

Dr. Elliott

SOC105

28 April 2022

Privilege in America and Why it is Ignored

Every white male in America benefits from the system of oppression the country was founded on, even if they do not want to realize it. This may seem obvious to most people in academics. However, once you step outside of the campus or classroom it is, for some reason or another, *not* widely accepted. Why this is is something I find very interesting. It could be because people do not want to accept it. Some think it is a personal attack. Maybe they want to ignore it. Maybe they do not believe it or inadvertently deny it, and this is the matter I want to address. No matter how it is presented or hidden, it is a deep rooted aspect of our society. To change it and to make everyone equal in the eyes of our collective consciousness, there must be alterations in the ways people perceive their own privileges and accept that they are there.

There are a multitude of ways that people benefit from our country's foundation of oppression. Whether it be the ability to walk alone at night without fear of being attacked or being able to walk by people without them clutching their purses, many aspects of our society function on the fulcrum of racism and sexism. The biggest issue, though, is the people benefiting from it the most who do not see or believe the privilege they hold. If the most powerful group does not want something to change, it rarely does. We see this in our government, made up largely of white old men in the house and the senate (the average age is around sixty) who control so much power in the country. If the people in power do not see their privilege or want to abuse it, how are they ever able to expand that to others?

grandfather is an example of this. I have talked to him about this issue numerous times, and he likes to say that everyone in America is equal because it is “well, the land of the free”. He tells me directly that he has no more power than a black woman. However, when I told him I am going into nursing, he said “Well you’ll get hired anywhere, you are a white guy after all”. It is these cases of direct contradiction to their own words that bothers me most. It is so clearly a privilege that every white man holds; to be more likely to get hired, get into certain schools, to get more raises and less dirty looks. Why is it something that so many would rather not talk about?

I think it has something to do with denial. White people as a whole know their life is easier than a person of color. Ask any white person if they think a black person (on average) has it harder than a white person, and most of them will say yes from my experience. But, when you frame the question slightly differently, the answer changes. When you ask them if they think they, as a white person, are better off than a black person on average, a lot of them will want to say no. This is a small yet peculiar difference that I find very interesting.

The key difference in these two questions and how people answer them has mostly to do with how the answer could affect them. Most white people would not object to programs that bring people of color *up* to their level, but the idea of being brought *down* to the person of color’s level frightens them. It is just another obvious proof that they do realize the inequality, but ignoring it is easier than causing things to change, and therefore paying the price for them.

Think of it this way. Admitting that poor communities in Africa are worse off than the way we live here in America is easier because it is just the “way things are”. However, saying that we have it much better in America than poor communities in Africa feels a little worse

that person. Most people I have talked to seem to have this moral intuition. And if we feel the need to help, it introduces a kind of guilt.

A lot of the time white males who are very wealthy achieved their wealth through privilege. Whether it came from their parents and grandparents or the ability to get hired at law firms for their sex and skin color. The issue, though, is that when they admit that black people tend to have it worse, it makes them wonder why. It is obvious that black people have the system working against them. Whether it be worse school funding in their area, less police presence or police targeting them, black communities have a lower ceiling to fit under. But, when new policies are put into place to fund their communities more or provide more protection, that money has to come from somewhere. Whether it be property taxes or taxes on their trusts, a lot of wealthy white people would have to pay to help fix the system their ancestors helped create.

Therefore, denying that black people do have these issues is an easy way to avoid these costs. If the problem doesn't exist, there is no need to fix it, and people do not have to work on it. Instead, these taxpayer dollars can go to the rich white men in congress to fund their office furniture, and the wealthy citizens can pay less tax on their five Airbnb's.

Dr. Peggy McIntosh talks about this "invisible" white privilege as well. She says "White privilege is like an invisible knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (McIntosh 30). This privilege is something we are taught to ignore, whether it be being white or male, but why? It is because recognizing it would get rid of these privileges and make us equal, but a lot of people do not see it that way.

Many people, when you tell them every white man benefits from privileges he is automatically provided with, think it is a personal attack. This is what I have seen the most. What

system. There is an innate difference between privilege and prejudice, but to a lot of people who are less educated they are synonyms. This difference is so important, because when people realize it is not them doing it, rather it was the ones who built the system, they almost always feel better about the situation and actually *want* things to change.

This phenomenon of white people not seeing their privilege is what McIntosh calls the “invisible knapsack”. It is a bag of privileges that every white male has due to the fact that they live in the system. However, when you ask white people these questions about social change and if they think they have it better they panic. They panic because they think you are trying to take their knapsack away. We need to give context to the situation.

Instead of the knapsack being taken away, we need to show them that having the knapsack is not necessary if everyone has the things they need. Nobody would want to borrow your tools if they had their own. Racism and sexism all stem from the urge to keep a white-knuckle grip on the knapsack, but what if we did not need it anymore? What if everyone had a bag with all the tools they needed to not just survive, but thrive as well? That is what we must urge people to consider when we talk about privilege, and it is the only way we can create meaningful change.

McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." UMBC.edu, July 1989, https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf.