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## Owning unearned white privilege

By HEIDI SCHLUMPF

You think you did it all yourself. You earned a scholarship to college, studied hard, paid your dues at your first job. Now you've got a decent midlevel management position, a spouse and a couple of kids, and a moderate but comfortable home.

But without your better-than-average public school education, that scholarship -- and the college education -- might have gone to someone else. And what about that interest-free loan from the First National Bank of Mom and Dad when you were struggling, not to mention the car they "sold" you for next to nothing? And did you factor in the real estate agent who steered you to that desirable neighborhood you now live in?

These are some of the benefits of white privilege -- the unearned, unjustified advantages not automatically afforded to people of color in this country and generally taken for granted by those of us who are classified as "white." It is the reality that contrasts with the sincere fiction of the American myth of meritocracy, which says that everything we have must have been earned.

But white privilege is also about what we white people don't get: the multiple May-I-help-you's when we enter high-end shops, always being asked for ID when we use our credit cards, the hassle of being pulled over by police officers for "driving while black." It can be as simple as knowing that history books, greeting cards, even Band-Aids will include our skin color, or as complex as not having to worry that no matter what we do -- positive or negative -- it will not be a reflection of our entire race. No one ever says, "Isn't it great how that white person won the Pulitzer Prize this year" or "Look at that white mass murderer."

### The invisible knapsack

White privilege is the "upside" of discrimination, according to Peggy McIntosh of Wellesley College, who popularized the term with her 1988 groundbreaking paper that listed 46 advantages she realized she receives just for being born white. They range from "I can arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time" to "I can be sure my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race" to "I can be sure if I need medical or legal help, my race will not work against me."

McIntosh called white privilege the “invisible knapsack” because most whites are unaware of it and may even deny its existence. It’s so much easier to define racism as individual acts of prejudice than to acknowledge the invisible systems that confer dominance on one group at the expense of another.

Getting white people to shift their thinking from “How terrible for people of color” to “How exempt and advantageous for us” was the goal of a recent conference at the University of Notre Dame. Sponsored by the university’s theology department and cosponsored by more than a dozen other departments and organizations, “White Privilege: Implications for the Catholic University, the Church and Theology” was held March 26-28 at a university where, as the president pointed out in his welcome, blacks were not admitted until the 1950s.

In many ways it resembled a typical academic conference, with 100 or so attendees hearing provocative lectures from distinguished leaders in the field. But at times it resembled some new kind of 12-step program, with speakers’ introductions quickly followed by their confessions of having benefited from the privilege of being white.

I came with my own preconceived notions. Since this was a conference on race, I expected to see the leading black Catholic theologians -- Bryan Massingale, Shawn Copeland, Jamie Phelps. And they were there. But this was a conference primarily for and about white people, urging us to acknowledge our white privilege, to construct a white identity that doesn’t include oppressing others, and to do something about the personal and institutional racism that still exists in our church and society.

That focus on whites was intentional. “I think it’s important for white people to be put on the spot to account for our privilege,” said conference organizer Margaret Pheil, assistant professor of theology at Notre Dame and a member of the South Bend, Ind., Catholic Worker community. “Our unearned privilege comes at another’s disadvantage. It’s not a free pass. As uncomfortable as it is, we have to name it and recognize the ways we are exempt in order to disrupt white privilege.”

It is not easy or comfortable for white people to think about race in terms of white privilege. Many of us who consider ourselves “liberal” in the best sense of the word understandably bristle at the notion that we are racist. Some of us insist that the real issue today is class, not race. Among the younger set, it’s not uncommon to hear the assertion that racism was the issue for past generations but not for them. After all, we all know race is a social construct, not a biological reality, right? Isn’t the world colorblind now?

Ah, wishful thinking. The reality is that in this era of so-called “colorblindness,” racism still exists, more subtle, institutional and covert than before, according to sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva of Duke University. What we have, he said, is “racism without racists.”

“Colorblind racism is suave but deadly,” he said. “At the heart of colorblindness is a myth: that race has disappeared. This helps whites justify contemporary racial inequality.”

Whites exhibit this false colorblindness in a variety of ways: with abstract liberalism that opposes concrete programs to eliminate racism, by blaming the victim, by minimizing race and focusing instead on class or culture, with semantic statements (“I’m not a racist, but...”), and through racial stories (“If Jews, Italians and Irish can assimilate, why can’t blacks?”).

### **The happy racist**

Developmental psychologist Janet Helms of Boston College offered another framework for recognizing how we whites deal with race. She groups whites into “unconscious racists” and those who are consciously trying to overcome racism. While it is easy for most liberals like myself to deny that we are the “happy racist” who believes the world is colorblind, or the “ordinary racist” who believes his or her race is innately better and deserving of privilege, it’s harder to admit that our conscious efforts to be more open-minded often fall short of the mark.

For example, “white liberals” articulate principles of fairness but often do not live them, according to Helms’ classifications. “They believe white culture is better but want to help [people of color] do better,” she says. I’m guilty of this when I prefer to associate only with educated, upper-class people of color. The “caped crusaders” are on a mission to fight racism and are often ostracized by other whites for “breaking the rules.” Oh, boy, that was me when I was dating an African-American man in college.

