

It is no secret that systemic racism and sexism are deep seeded systems of oppression that plague American society. Neither black, color, nor woman are mentioned in the United States Constitution. As time progressed, egalitarian movements occurred as a result of awareness of oppression. These movements are still present today, as equality has not been achieved. While policies and initiatives have changed over time in a positive way to benefit issues of sexism and racism, the consequences of systems that founded America's foundation are still seen and felt.

Women and people of color are subjected to a system that is not built for them. Through beauty standards, stereotypes, and cultural norms, they are judged on appearances. They are not judged for intellectual capabilities and qualifications.

For my first two years of high school, I lived in the diverse and blue-collar town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. The demographics of my school were proportional to the diverse composition of the community. However, diversity within the school was not evident in all classrooms. As an Advanced Placement (AP) student, I was surrounded by white upperclassmen. During my sophomore year, I was enrolled in five AP classes. Two were English, two were science, and one was history. While boys dominated populations of AP classes, so did white people; even more so than the number of boy students over girls. There was a total of four people of color in my classes, collectively.

In my AP Biology class, I was one of three girls. The other two girls in the class were juniors, while I was only a sophomore. I enjoyed science. I was good at it. In eighth grade, I was in a program with only twenty other middle school students from around the entire county that allowed us to take honors biology at our future high school. Following eighth grade, I took honors chemistry and honors environmental science during my freshman year. With that said, I

surrounded by boys that were in my classes before. I was just as qualified to take the class as they were. Despite my qualifications; in labs and during group work, my male classmates assumed that I was incompetent by the way that I looked. On lab days, I drug my feet to class. I knew that when I got there, my voice and ideas would be disregarded. It made my stomach churn with anxiety walking to fifth period each day.

I am fairly adjacent to the American beauty standard. I am a white and feminine presenting girl with blue eyes, long hair, and on the thinner side. My uniform of choice in high school was light-colored dresses and skirts. I was not expected to know much, especially in high-level science classes.

It was exhausting to be micromanaged and hovered like helicopters by boys whose unflagging efforts inferred they knew more than me. It did not matter that I had higher test scores and performed better than them on individual assignments. I still was ignored.

Naturally, I grew impatient and frustrated as the classes went on. My ideas were immediately discarded and I felt belittled. My indignation fueled me to perform. If my voice was ignored, I figured that my performance could speak louder. I worked even harder than before to break class exam curves in silence.

One day, we were given a lab about osmosis. We worked in pairs instead of the typical group. In an attempt to motivate us, our teacher made the lab a competition. The goal was to create the most precise solution that would cause a potato wedge to shrink to a specific weight. The potato wedge that was closest to the given weight at the conclusion of the experiment would be awarded extra credit. I intentionally chose a partner who took advantage of social loafing. I was familiar with him. I worked in lab groups with him before. He never put in the effort and

me to convince one person to let me take the lead than four boys who were academically driven and put in effort to classes. I made sure to stay extra focused in this lab, in hopes of finally being taken seriously by not only my male classmates but my male teacher. The next day, we measured and compared the results. When the results of my lab were evaluated, the boys in the class were visibly surprised. They asked my teacher to weigh it again, assuming my results were fabricated. After the results were examined and evaluated multiple times, it was clear. The results of the lab granted my partner and me extra credit. While the boys in the class were surprised, they grew even more defensive. I continued to work hard, in the constant struggle of the dismaying, ceaseless, and eventually mind-numbing cycle of sexism in the classroom.

While I was undermined by my classmates and my teacher because of my sex, I did not experience the barrier of my race. I knew subconsciously before I even began the class that my race would be represented.

I was able to speak up to boys in my class without implicit and explicitly expressed biases about my race that stood against me. While all of my sophomore-year teachers were men, they were white men. Their skin color was the same as mine. They did not make negative assumptions about my intelligence and work ethic according to the color of my skin. When I spoke up in class, I was perceived and assumed to be a sensitive baby, not aggressive and malicious. The diversity of the school community was not represented in my AP classes.

Although AP classes prepared me for academic challenges, they did nothing to develop my social and cultural awareness. The ringing of the bell indicated it was time to change class periods. The hallway traffic was the only time of day when I could see a representation of the diversity in my school.

addressed how white people have unearned assets and advantages that they are born with. It is invisible because white people are not required to think about it. They just have it. She gave examples of white privilege in daily life; including that she, “Can speak in public to a powerful male group without putting her race on trial.” And, “Being sure that her children would be given curricular materials that testified to the existence of their race.” I have an invisible knapsack. It is filled with tools of hidden benefits from the color of my skin. I carry it with me wherever I go, without even thinking about it. My invisible knapsack gives me benefits that thrive off of a system that harms people who are not white. I will never experience the ways in which the invisible knapsack harms people of color.

In addition, McIntosh noticed other forms of oppression in her work in Women’s Studies. In her research, she noticed how men fail to acknowledge that they are over-privileged. While men might say that women are disadvantaged, they deny taboos and details on their male privilege. They are unwilling to address them. The boys in my classes were educated individuals. They were likely aware of the terms sexism and male privilege but did not acknowledge their privileges in their actions. The boys in my class correlate with McIntosh’s observations that their denial of their dominant position and unearned advantages protect male privilege. McIntosh understands that male privilege is unconsciously oppressive, so she concludes that unacknowledged privilege is unconscious oppression.

Naomi Wolf’s ideas on the beauty myth tie into Peggy McIntosh’s observations of male privilege and white privilege. The beauty myth is a cycle of reaching to obtain an unrealistic societal beauty standard. Beauty standards have pushed women into a box. Women are subjected to being objects, rather than people with intellectual capabilities. In my class, I was not seen as a

presenting woman put me in a box. I was automatically assumed to be incompetent. The beauty myth keeps men in a position of domination. It is an effect of institutions and systems created by men, keeping them in control and power.

While policies and movements are slowly moving in the right direction, it does not change the fact that America's foundation has elements of racism and sexism. If institutions and systems are left unchanged, the oppression will continue. If we do not collectively acknowledge our privileges, we will continue to encourage an oppressive system. We must keep educating ourselves and use our positions of privilege to uplift the voices that have been silenced.

