

White Benefits, Middle Class Privilege

IT IS NOT necessarily a privilege to be white*, but it certainly has its benefits. That's why so many of us gave up our unique histories, primary languages, accents, distinctive dress, family names and cultural expressions. It seemed like a small price to pay for acceptance in the circle of whiteness. Even with these sacrifices it wasn't easy to pass as white if we were Italian, Greek, Irish, Jewish, Spanish, Hungarian, or Polish. Sometimes it took generations before our families were fully accepted, and then usually because white society had an even greater fear of darker skinned people.

Privileges are the economic "extras" that those of us who are middle class and wealthy gain at the expense of poor and working class people of all races. Benefits, on the other hand, are the advantages that all white people gain at the expense of people of color regardless of economic position. Talk about racial benefits can ring false to many of us who don't have the economic privileges that we see many in this society enjoying. But just because we don't have the economic privileges of those with more money doesn't mean we haven't enjoyed some of the benefits of being white.

We can generally count on police protection rather than harassment. Depending on our financial situation, we can choose where we want to live

* I draw on important work on privilege done by Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, MA 02181 (1988), as well as material from *Helping Teens Stop Violence* Allan Creighton with Paul Kivel, Hunter House, Alameda CA (1992).

and choose neighborhoods that are safe and have decent schools. We are given more attention, respect and status in conversations than people of color. We see people who look like us in the media, history books, news and music in a positive light. (This is more true for men than for women, more true for the rich than the poor.) We have more recourse to and credibility within the legal system (again taking into account class and gender). Nothing that we do is qualified, limited, discredited or acclaimed simply because of our racial background. We don't have to represent our race, and nothing we do is judged as a credit to our race, or as confirmation of its shortcomings or inferiority. There are always mitigating factors, and some of us have these benefits more than others. All else being equal, it pays to be white. We will be accepted, acknowledged and given the benefit of the doubt. Since all else is not equal we each receive different benefits or different levels of the same benefits from being white.

These benefits start early. Most of them apply less to white girls than white boys, but they are still substantial. Others will have higher expectations for us as children, both at home and at school. We will have more money spent on our education, we will be called on more in school, we will be given more opportunity and resources to learn. We will see people like us in the textbooks, and if we get into trouble adults will expect us to be able to change and improve, and therefore will discipline or penalize us less or differently than children of color.

These benefits continue today and work to the direct economic advantage of every white person in the United States. First of all, we will earn more in our lifetime than a person of color of similar qualifications. We will be paid \$1.00 for every \$.60 that a person of color makes. We will advance faster and more reliably as well.

There are historically derived economic benefits too. All the land in this country was taken from Native Americans. Much of the infrastructure of this country was built by slave labor, incredibly low-paid labor, or by prison labor performed by men and women of color. Much of the housecleaning, childcare, cooking and maintenance of our society has been done by low wage earning women of color. Further property and material goods were appropriated by whites through the colonization of the West and Southwest throughout the 19th century, through the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II, through racial riots against people of color in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, and through an ongoing legacy of legal manipulation and exploitation. Today men and women and children of color still do the hardest, lowest paid, most dangerous work throughout the country. And we, white people, again depending on our relative economic circumstances, enjoy plentiful and inexpensive food, clothing and consumer goods because of that exploitation.

We have been taught history through a white-tinted lens which has minimized our exploitation of people of color and extolled the hardworking,

courageous qualities of white people. For example, many of our foreparents gained a foothold in this country by finding work in such trades as railroads, streetcars, construction, shipbuilding, wagon and coach driving, house painting, tailoring, longshore work, brick laying, table waiting, working in the mills, furriering or dressmaking. These were all occupations that Blacks, who had begun entering many such skilled and unskilled jobs, were either excluded from or pushed out of in the nineteenth century. Exclusion and discrimination, coupled with immigrant mob violence against Blacks in many northern cities (such as the anti-black draft riots of 1863), meant that recent immigrants had economic opportunities that Blacks did not. These gains were consolidated by explicitly racist trade union practices and policies which kept Blacks in the most unskilled labor and lowest paid work.

It is not that white Americans have not worked hard and built much. We have. But we did not start out from scratch. We went to segregated schools and universities built with public money. We received school loans, V.A. loans, housing and auto loans when people of color were excluded or heavily discriminated against. We received federal jobs, military jobs and contracts when only whites were allowed. We were accepted into apprenticeships, training programs and unions when access for people of color was restricted or nonexistent.

Much of the rhetoric against more active policies for racial justice stem from the misconception that we are all given equal opportunities and start from a level playing field. We often don't even see the benefits we have received from racism. We claim that they are not there.

Think about your grandparents and parents and where they grew up and lived as adults. What work did they do? What are some of the benefits that have accrued to your family because they were white?