A person in the final stage, which Helms calls “autonomy,” truly values all people no matter what they look like, without denying his or her own membership in the white group. This person values diversity and lives and works in a diverse environment. While many of us strive for this level of integrity, I had to admit that I often slip down to the more comfortable “white liberal” stage. But Helms cautioned us not to worry if we are not perfect: “Reaching autonomy is an ongoing process,” she said.

The sad truth about white privilege is that it not only harms people of color, but also damages the lives, psyches and souls of white people. We need a mutual conversion from the unbalanced reality of white superiority and black inferiority, urged Jamie T. Phelps of Xavier University in New Orleans. “I don’t think black people and brown people are the only victims of racism. White folks are also victims of racism, but they’re in denial about it,” she said. “White privilege is the other side of the coin of racism. And you’re not going to solve the problem by addressing white privilege in isolation from racism.”

Given the enormity of what is clearly an issue of social justice, shouldn’t the Catholic church be leading the way in fighting racism and white privilege? Sadly, it often is not. “If you consider the race of

theologians, we can see why we have the kind of theology that's done and left undone," said theologian M. Shawn Copeland of Boston College.

On the ground and in the parishes, there have been attempts. Bishop Dale Melczek of the Gary, Ind., diocese, one of the most segregated areas in the United States, made a three-year commitment to furthering racial justice in his diocese. The effort included mandatory workshops for clergy, small faith-sharing groups in parishes, larger listening sessions in which people of color shared their painful personal stories, and finally a diocesan-wide atonement service in which the bishop apologized to people of color and assigned a penance for all.

There have been similar efforts, in the Chicago archdiocese, for example, where Cardinal Francis George wrote a pastoral letter on racism. Melczek wrote two himself, and the U.S. bishops have been working on an update to the 1979 "Brothers and Sisters to Us" for several years, although it seems to have at least temporarily stalled. Pastoral letters are nice, but as Phelps noted, "The pastoral letters will remain dry words until the people of God read those words and begin to animate them."

Theologian Jon Nilson of Loyola University Chicago also lamented the lack of attention to this issue by the church. "Don't we need bishops who are more concerned -- not with whether we say, 'And also with you' or 'And with your spirit' -- and more concerned about a nation that's separate, hostile and unequal?" he asked. "If as a church we are silent, we lose our humanity as well as our moral and theological moorings."

Yet Nilson acknowledged that wallowing in guilt about our poor track record on race will get us nowhere. Instead he urged Catholics to "seek sadness," rather than guilt, and then get to work to change the racial inequality in our world. If there was one message of hope, it was that white people can use their privilege - - once they admit they have it -- to weaken systems of unearned power.

## **Entering the kingdom**

Theologian Laurie Cassidy of Trinity College in Connecticut likened this work that whites must do to the work of salvation. Her provocative alteration of Jesus' words have stuck with me: "How hard is it for white people to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a white person to enter the kingdom of God."

Cassidy suggested a two-fold path of contemplation and resistance to all forms of dominance, not only race but also class, gender and sexual orientation. Theologian Alex Mikulich of St. Joseph College in Connecticut also urged a dual response of contemplation and protest. Such repentance, he said, would be "bodily baptism into the terror of people of color's experience, economic fasting that involve real loss, mourning communally for what is unjust, and enacting imaginative forms of solidarity."

For Mikulich, as for many of the conference participants, these issues are not merely academic ones. As the adoptive parent of two African-American children, he has a personal stake in how our society treats people of color. Of course, it is precisely this love parents have for their children that can be an obstacle to dismantling white privilege, Nilson of Loyola pointed out. Much of today's "white flight" to the suburbs comes from genuine concern for children's welfare and a desire for them to have the best educational and other experiences possible.

But do we sometimes mistakenly believe that grass under our children's feet is more important than experiences with people of diverse backgrounds? As my husband and I pursue the adoption of a daughter from China, we know that her exposure to other people of color will be as important, if not more so, than the standardized test scores of a potential grade school. But if our children were white, would we place such a high priority on diversity?

At the conference's final wrap-up session, theologian Fr. Bryan Massingale of Marquette University said he appreciated that black scholars weren't expected to do all the work at this event. "I was happy to see white people taking responsibility for white privilege," he said. "It's good to be in partnership with people who are owning their own stuff."

Other attendees struck a hopeful note; some even saw the hand of God at work during the three days. But Mikulich rightly noted that one such gathering was just a beginning. "We still have so much work to do," he said.

Then we all went home. Now, you would think that after three days of intense immersion in study, discussion and solidarity around the issue of race and white privilege, not to mention my impending entry into the world of interracial families, I would return home a converted woman.

But old habits die hard. Back at work I was reminded that I was to attend a mandatory all-day diversity training. Was my reaction one of gratitude that my place of employment values diversity? Was I thankful for yet another opportunity to examine the issues of race and ethnicity? Elated to join the struggle for a more equitable society?

No. I complained that the daylong training would interfere with my other work. As Mikulich said, "We still have so much work to do."

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