

# White Privilege

## An Account to Spend

By Peggy McIntosh, Ph.D.

“

Discussions of race and privilege can help form an invaluable ability to recognize systems of power, both around us and within us. This knowledge can empower us all to know better where we came from, who and where we are, and what we can do.

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### Foreword by The Saint Paul Foundation

Through its **Facing Race** *We're all in this together*<sup>®</sup> anti-racism initiative, The Saint Paul Foundation encourages constructive conversations on the tough issue of racism. Peggy McIntosh's 1989 seminal article, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack," is a critical tool that has been used with conversation participants to raise awareness of racism and white privilege.

Yet after reading the article, some white people have struggled with feelings of guilt and felt unsure about how to move forward. As one person wondered, "Now that my eyes have been opened to white privilege and other types of privilege, what should I do?" This new article, "White Privilege: An Account to Spend," is a gift from Dr. McIntosh that empowers readers to do something other than feel guilty.

"White Privilege: An Account to Spend" encourages readers to think about using unearned advantage—privilege—in a constructive way. Privilege, like disadvantage, exists through systems that individuals are born into, and is not something that they request. At the same time, there are many actions that privileged individuals can freely take in their daily lives to weaken unjust systems of advantage or discrimination. To weaken privilege systems can be a source of positive energy and joy.

It is an honor that Dr. McIntosh chose to work with The Saint Paul Foundation on this companion article. The Foundation has been pleased to support her efforts to dismantle racism and to help build a community where everyone feels safe, valued and respected.

**F**acing Race, a community initiative of The Saint Paul Foundation, was started in 2002 with brave and visionary questions: Is it possible to improve the racial climate of a region? If so, is it possible for the change to stick? Can the initiative become a model for other anti-racism efforts? I am excited about these questions. Participants in Facing Race have done something courageous and unusual by engaging in prolonged conversations about race with one another. I hope that you have all found it worthwhile, eye opening and useful for living your lives.

For white people, doing anti-racism work for the first time can be stressful, scary and downright unpleasant as they see that one's position in the world is not what one had been led to believe. New awareness of unearned advantage can be disorienting, dizzying or sickening. And when one looks beyond the self to the rest of the society, it can be deeply discouraging to realize how widespread, deeply rooted, complicated and damaging the whole system of privilege is.

I have found, however, that there is an upside to the study of race relations for me as a white person and as a person who has class privilege. I have learned that I have some power to change myself and the environment I am in, to work toward the society I want. I feel much more empowered than I ever did when I was oblivious to being white in a society that favored whites. I have found many ways in which I can use my unearned power to share power. Toward the end of this essay, I will spell out some of them (see p. 6). For those of us who have seen that we have white privilege, the next logical question may be this: "So what can I do about it?"

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In Facing Race you have probably read an essay I wrote 20 years ago entitled "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." That article is a condensation of a longer one that lists 46 ways in which I realized I had unearned racial advantage over African American women I worked with at Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. I hope you understood this fact about my lists of examples: I was speaking for myself as a particular white woman in relation to these particular African American women colleagues. I was not writing about all whites and their privileges relative to all people of color, everywhere. Yet my very specific and personal examples turned out to speak to many beyond myself. This autobiographical method could be used by anyone to understand his or her own circumstances

better. In general, the method has been well understood, and I am very glad that the article has spread all around the world and has helped people see, name and conceptualize the ways some of us benefit by being exempt from one or more forms of discrimination.

I feel that seeing privilege is the missing link between understanding discrimination of any kind and understanding how to end it. I now believe that white privilege, rather than discrimination, is the central actor in racism—the central force that creates racism and keeps it in place. To lessen racism we need to lessen white privilege. It is not enough for me to recognize that as a white person I carry an invisible weightless knapsack of unearned advantages. I also need to decide what to do with it. **Privilege gives me power that I can use for social change.**

## The Problem: Systems of Privilege

As you will have noticed in your discussions about race, the phrase “white privilege” triggers anger in many people. For example, many working-class white people who have worked very hard all their lives feel frustrated to be told that they have any unearned advantages.

White people who have struggled to stay afloat have trouble imagining that they have any “privilege” in relation to others. If whites have privilege, why do they have so little to show for it?

The answer is that there are many different types of privilege and discrimination. A white person may not speak English well, may not have enough money and may face discrimination as a recent immigrant. The stress from not having English-speaking privilege, class privilege or U.S. privilege can keep a white person from feeling that he or she has any privilege at all. Everything about life is hard. Yet it is harder still for those who do not have white privilege.

At the same time, those white working-class people who do get ahead, against the odds, often believe their own hard work alone got them where they are. The American dream—that people individually achieve upward mobility through hard work—appears to be a valid dream for them, and they imagine it to be working for everybody else, too. They are taught not to see anything except their individual efforts. Yet their color influenced which jobs, neighborhoods, schools and public services they could access.

I see that people benefiting from a privilege system are taught not to see it. How is this possible? It is because we are taught the myth of meritocracy. This is a two-part belief that underlies the ideology of the United States. The first part: The individual is the only unit of society. The second part: Whatever an individual ends up with in life must be what he or she wanted, worked for, earned and deserved. This is the U.S. myth of equal opportunity for all: Everybody

succeeds on his or her own merits. Under this myth, it is easy to believe that if people do not succeed, it is because they are not worthy, either individually or as a group—for example, because they aren’t smart or don’t work hard enough. The myth of meritocracy says that if people work hard, they get ahead.

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I was taught in both subtle and overt ways that white people had earned and deserved all of our successes. I was taught that we whites were “the best and the brightest” compared with people of color who have fared less well. Because of this training, I unconsciously believed that whites were superior, and that our being in charge of the society was a normal and natural sign of our superiority.

I thought it was normal for the police to be nice to us because we were good people; it was normal to read about whites in the schoolbooks because we had created “civilization;” it made sense that we got good jobs because we were hard workers; and so on. Since I believed that all people succeeded on their merits, I didn’t see the invisible mechanisms of group privilege that pushed us as whites ahead. The power we held seemed appropriate.

This feeling of being correctly placed above others kept me from seeing the ways in which everyone is born into an unfair system. It prevented me from noticing how those with the most power got to define, control and reward “success.” It kept me from seeing that whether I “succeeded” had less to do with how hard I worked, or how good a person I was, than with the systemic class and race privilege to which I was born. Through this privilege I was given the benefit of the doubt and didn’t have to prove that I was normal or acceptable.

## Seeing Privilege

I began to see privilege when I saw that in colleges, men had not earned all that they had. They were born male into a system where higher education favored men as a group. This had nothing to do with whether the men were nice men. It had nothing to do with their personalities. It had nothing to do with their inherent abilities. The universities were simply centered on them. The world of knowledge was formed by men's books about men's lives and ideas. As a woman, I experienced the downside: Women's lives and ideas were omitted. The men filled all the available space in the curriculum and held nearly all the teaching positions. We had to fight to get women onto the faculties and into the curriculum.

It wasn't the fault of these men that they lived and worked in a system that favored them, but I found them to be oppressive—for example, in their assumption that scholarship on and by women couldn't be fitted into the basic curriculum because it was already full. I wondered how these very nice male professors could be so oppressive. I thought I had to choose between my observations that these men were nice and my experience that these men were oppressive.

But while I was trying to decide whether my male colleagues were nice or oppressive, I remembered back several years to a time when I had been shocked by essays, mostly by black women, commenting matter-of-factly on the racism of white women and the racism in the women's movement. They referred to all white women categorically. Their strong words opened my eyes to the parallel between male dominance, which I was working under but did not have myself, and white dominance, which I began to

see I did have but had been taught not to recognize. I began to see that while I did not have male privilege, I did have white privilege, and yes, I saw reluctantly that this made me oppressive for women of color to work with.<sup>1,2</sup>

I realized that in my building at the Wellesley Center for Research on Women (now the Wellesley Centers for Women), I had advantages over my African American colleagues since the whole system of knowledge was made by white people, and because the people who ran the foundations that gave us grants were also white. I began to understand the ways in which the systemic privilege of being born white was helping me, and that they had nothing to do with whether I was a "nice" person or a "good" person.

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## Personal Experience, Institutional Privilege

Over a period of three months I wrote down 46 ways in which I had unearned race privilege relative to my African American colleagues at work.<sup>3</sup> As I was making these lists of unearned advantages, the news became worse: My personal examples were revealing the white privilege of whole societal institutions. For instance, I wrote, "I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race." This statement is not just about my children in school. It is also about the huge systems of knowledge-making and transmission that go under the name of education: curricular materials that are produced by publishers, approved by school boards and used by teachers in institutions that loom over all children. The example is not simply personal; it is societal. It is about my children, but it reveals something profound about the whole educational system.

