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White Privilege and its Influence on the College Campus

Darcy L Lemaire

The article explores the topic of White privilege from the author's perspective as a White, Catholic, middle-class, rural Southern Vermont woman. White privilege affects every aspect of the college campus, from academics to residence life. Within the context of this understanding, White student affairs professionals can better understand the reality of White privilege, including the loss to Whites that results from its prevalence in society and on our campuses, and work to combat racism more successfully.

An examination of the history of higher education reveals an elite system that has favored Whites, through both overtly and covertly racist policies and a mono-cultural social structure. This has left the field of student affairs with a system that does not meet the needs of many Students of Color. It is therefore the responsibility of White student affairs administrators, from the perspective of this author, to explore the White privilege they and their White students experience every day. This paper continues this exploration by: (a) discussing the loss at the hands of racism for White people on campus that results from White privilege, (b) explicating the definition and prevalence of White privilege as a social construct, specifically on the college campus, and (c) associating an understanding of White privilege with the ability to combat racism.

The Loss to Whites

The influence of White privilege is first apparent in childhood, particularly at home. "Once... our willingness to please saved us from parental disapproval. Later on, this adaptation becomes a handicap... We continue it, even when it does not apply to present circumstances" (Rose, 1981, p. 31). The hegemony, or unrealized practice and acceptance of White privilege, allows us to continue "playing by the 'rules'" we learned as children. As Rose describes, "White people tell me... that the process is emotional, and for the first time they understand emotionally as well as cognitively the loss to them because of racism" (p. 41). To understand the loss White people suffer due to White "privilege," a White person must be able to conceive the world without White privilege. Once one is able to imagine it, the realization of what is lost when one embraces White privilege is unbelievably clear and often causes a highly emotional response, such as anger or depression, as described by Rose (1981). Without both emotional and cognitive understanding of what the world could be like without White privilege, a White person soon loses the moment of clarity necessary to shift one's frame of reference and awareness of oppression to one that acknowledges the oppressive nature of racism.

The most common loss expressed by White people without this emotional and cognitive understanding of White privilege is that "a white identity is much more closely associated with a sense of social normalcy – so much so that it doesn't have to even identify itself with a culture or ethnicity" (Fowler, 1998, p. 6). White students often express this feeling or perception that they do not have a culture. This loss of awareness of Whites, that they have a culture, is a significant one. Kivel (1995) describes this same phenomenon by stating that "We lose our own 'white' cultures and histories. Sometimes this loss leads Whites to romanticize the richness of other cultures" (p. 35). Paradoxically, the loss has coincided with the fact that White privilege often prevails and defines the status quo for American culture. When Whites gave up their unique cultures, the result was economic, social, and political gain. Whites lost their unique cultures and/or ethnicities but gained universal acceptance. If no White person's culture was unique, then every White person's culture was normal and accepted. This normalcy created a hierarchy based on race and set up a power dynamic whereby People of Color were deemed inferior because of cultural differences made obvious through skin color.

There are examples of White privilege in higher education. As student affairs professionals, we often rely on identity development theories to interpret student behavior. An unfortunate example of White privilege is that within the available identity development theories, "little attention has been demonstrated toward ...differences such as sex, age, race/ethnicity, affectional-sexual orientation and religion and their effect on the developmental process" (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 174). Therefore, when working with a Student of Color, one cannot

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automatically expect that the established identity development models reflective of White students will be appropriate. Worse yet, we may fall back upon our White privilege and assume that a particular student identifies as a White student. Lee and Davis (2000) describe the emotional result for “students of color on predominantly White college campuses [in that they] often experience feelings of alienation, marginalization, isolation, and loneliness” (p. 110). It is saddening to think that privileged White student affairs practitioners may be the cause, rather than the solution to this problem, resulting in the loss of authentic, growth inspiring relationships with students.

White people do indeed lose a great deal as a result of White privilege; Rose (1981) summarizes the loss to Whites due to White privilege by stating that “the loss to all non-targets [in this case, White people] on any oppression is twofold: the lost capacity to assess a situation and act creatively and appropriately, and the loss of meaning among fellow human beings – the loss of intimacy, the loss of genuine human connections” (p. 45). As student affairs practitioners, we must relate to our students on a human level. White practitioners are unable to do this without developing an awareness of their privilege and how that privilege affects Students and People of Color.

White Privilege On Campus

White Privilege Number One: Whiteness is “Normal”

Ruth Ann Olson defines privilege as a “passive advantage that accrues to an individual or group” (as cited in Kivel, 1995, p. 83). As a group, White people experience privilege not because of any action on their part necessarily, but merely due to the fact that Whiteness and normalcy are assumed to be one in the same in our society. White students “have an automatic, unearned set of privileges simply because of ... the color of [their] skin” (Acker, 1996, p. 9). There is nothing a Student of Color could do by way of upbringing or economic benefits to earn the set of privileges White students enjoy automatically, just as there is nothing a White person can do to get rid of their unearned privilege.