Look at the following benefits checklist. Put a check beside any benefit that you enjoy that a person of color of your age, gender and class probably does not. Think about what effect not having that benefit would have had on your life. (If you don't know the answer to any of these questions, research. Ask family members. Do what you can to discover the answers.)

*White Benefits Checklist**

- My ancestors were legal immigrants to this country during a period when immigrants from Asia, South and Central America or Africa were restricted.

* This checklist works well as a stand up exercise in a workshop or other group situation. As each item is read by a facilitator, everyone in the group to whom the item applies stands up silently for a moment, sits down, and then the next item is read. Discussion in pairs or as a whole group follows.

- My ancestors came to this country of their own free will and have never had to relocate unwillingly once here.
- I live on land that formerly belonged to Native Americans.
- My family received homesteading or landstaking claims from the federal government.
- I or my family or relatives receive or received federal farm subsidies, farm price supports, agricultural extension assistance or other federal benefits.
- I lived or live in a neighborhood that people of color were discriminated from living in.
- I lived or live in a city where red-lining discriminates against people of color getting housing or other loans.
- I or my parents went to racially segregated schools.
- I live in a school district or metropolitan area where more money is spent on the schools that white children go to than on those that children of color attend.
- I live in or went to a school district where children of color are more likely to be disciplined than white children, or more likely to be tracked into nonacademic programs.
- I live in or went to a school district where the textbooks and other classroom materials reflected my race as normal, heroes and builders of the United States, and there was little mention of the contributions of people of color to our society.
- I was encouraged to go on to college by teachers, parents or other advisors.
- I attended a publicly funded university, or a heavily endowed private university or college, and/or received student loans.
- I served in the military when it was still racially segregated, or achieved a rank where there were few people of color, or served in a combat situation where there were large numbers of people of color in dangerous combat positions.
- My ancestors were immigrants who took jobs in railroads, streetcars, construction, shipbuilding, wagon and coach driving, house painting, tailoring, longshore work, brick laying, table waiting, working in the mills, furriering, dressmaking or any other trade or occupation where people of color were driven out or excluded.
- I received job training in a program where there were few or no people of color

- I have received a job, job interview, job training or internship through personal connections of family or friends.
- I worked or work in a job where people of color made less for doing comparable work or did more menial jobs.
- I have worked in a job where people of color were hired last, or fired first.
- I work in a job, career or profession or in an agency or organization in which there are few people of color.
- I received small business loans or credits, government contracts or government assistance in my business.
- My parents were able to vote in any election they wanted without worrying about poll taxes, literacy requirements or other forms of discrimination.
- I can always vote for candidates who reflect my race.
- I live in a neighborhood that has better police protection, municipal services and is safer than that where people of color live.
- The hospital and medical services close to me or which I use are better than that of most people of color in the region in which I live.
- I have never had to worry that clearly labeled public facilities, such as swimming pools, restrooms, restaurants and nightspots were in fact not open to me because of my skin color.
- I see white people in a wide variety of roles on television and in movies.
- My race needn't be a factor in where I choose to live.
- My race needn't be a factor in where I send my children to school.
- I don't need to think about race and racism everyday. I can choose when and where I want to respond to racism.

What feelings come up for you when you think about the benefits that white people gain from racism? Do you feel angry or resentful? Guilty or uncomfortable? Do you want to say "Yes, but..."?

Again, the purpose of this checklist is not to discount what we, our families and foreparents have achieved. But we do need to question any assumptions we retain that everyone started out with equal opportunity.

You may be thinking at this point, "If I'm doing so well how come I'm barely making it?" Some of the benefits listed above are money in the bank for each and every one of us. Some of us have bigger bank accounts—much bigger. According to 1989 figures, 1 percent of the population controls about 40 percent of the wealth of this country (*New York Times*, April 17, 1995 "Gap in Wealth in United States called Widest in West"). In 1992, women generally made about 66 cents for every dollar that men made (Women's Action Coalition p. 59).

Benefits from racism are amplified or diminished by our relative privilege. People with disabilities, people with less formal education, and people who are lesbian, gay or bi-sexual are generally discriminated against in major ways. All of us benefit in some ways from whiteness, but some of us have cornered the market on significant benefits from being white to the exclusion of the rest of us.

The opposite of a benefit is a disadvantage. People of color face distinct disadvantages many of which have to do with discrimination and violence. If we were to talk about running a race for achievement and success in this country, and white people and people of color lined up side by side as a group, then every white benefit would be steps ahead of the starting line and every disadvantage would be steps backwards from the starting line before the race even began.

The disadvantages of being a person of color in the United States today include personal insults, harassment, discrimination, economic and cultural exploitation, stereotypes and invisibility, as well as threats, intimidation and violence. Not every person of color has experienced all the disadvantages described below, but they each have experienced some of them, and they each experience the vulnerability to violence that being a person of color in this country entails.