1. Essays by Lorraine Bethel, Barbara Smith and Renita Weems in *Conditions: Five: The Black Women's Issue*. (Vol. 2, No. 2, Autumn). Edited by Lorraine Bethel and Barbara Smith. Brooklyn, NY: 1979.

2. Essays by Gloria Hull, Alice Walker, Ellen Pence, Constance Carroll, Michelle Wallace, Barbara Smith and the Combahee River Collective in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. Edited by Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott and Barbara Smith. Old Westbury, NY: The Feminist Press, 1982.

3. McIntosh, Peggy. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies." Working Paper 189. Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, 1988.

At that time I wrote, "If a traffic cop pulls me over or if the IRS audits my tax return, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my race." This statement is about institutionalized racism and institutionalized white privilege within the law-and-order system and the Treasury Department of the United States. My privilege means that I do not have to be as frightened and wary of these institutions as my colleagues of color do, for their own protection. The institutions are more on my side.

I also wrote, "If I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me." The overarching institutions of law and medicine are controlled by people of my race.

I found also that my privilege in relation to other people in the United States varied by ethnic group, so I made multiple privilege lists to explore both my privilege and institutionalized racism from these different vantage points. Here are some of the items from my list of privileges relative to Asian American colleagues:

- I can count on my silence in a committee meeting not to be read as a sign of assent or contentment.
- I am never considered to be an expert on science or math, or a failure if I am not outstanding in these areas.
- If my children do well in school I am not accused of having pushed them too hard.
- I was never under pressure to have my eyes operated on to make me look more Western, nor was I encouraged to stay out of the sun in order to make my skin look less Asian.
- My group is never accused of taking over symphony orchestras' string sections.
- My accent is not mocked.
- I am not considered a foreigner in the land where I was born.

For cultural competency about whiteness, I need to be aware of the many different forms white privilege takes in relation to the various kinds of discrimination that different ethnic groups experience.

If you are white and you begin to assemble your own personal examples, as well as to understand the story they tell about systems of privilege in the United States, it can be deeply discouraging. You discover that the twin sides of racism—race discrimination and white privilege—are much worse than you feared. Unfortunately, the remedy is not just accepting or tolerating people who are different from us. Being a nice person will not dismantle institutional systems of bias and privilege.

The good news is that we who are the most powerful also have the power to choose. We can use our privilege to weaken systems of power and privilege. And I and many others have found that when we do so, the prognosis for us individually and as a society can seem much better than we could have imagined.

I have come to see privilege as a bank account that I did not ask for but that I may choose to spend. I was born right-handed in a culture that has many inventions and objects that favor right-handed people. I was born able-bodied. I was born to class privilege, ethnic privilege, heterosexual privilege, "Christian" privilege (and within it Protestant privilege) and U.S. privilege. In all of these cases I have been given power I can use for change.

## Spending the Bank Account

So how do I spend my bank account of racial privilege? I organize projects, invest time and money, read, write letters and e-mails, intervene, spread the word, campaign, work with others against injustice and try to influence policy. It is a mixture of raising my own awareness and trying to change the social fabric as well. For example, my work has involved:

- Coming to see and weaken some of the habits of whiteness and white control that I was raised to take for granted in myself and other white people.
- Visiting the police in my town to protest their harassment of African Americans and immigrants.
- Organizing for racial integration of my neighborhood.
- Trying to diversify mostly white groups I work with.
- Hiring and supporting people of color.
- Co-presenting on white skin privilege with persons of color (Indigenous, Latina/o, Asian American and African American) to share publicity, podium time and speaking fees.
- Pressuring supermarkets to stock the foods of ethnic groups they would like to exclude from their customer base.
- Starting conversations, including family and public conversations, about privilege and racism.
- Listening and then responding as an ally to participants of color in mostly white organizations rather than letting their comments hang unacknowledged in silence.
- Doing homework on, then promoting and disseminating, the words and works of those who do not have white privilege.

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- Understanding how much I have to learn from people I was taught to overlook, fear or avoid for reasons of race, class, religion, nationality or sexual orientation.
- Making presentations and organizing programs in which I am honest about how much I have learned from people of color.
- Belonging to a group of white anti-racists who meet regularly.
- Intervening in and even ending conversations that put down vulnerable groups.
- Choosing to live on less money so our family can give more money toward social justice or individuals in need.
  - Being more willing to use the terms “white superiority” and “white supremacy” in discussing the assumptions and outcomes of white privilege.

