White Privilege

Jacqueline Kutcher

Oakland University

**White Privilege**

An experience in my life where I have experienced white privilege was at work. I work in a restaurant as a Door Coordinator, which is the manager of the hosts and bussers. I have had no prior experience as a manager, so going into the position, I was very nervous if any of the employees would respect me. I am only twenty years old, so most of the employees are only a year or two younger than me. I found that it was actually quite easy for me to slip into the role of Door Coordinator, and overall I was respected by most of the employees. This however, was not the case for our kitchen manager, who entered his position at the exact same time that I did. While I had zero experience, he had almost ten years of restaurant managing experience. He is also almost forty years old, so the position of authority should have been easier for him. However, he is a black man, working in an almost completely white restaurant. Throughout the months of working side by side with him, I have noticed that almost everything he does is analyzed, while almost no one pays attention to my actions. Almost every shift I work, I show up exactly on time and sometimes even a few minutes late, yet no one has ever said anything to me about my tardiness. Yet the kitchen manager is always harassed by the staff on the rare occasions he is late. Also, the kitchen manager has a sick child that requires a lot of supervision, which sometimes requires him to leave work early. The owner of the restaurant is a caring boss, and has no problem with him leaving whenever he needs to, as long as someone is put in charge. Walking through the kitchen a few months ago, I heard a few kitchen employees discussing how lazy the kitchen manager is, and how he can just “walk out” when he feels like it. Also, at the beginning of the summer only a few months into our managing careers, a host needed paper work printed off the computer that is in the locked office. Only the managers have keys to this office, and the only manager who happened to be on at the time was the kitchen manager. He could not figure out the computer password since it had recently changed, and was unable to print off the papers for her. I arrived an hour later, so when I walked in, the host immediately told me the situation. I found the kitchen manager and we went into the office, and together we figured out the new password, it had been hidden behind some paperwork. When I came back up to the front, the host made a comment that, “at least someone knows what they’re doing.” Overall, Foundations for Multicultural Social Work Practice, has opened my eyes to the difference in the way the staff perceives him and I. I believe that my white privilege has helped the employees see me as a professional manager, while it has hurt his authority as a black manager.

**My Reaction**

My reaction to the comments that were made by the kitchen staff about the kitchen manager being able to walk out was to ignore them and walk away. At the time, I believed that they were just gossiping about him, and it was based on the fact they did not get along with him. Looking back, I wish that I would have stood up for him, because it is not right for them to judge him so harshly, on something that he has no control over. A sick child is something that people should feel sympathy and compassion, not implies laziness. I was much more proud of my reaction to the host who claimed that, “at least someone knows what they’re doing.” I immediately told her, that we figured out the password together and that she should not judge him so harshly for being a new manager. It was not his fault that someone had covered up the post-it, with the password on it, and that an attitude like that was going to get her suspended. At the time, I did not even make the connection that she was probably judging him on his race, based off a stereotype that she already had. Even now, almost a year later, I notice almost every time we work together, that he still struggles, while I sit comfortably in my position and rarely get questioned. Now, when I overhear employees discussing his ability to manage, I always step in and correct them, because he is a really good manager, who works very hard. The employees never notice the good things that he does for this company; they only notice what they perceive as his being lazy or incompetent.

**Factors that Influenced my Reactions**

I believe the reason that I did not have a reaction to the first few criticisms about the kitchen manager, was because I grew up in an all-white suburb and I was never educated on the struggles that the black community faces. I never made the connection that he was not being perceived as well as me was because of his skin color. Foundations for Multicultural Social Work Practice, has shown me that I need to look at the bigger picture. The skills that I have already learned in this class have already made me feel more confident about approaching future criticisms of him. Another factor, that influenced my past reactions though, was working in a “raciest” restaurant. Standing up for the black community, is just not done there, or in any of the restaurants that I have worked in. I am not implying that everyone who works at my restaurant is raciest, because they are definitely not, but there is definitely a stereotype. Such as, black people do not tip, so there are a lot of negative discussions about black clients. I think that unconsciously, I did not want to be the only person saying something, and not get perceived well from my co-workers because of that.

**My Reaction as a Social Work Practitioner**

I believe, that as a social work practitioner, I would have responded differently. I would have a different set of skills to handle situations such as this, and I would be more confident about standing up for him. I also have noticed that the more I learn about social work; the more I am inspired by social justice I do not think that after finishing the social work education that I would even be able to remain quite.

**White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**

The article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh said that people of white privilege are allowed to be unaware of certain situations that happen in everyday life, because of their skin color. One of these situations was, “If I have low credibility as a leader, I can be sure that my race is not the problem.” In my opinion, the kitchen manager at the restaurant I work at is facing this exact problem. His employees, base their opinion of his managing abilities, off the color of his skin.

**Privilege and Oppression**

White privilege survives on the principle that for one group to be up another must be down. White privilege is not something that a person earns; it is unfairly given to them at the expense of another person. The respect that I was given over the kitchen manager for no reason was not deserved, and I should have been the one to get less respect. He has been oppressed from the beginning of this position for his skin color, and from being the great manager that he is capable of. The frustration that he deals with every time he works would be enough for me to hate my job. He continues to work hard, and none of the employees notice or care, because they have already formed their opinions of him based on his skin color. Oppression should not be allowed to exist in today’s society.

References

McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack. Race, class, and gender in the United States: An integrated study, 4, 165-169.