White Privilege Number Two: The Hierarchy of Power

This unearned privilege enjoyed by Whites relates to unmerited power as well. “To be white is to be everywhere and nothing at all at once – privileged by a veil of color that provides not cultural identity, but power and opportunity by pretending not to be anything at all” (Fowler, 1998, p. 1). Not only do White people enjoy unearned privilege, but they also enjoy the ability to take it for granted. Whites often do not recognize the privilege that comes to them without merit, merely because they perceive their behavior and that of other Whites around them as normal, as “everywhere.” As McIntosh (1988) explains, “I think whites are carefully taught [through observing cultural norms in society] not to recognize white privilege” (p. 94). It is the lack of awareness about White privilege that limits feelings of White guilt and continues a hierarchy of power, constructed upon the founding values of this nation. In this hierarchy, Whites possess more power than other racial groups simply due to the privilege associated with having white skin. Given the fact that white skin is perceived as “normal,” this acquisition and use of power is also viewed as “normal.” White power continues because Whites control the governmental, economic and corporate systems from which the power comes. “Whiteness is the universal standard by which diverse others are measured” (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 83). Whites may continue to have more power even when they are no longer in the majority because they still have the resources of money and power.

White Privilege Number Three: Whiteness is Ideal

To put it in harsher terms, “Whiteness” means “human” by many standards of our society. This goes beyond the concept of normalcy. To a greater extent, Whiteness is seen as the archetype, or the best way to look, behave, talk, dress, etc. Because of White privilege, “whites are taught to think of their lives as morally neutral, normative, and average, and also ideal” (McIntosh, 1988, p. 96). For example, White student affairs administrators can expect White upper-level administrators to write policies that appear “normal” to them, without consideration of other people for whom such policies and practices may not feel normal. This is White privilege. The way in which communication takes place, from upper-level administrator down to support staff is a mono-cultural means of communication because institutions are organized in a mono-cultural way. The system of competition for promotion, a reward system based on White cultural standards, is also an example of White privilege on campus.

This concept of the ideal as defined by Whiteness extends throughout many aspects of White society. “From the old phrase referring to a good deed, ‘That’s White of you,’ to the New Age practice of visualizing oneself surrounded by white light, the term “white” has historically signified honor, purity, cleanliness and Godliness in White Western European and mainstream U. S. culture” (Kivel, 1995, p. 20). It is because of White privilege that many White students and student affairs professionals have never realized the extent of the White influence on our national culture. It permeates the media, campus life, and society as a whole. This is “further reinforced throughout the system of the dominant culture via television, movies, textbooks, history classes, curriculum, tracking and more” (Rose, 1981, p. 38). White privilege is present in every way White Americans learn how to operate in the world, from our first glance at the television, to resolving roommate conflicts, to graduation day.

White Privilege Number Four: American Society is White

It is important to note with regard to the White influence on society, that “specific aspects of U.S. culture predominantly reflect the White experience” (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 82) and additionally reflect student life. Students of Color “experience an otherness [sic] and under-privilege that most whites accept but rarely think about” (Fowler, 1998, p. 1). White privilege permits White student affairs professionals to ignore the unwelcoming nature of their campus to Students of Color, due to their programs, their posters, brochures, and decorations, and indeed, every aspect of campus life. Because Whiteness is a part of everything that Americans say and do, many White administrators simply pass by everyday examples of racism without even noticing.

Student affairs professionals struggle when they practice integrity in regard to their relationships with all students when systems such as White privilege go unexamined. In truth, “practitioners and scholars may unwittingly contribute to the universalization of Whiteness... [and] to ignore White ethnicity is to redouble its hegemony by naturalizing it” (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 81). Thus, White privilege continues to dominate the college campus, to the detriment of an increasing number of Students of Color.

White privilege begins long before students arrive on campus. The effects of a society promulgating a system of White privilege multiplies throughout the years a student spends in school. A few examples are as follows:

Segregated and inferior schools have forced students of color to play catch up in college taking longer to complete their studies. Established networks of white academics have made it easier for white students, particularly males, to get into the best universities, thereby getting better training, credentials and research opportunities. These networks help them to find out about scholarship opportunities and to find postdoctoral positions, thus advancing their careers faster (Kivel, 1995, p. 160).

White students rarely realize the advantages they have been given by the nature of White privilege, but Students of Color surely feel the effects of a system that does not include automatic skin privilege for them. Practitioners in the counseling field recognize these effects clearly. “To be oppressed is to be socialized into a worldview that is sub optimal and leads to a fragmented sense of self” (Reynolds & Pope, 1991, p. 177). The sense of dividedness, or the “fragmented self,” described makes the task of the student affairs professional much more difficult. “Educating the ‘whole’ student is, in fact, a common theme throughout higher education” (Graham & Gisi, 2000, p. 279), and many White student affairs professionals, unaware of their privilege, are unable to recognize the “whole” of many students.