For me as a teacher, spending the bank account of white privilege has also meant putting curricula, teaching methods and school climates on a more inclusive base. In order to accomplish this, I founded the SEED Project (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) in 1986. For the last 22 years, SEED has trained teachers in K–12 schools and colleges to lead their own monthly staff development discussions on educational equity and diversity. Along with Emily Style and Brenda Flyswithawks, I spend most of my time raising money for and co-administering the SEED Project. (You can find out about the SEED Project at [wconline.org/seed](http://wconline.org/seed), or e-mail [mmcintosh@wellesley.edu](mailto:mmcintosh@wellesley.edu).)

As in my original paper on white privilege, this list of examples is autobiographical and relates to my own circumstances. Such a list would look different for each person who made one, depending on his or her circumstances and sphere of influence. I invite you to contemplate how you might spend whatever kinds of privilege you may have.

## Why Spend the Bank Account?

What are the payoffs for whites if we use our unearned advantage to weaken systems of unearned advantage? It feels good to stop being resented or even hated. Many of us who have racial or class power do not realize that we are so mistrusted by people who have less money or status. This mistrust may continue for some time even if we show we have more awareness and commitment to social justice. However, when it lessens at all, the change is palpable.

I had lost a lot because of my privilege. One thing I had lost was the opportunity to engage in real conversations with people I was taught to look down on. They could sense I was unconsciously patronizing or scared. Working against racism and white privilege brought me a purpose in life beyond feathering my own nest or working chiefly for the welfare of my own family, friends and students. I began to develop a stronger character and personality when I started to have working relationships with people beyond the social and racial groups I was allowed to associate with as a child. These new and authentic relationships gave me for the first time a sense of community. Until then, the word “community” had been quite limited for me as a Caucasian person who was raised in mostly white towns of single-family homes. Working for social change took me deeper into awareness of my own socialization and also made me more extroverted, even visionary, in my hopes and dreams, which were no longer so individualistic. I began to be effective in helping to change whole institutions.

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I now spend my energy on projects I could not have dreamed of when I was young. When my projects are going well, it is like finally living in a better world—a world that has reduced suffering. Using privilege on projects for social change allows me to work toward the world in which I want to live.

My life has improved so much that sometimes I wonder what kept me from seeing the big picture earlier in my life. My first answer is that I was a very good student of what I had been taught. I was deeply ignorant of social systems, and since most of them worked to my advantage, the chance of my ever spotting them was slight.

I have found that beyond ignorance, the biggest obstacle, and the biggest source of resistance to spending the bank account, was my fear—fear that if I tried to use unearned power and privilege to share power for a new social ideal, I would lose status, money, respect, purpose, life plans, family, friends, pleasure, institutional support and my current sense of identity. I know most people today are already feeling insecure with regard to social class, income, time, opportunity, safety and their capacity to do what they want. Many people feel something like this: “I’m already stretched and hurting. I can’t be sure of my own future. How can I do more than take care of myself and my own?”

If you are feeling this way, take courage. My experience has been that even very ordinary, everyday sharing of racial and other kinds of power can have a tremendous emotional and social payoff. It can make the world seem less insecure, and more meaningful. It can create a sense of community—the knowledge that none of us is alone and that we are all in this together. Lessening white privilege is about repairing lost connections. Most of the connections and disconnections in U.S. culture and in our institutions occur along lines of power. None of us is simply part of one identity group: We all have souls and identities, but at the same time we were born with social locations and group identities that shape us and easily keep us separated from other people, especially within institutions. I find that working against racism mends the social fabric, heals the soul, and reduces fear, isolation and alienation. It is not merely altruistic—it makes things better for everybody.

Discussions of race and privilege can help form an invaluable ability to recognize systems of power, both around us and within us. This knowledge can empower us all to know better where we came from, who and where we are, and what we can do. When we combine self-reflection with group process, we create a mysterious and powerful way for people to

go much further than before in their own understanding. In the context of a committed group of brave others on the journey toward new knowledge, with open hearts people can deepen their awareness and commitment to using their energy for change.

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Speaking candidly with others about our connected experiences of power, as we do in the SEED program, is an innovative and promising way for any group of people to get more insight into how to help everyone survive and thrive. It may seem at this time in our history that one remains obstinately countercultural by conceptualizing race and power systemically, but in fact, in doing so one becomes a wiser, worthier and more humane citizen of the community, the nation and the world.

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