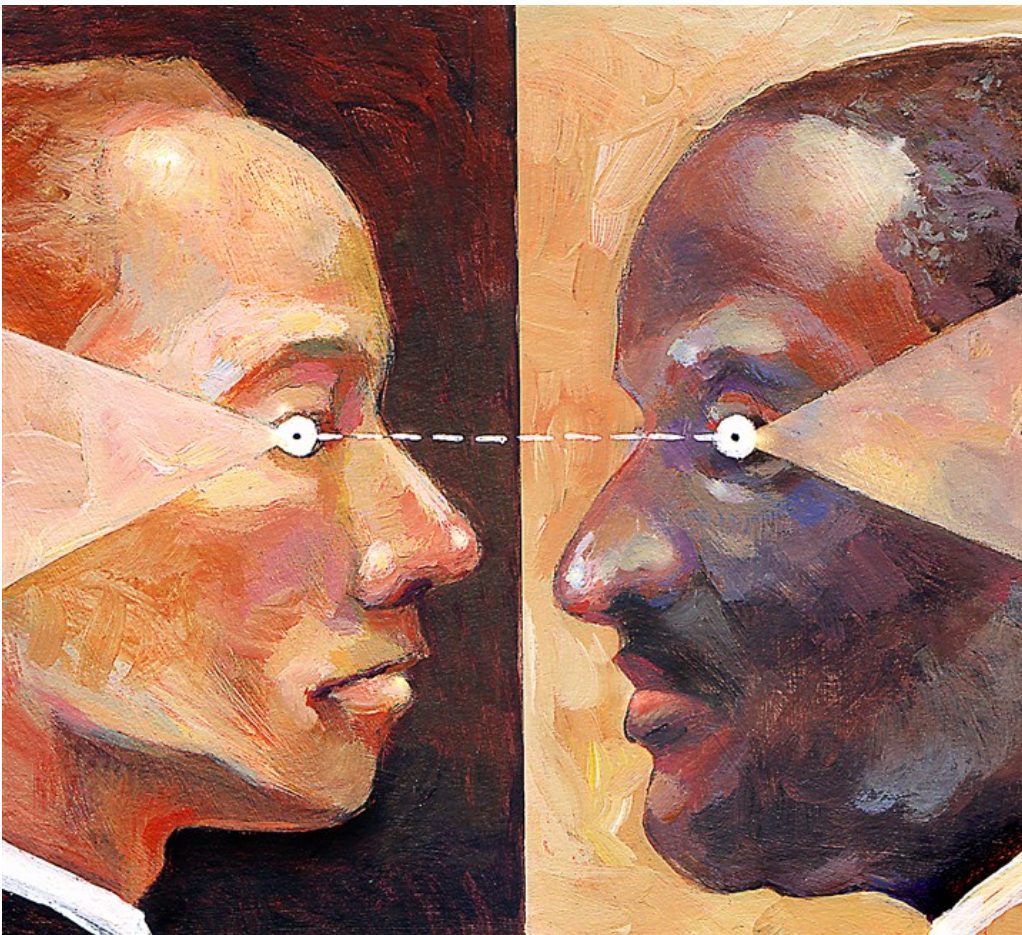


Unpacking white privilege

Feeling guilty about racial injustice isn't the point; the point is doing something about it

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By Mark N. Kramer

Just over 26 years ago, scholar Peggy McIntosh gave us 26 reasons to believe that white privilege exists as “unearned advantage.”

In an essay titled “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Ms. McIntosh “unpacked” unacknowledged privileges and unearned assets bestowed upon her by virtue of her white skin. For example, Ms. McIntosh noted that “I can choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my skin” and, more pointedly, “I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.”

As a white person reading this essay 20 years ago, I found it to be formative for my own thinking and even lifestyle. And I’m encouraged that many more white folks now are starting to see whiteness as a thing, and acknowledging the operation of privilege in everyday life (which, Ms. McIntosh pointed out, also is bestowed by gender, class, education, religion and other characteristics). Still, if current events and political dialogue are any indication, Ms. McIntosh’s list proved limited in its reach.

It’s time for an update. I’ve heard from enough white people (including college students in my writing classes) who’ve read Ms. McIntosh’s essay or something similar and asked (or protested, really), “OK, fine, let’s say this is true, and I have privileges I didn’t earn ... I can hardly stop being white, right? Am I supposed to just feel bad about my race?”

No. “White guilt” is meaningless ... unless it leads to action.

The knapsack’s contents have been unpacked a bit. I’d like to put them to use. Here are some things white people can do, based on some of the privileges Ms. McIntosh unpacked, to work toward equity, foster better relationships and build deeper awareness and empathy. (While I have, for various reasons, focused upon dynamics between whites and African Americans, much of this could apply to dynamics between whites and people of other races as well.) Ms. McIntosh wrote:

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

Personally, I can respond to this privilege by initiating relationships with people who aren’t white — without being that pushy white person who just wants “a black friend.” I can seek situations in which I am the only white person, sit with those feelings of isolation and dissonance.

2. 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.

I can choose to live in a racially and socio-economically diverse neighborhood, or live where I am the minority.

3. I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.

I can speak when I see African-Americans being hassled. I can patronize African-American businesses, shops and contractors, build partnerships across racial lines.

4. I can turn on the television or [look at] the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.

I can seek out African-American news sources, learn how political and social events are framed outside of mainstream media, which are, regardless of political bent, mostly upper-class and

white.

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

I can explore the richness of our nation’s past, including all people’s experiences. African-American history is integral to American history.

6. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

I can share that richer history with my children and other young people, sharing both our nation’s groundbreaking achievements and heartbreaking injustices, rather than whitewashing the past or present in the name of preserving childhood innocence.

7. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my race represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my cultural traditions, into a hairdresser’s shop and find someone who can cut my hair.

I can acknowledge that my music, food and style (such as it is...) are not neutral, “normal,” or non-ethnic, but expressive of a specific culture with a unique history driven by a unique set of forces.

8. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my race.

I can listen. I can stop pontificating and really listen. For words, yes, but also for feelings, hurt behind the eyes, body language. Listen to the ways of speaking that hint at meaning.

9. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.

I can address people as individuals. I can challenge anyone claiming to know “what African-Americans think...” or “how blacks act.”

10. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

I can usually skip the descriptor “African-American.” Race matters (trying to be “color-blind” is a short-sighted approach) but it often is not the point. Sometimes an “African-American writer” is just ... a writer.

11. I can take a job [or attend college] with an affirmative-action employer [or university] without having my co-workers on the job [classmates] suspect that I got it because of my race.

I can support educational equity in order to break the school-to-prison pipeline so all children can participate in a workforce with such abundant opportunities that affirmative action becomes a thing of the past.

12. If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure that I haven’t been singled out because of my race.

I can speak out against racial profiling.

13. 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.

At times I've refrained from speaking because I don't want to be that do-gooding liberal wearing guilt like a badge, moralizing so loudly as to drown out real experts on racism (i.e. most people who aren't white). But if I — if whites — speak in a way that suggests I understand how whiteness operates, I'm more likely to have something constructive to contribute to the conversation, and I'm more likely to be heard.

Of course, we whites cannot stop being white or even benefitting from our whiteness. But we can learn to appreciate that being white does carry certain unearned privileges. We can embrace whiteness, even as we leverage that privilege to make our society fairer.

The cost of doing so is minimal. The payoff could be considerable.

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