still can take pride in, even when I know that the rules under which I work in are stacked to my benefit. Until we let go of the fiction that people have complete control over their fate - that we can will ourselves to be anything we choose - then we will live with that fear.

White privilege is not something I get to decide whether I want to keep. Every time I walk into a store at the same time as a black man and the security guard follows him and leaves me alone to shop, I am benefiting from white privilege. There is not space here to list all the ways in which white privilege plays out in our daily lives, but it is clear that I will carry this privilege with me until the day white supremacy is erased from this society.

Dawn/LAT-WP News Service (c) Baltimore Sun.

Original_Sender: Oktimpi@aol.com

Subject: Re: A way to think about white privilege -Forwarded -Forwarded

I have often pondered this theme, since I have seen how fate takes a different path, only because of Geographical circumstances. I suppose that is the root of the saying "being at the right place, at the right time", specifically being in America at the time of birth. I believe that all people in this country should have a representative of their families to have and obligatory 3 year civil service over seas, wheather in the Peace Corps, military or any other organization that allows one to work in an environment completely un-american. This allows for paradigm shifts, and the need for change and appreciation arise. One suddenly sees how good some things are, and how bad

others can be, and appreciate how change should take place. It is only when your overseas that you appreciate how workers in america are striking to make over \$10.00 an hour in an american company and the same company overseas has the same employees making \$130.00 for a whole month, working almost twice as many hours as their american counterparts, the companies products selling for nearly twice as much as they do in america. One would appreciate the fact that for 32 cents of a dollar (roughly 3 minutes of work at minimum wage), one can send a letter anywhere in this large country. It takes about a half a days wages to get the same letter half way across some third world country, and there really isn't any guarantee that it will reach its destination. I had a foreign friend that worked for his governemnt and they would annually receive form letters from the President of his country for Christmass, and it was always humorous that the letter would always arrive in May! Once one lives out, one can appreciate the ironies resultant of the consequences of Geographical fate. These consequences lead to a better understanding of human nature and allows for paradigm shifts that can give positive changes a better chance.

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Original_Sender: Madonna Yawakie <yawak001@gold.tc.umn.edu>
Subject: Re: A way to think about white privilege -Forwarded -Forwarded

One thing that I have learned over time is that truth is relative. Relative to one's experience. It is difficult to acknowledge that American Indians, or other communities of color have a level playing field with mainstream America, therefore it is also difficult to say that their is an "American" priveledge for these communities. A good way to measure American priveledge is to compare statistics from each community in the U.S. Census Bureau. This will identify how communities of color fare in comparison with mainstream america.

Madonna Yawakie

AISESnet Discussion List wrote:

> Original_Sender: bones@aztec.asu.edu (BRIAN KENNY)
> Subject: Re: A way to think about white privilege -Forwarded -Forwarded
>
> so anybody care to talk about "American" priveledge
> that phenomenon of Americans, be they white black hispanic or
> native american, who have advantage over the rest of the
> world and have unearned advantage simply being born
> American.
>
> this is true regardless of being born on an reservation with
> outdated or little infrastructure or being born in
> manhattan.

Original_Sender: "McClendon, Ginger" <Ginger.McClendon@Nextel.com>
Subject: RE: A way to think about white privilege -Forwarded -Forw

Or perhaps we could cease judging people by the groups they often have no choice but to be associated with (white, native american, black, born in manhattan or the res) and judge them individually.

This is the only way that racism will end. All sides must practice this principle if it is to work. As long as we focus on other groups/people's shortcomings we are not focusing on bettering ourselves. In the end I am only responsible for my contributions and failures. I try to assess each person for their own contributions - did they prejudice against me, or others unjustly? did they practice hatred instead of tolerance? did they turn away when they could help? what creeds and ethics do they support?

These alone are the measure of a person - not whether he is white, brown or black.