Anti-Racism

This section follows the model of Peggy McIntosh (1988), who wrote, “one who writes about having white privilege must ask, ‘Having described it, what will I do to lessen or end it?’” (p. 95). Part of my own frustration after first realizing the prevalence of White privilege was wondering what comes next. Now that I am aware of my privilege, what can I do to combat privilege and work for equality? How can I use my newfound understanding to fight racism?

In order for Whites to authentically work toward anti-racism, they must shift their frame of reference from that of privilege to a better understanding of American society as a whole. Perry illustrates this and describes “intellectual growth as movement through a sequence of intellectual positions from which people view the

world of knowledge, truth, and value” (as cited in Rose, 1981, p. 25). In Perry’s fourth position, Committed Relativism, “students understood that ‘truth’ depends on its context, yet at the core of that understanding rests a willingness, capacity, and courage to live a personal code of value and standards” (p. 26). This postmodern explanation, while based on Perry’s exclusive research sample of White males, requires White student affairs professionals to not only recognize their own privilege, but to explore how White privilege affects Students of Color.

Many researchers contend that the deconstruction of Whiteness is essential to anti-racist educational intervention and necessary to challenge White privilege in order to promote a multi-cultural shift in perspective. “The deconstruction of Whiteness, especially its advantages and privileges, helps [student affairs administrators and] students to discover the direct impact of living in a society where being White is favored in the distribution of social capital and opportunity” (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 84). Students of Color are already well aware of this impact in most cases. It is important for White student affairs practitioners to make the choice to discover this impact from their own perspective. This is especially difficult for such practitioners; as Fowler (1998) puts it, “It is difficult for white people to accept that they might have worked hard, but their success also has to do with certain privileges” (p. 10). A Person of Color that performed the same way may not have achieved the same measure of success.

This is a harsh realization, and comes into play with regard to choice. As McIntosh (1988) states, “it is an open question whether or not we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken invisible privilege systems and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base” (p. 105). Rose (1981) further explains the purpose of helping Whites to discover the “invisible privilege system”:

In my experience it serves no purpose to blame or shame Whites about racism – this only exploits the confusion and does not produce positive results. Rather, my approach is to help both Whites... and People of Color... move from positions of guilt and shame, or from rage and blame, to more ‘workable’ frames of reference – toward the building of alliances (p. 25).

Like Acker (1996), my purpose is not to convince our society to take away privileges. My hope is to help increase privileges and opportunities for everyone. White student affairs administrators in particular have “the responsibility of having these privileges, these unearned advantages and [to] use them to help others, to make the [campus] a better place for all – not just for the privileged” (p. 9). This can be achieved through a shift in perspective on the part of student affairs practitioners.

One way to uncover the loss due to White privilege is to reconstruct a true reality of our nation. Whites can do this through “assum[ing] racism is everywhere, everyday” (Kivel, 1995, p. 103). “Listening to people of color and giving critical credence to their experience is not easy to us because of the training we have received” (p. 87). From childhood, most Whites have been unaware of their White privilege. It is important to suspend disbelief and recognize the truth in the stories of racism told by People of Color. Suspending disbelief will become easier as the White person begins to “notice who is the center of attention and who is the center of power” (Kivel, 1995, p. 103). Not surprisingly, it is almost always a White person exercising their privilege. Suddenly, the truth told by People of Color becomes much more clear.

“What counts is the ability to shift our frames of reference, and to be able to understand and communicate from a place of personal integrity and intimacy” (Rose, 1981, p. 43). This can be achieved through “displacing Whiteness as the universal standard by which all other races are gauged [as] a step toward racial and cultural equity” (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000, p. 83).

Conclusion

This paper focused on first discussing the loss for White people on campus that results from White privilege, showing that while “loss” due to “privilege” is perhaps unexpected, White administrators nevertheless lose a great deal, as a result of their unexplored, unrealized White skin privilege. There is a loss of relationship for

White people in terms of their privilege based on skin color, and there is a loss of identity, self, and a sense of community that stems from White ideology and the social construct of Whiteness.

Next, the paper worked to explicate the definition and prevalence of White privilege, specifically on the college campus, and through example and some review of the literature, showed that White privilege is indeed prevalent on the college campus. Lastly, this paper associated a prerequisite understanding of White privilege with the ability to combat racism. With this understanding, White student affairs administrators can change the future of the academy from the history of higher education that reveals an elite system that has favored Whites to a field of student affairs that meets the needs of all students. This examination of the influence of White privilege on the college campus has shown that it is the responsibility of White student affairs administrators to explore the White privilege they and their White students experience every day, and to use their newfound understanding to work toward anti-racism in higher education.

The first step is acknowledging White identity and the White privilege that comes along with having white skin, the next is understanding that the reason for White privilege is a history of oppression that began with colonization, and the most important step is to work towards transformation. I hope future research will comment upon taking an understanding of racism to the institutional level, which involves an acknowledgement of White privilege and requires taking a leadership risk. Transformation and positive change will mean shifting the center of institutional understanding from that of Whiteness to that of multiculturalism and anti-racism.

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