Institutional racism is discussed in detail in parts four, five, and six. But the personal acts of harassment and discrimination experienced directly from individual white people can also take a devastating toll. People of color never know when they will be called names, ridiculed or have comments made to them or about them by white people they don't know. They don't know when they might hear that they should leave the country, go home or go back to where they came from. Often these comments are made in situations where it isn't safe to confront the person who made the remark.

People of color also have to be ready to respond to teachers, employers or supervisors who have stereotypes, prejudices or lowered expectations about them. Many have been discouraged or prevented from pursuing academic or work goals or have been placed in lower vocational levels because of their racial identity. They have to be prepared for receiving less respect, attention or response from a doctor, police officer, court official, city official or other professional. They are not unlikely to be mistrusted or accused of stealing, cheating or lying, or to be

stopped by the police because of their racial identity. They may also experience employment or housing discrimination or know someone who has.

There are cultural costs as well. People of color see themselves portrayed in degrading, stereotypical and fear-inducing ways on television and in the movies. They may have important religious or cultural holidays which are not recognized where they work or go to school. They have seen their religious practices, music, art, mannerisms, dress and other customs distorted, "borrowed," ridiculed, exploited or otherwise degraded by white people.

If they protest they may be verbally attacked by whites for being too sensitive, too emotional or too angry. Or they may be told they are different from other people of their racial group. Much of what people of color do, or say, or how they act in racially mixed company is judged as representative of their race.

On top of all this they have to live with the threat of physical violence. Some are the survivors of racial violence or have had close friends or family who are. People of color experience the daily toll of having to plan out how they are going to respond to racist comments and racial discrimination whenever it might occur.

In the foot race referred to above for jobs, educational opportunities or housing, each of these disadvantages would represent a step backward from the starting line *before the race even started*.

Although all people of color have experienced some of the disadvantages mentioned above, other factors make a difference in how vulnerable a person of color is to the effects of racism. Economic resources help buffer some of the more egregious effects of racism. Depending upon where one lives, women and men from different racial identities are treated differently. Discrimination varies in form and ranges from mild to severe depending on one's skin color, ethnicity, level of education, location, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, age and how these are responded to by white people and white-run institutions.

Is it hard for you to accept that this kind of pervasive discrimination still occurs in this country? Which of the above statements is particularly hard to accept?

There is ample documentation for each of the effects of racism on people of color listed above. In many workshops we do a stand up exercise using a list of disadvantages for people of color to respond to. Those of us who are white are often surprised and disturbed about how many people of color stand when asked if they have experienced these things.

Most of us would like to think that today we have turned the tide and people of color have caught up with white people. We would like to believe (and are often told by other white people) that they enjoy the same opportunities as the rest of us. If we honestly add up the benefits of whiteness and the disadvantages of being a person of color, we can see that existing affirmative action programs don't go very far toward leveling the playing field.

The benefits of being white should be enjoyed by every person in this country. No one should have to endure the disadvantages that people of color experience. In leveling the playing field we don't want to hold anyone back. We want to push everyone forward so that we all share the benefits.

When we talk about the unequal distribution of benefits and disadvantages, we may feel uncomfortable about being white. We did not choose our skin color. Nor are we guilty for the fact that racism exists and that we have benefitted from it. We are responsible for acknowledging the reality of racism and for the daily choices we make about how to live in a racist society. We are only responsible for our own part, and we each have a part.

Sometimes, to avoid accepting our part, we want to shoot the bearer of bad news. Whether the bearer is white or a person of color, we become angry at whoever points out a comment or action that is hurtful, ignorant or abusive. We may accuse the person of being racist. This evasive reaction creates a debate about who is racist, or correct, or good, or well-intentioned, not about what to do about racism. It is probably inevitable that, when faced with the reality of the benefits and the harm of racism, we will feel defensive, guilty, ashamed, angry, powerless, frustrated or sad. These feelings are healthy and need to be acknowledged. Because they are uncomfortable we are liable to become angry at whoever brought up the subject.

Acknowledge your feelings and any resistance you have to the information presented above. Keep reading through this book and doing the exercises. Yes, it is hard and sometimes discouraging. For too long we have ignored or denied the realities of racism. In order to make any changes, we have to start by facing where we are and making a commitment to persevere and overcome the injustices we face.

We can support each other through the feelings. We need a safe place to talk about how it feels to be white and know about racism. It is important that we turn to other white people for this support. Who are white people you can talk with about racism?

When people say, "We all have it hard," or "Everyone has an equal opportunity," or "People of color just want special privileges," how can you use the information in this book to respond? What might be difficult about doing so? What additional information or resources will you need to be able to do this with confidence? How might you find those resources?