

The Invisible Backpack: An Exploration of White Privilege



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Introduction:

Peggy McIntosh wrote an essay in 1989 called, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack". It was written as a way to explore and explain how race and color afford certain privileges and disadvantages in society, much in the same way that she had found in her women's studies work at Wellesly College. She defined white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets which she could count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible weightless backpack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks" (p. 1). A distinction is sometimes drawn between white privilege and racial prejudice, though they often intermingle. Ruth Ann Olson (1992) splits the difference by characterizing prejudice as active, negative action directed at individuals while white privilege is a passive advantage that accrues to an individual or group" (p. 1). Below are just some of the general and school-based examples of white privilege that McIntosh (#1-15) and Olson (#15-20) have identified:

1. "I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
3. When I am told about our national heritage or about "civilization", I am shown that people of my color made it what it is.
4. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability.
5. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

6. I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
7. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
8. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
9. I can be sure that if I ask to talk to "the person in charge" I will be facing a person of my race.
10. 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.
11. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
12. I can go home from most meetings or organizations I belong to feeling somewhat tied in rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
13. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having coworkers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
14. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
15. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color that more or less matches my skin.
16. My children take for granted that the color of any crayons, bandages, or other supplies in their classrooms labeled "flesh" will be similar to their own.

17. The color of my children's skin causes most adults in school offices, classrooms, and hallways to have neutral or positive assumptions about them.
18. My children know that the vast majority of adults in their schools will be of the same racial background, even in classrooms where many or most of their fellow students are of races different from theirs.
19. I take for granted that the tests used to judge my children's achievement and to determine placement in special classes have been developed with groups that included significant numbers of students who share our racial history and culture.
20. My children are confident that they will never be embarrassed by hearing others suggest that the problems of the school (low levels of achievement, the need for special support services, etc.) are caused by the high number of children of their race."

The importance of exploring this subject has three basic tiers that participants may reach. First, participants should be able to recognize that people of color are disadvantaged; second, that people of non-color are over-privileged; and third, participants can compel themselves to lessen or end it (McIntosh, 1989). It is difficult to approach this subject without addressing whiteness and/or developing an understanding of why we should teach about this construct to high school students. Gregory Jay, a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee, suggests as many as eight reasons to address whiteness as part of the semantic and cultural underpinnings of the exploration of white privilege. They include:

1. White people need to take responsibility for race, since they invented the idea in the first place (at least in its modern sense).

2. The question of race should not just be raised when studying "people of color" (or during Black History Month).
3. Studying whiteness means studying institutional racism, especially practices that create "white privilege." Since white privilege is systemic and not personal, this approach can combat the tendency to get stuck in the "white guilt" syndrome (which involves both confessions and denials).
4. Studying whiteness can change the dynamic of any classroom, whatever its ethno-racial makeup, by moving the conversation from personal attitudes (and guilt) to the objective analysis of historical events, legal codes, social institutions, and cultural practices.
5. Silence about whiteness lets everyone continue to harbor prejudices and misconceptions, beginning with the notion that "white" equals normal. Whiteness oppresses when it operates as the invisible regime of normality, and thus making whiteness visible is a principal goal of anti-racist pedagogy.
6. Whiteness has been a significant legal and political category, and thus a powerful reality even if it is based on a fantasy. Whiteness is a way of distributing wealth and power according to arbitrary notions of biological difference.
7. Whiteness has been a significant aesthetic and cultural value (or symbol or commodity), and thus requires a defamiliarizing or deconstructive interpretation.
8. Teaching about whiteness helps move classes beyond the "celebrate diversity" model of multiculturalism.

Therefore, teaching about whiteness moves antiracist education in new directions by presenting difficult challenges to the very idea of "race." (Jay,

<https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>). This unit is designed to help facilitate a powerful unit that permits students to surface the realities and "embedded forms" of white privilege (McIntosh, 1989).

Overview:

It is not a stretch to consider the unit for an audience other than high school students, yet the content and resources may need a good deal of vetting before introducing it to younger students. While exploring the topic of white privilege can be an engaging topic, its contemporary and real-life implications are different than, say, a unit on the more traditional literary or historical topics of the Harlem Renaissance or Hampton University. The acknowledgement and surfacing of white privilege as a real, cultural pathology may often hit too-close-to-home for:

- Students of color whose lives and means are disadvantaged by its existence and power.
- White students whose lives and means are afforded advantage by it.
- Any student who will be compelled to address strategies or actions to change the reality and existence of white privilege.

In short, it makes participants more accountable by getting them to ask themselves, "Having described [white privilege], what will I do to lessen or end it" (McIntosh, p. 1).

Ultimately, consideration might be given to the age, racial make-up, and political context of the student body and community before determining which activities to utilize. Teachers often know their students best, but because of the "encounter experience" nature of the unit, acknowledging the community-based context and shaping the unit appropriately

would be both rewarding and prudent. Indeed, it is possible that sending a note home explaining the unit may be worthwhile for two reasons. Primarily, because it would acknowledge the diversity of opinions parents may have about race in America and permit them to learn more about the unit; and relatedly, it could provide an opportunity for parents and caregivers to explore the topic with their students while placing and valuing the voice of young people in exploring the topic in the context of family beliefs and norms.

Some of the activities may even be well-suited for work in Professional Learning Communities with teachers whose efficacy and understanding of others could be enhanced.

Curriculum Unit:

In order to make this unit a more authentic effort, I have aligned it to standards; specifically, to the Ohio Department of Education's *draft* Social Studies Academic Content Standards Revision. The March 2010 version contains six syllabi for high school social studies classes. I have aligned the unit to the proposed American Government course syllabus and the following enduring understandings:

Topic: *Civic Participation and Skills* – Democratic government is enhanced when individuals exercise the skills to effectively participate in civic affairs.

- Content Statement #3: Issues can be analyzed through the critical use of information from public records, surveys, research data and policy positions of advocacy groups.

Topic: *Role of the People* – The government of the United States protects the freedoms of its people and provides opportunities for citizens to participate in the political process.

- Content Statement #10: Historically, the United States has struggled with majority rule and the extension of minority rights. As a result of the struggle, the government has increasingly extended civil rights to marginalized groups and broadened opportunities for participation.

Topic: *Ohio's State and Local Governments* – The State of Ohio acts within the framework of the U.S. Constitution and extends powers and functions to local governments.

- Content Statement #12: Individuals in Ohio have a responsibility to assist state and local governments as they address relevant and often controversial problems that directly affect their communities. (pp. 7-8)

In addition, the unit's activities from *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* (Heintz and Folbre, 2000) can also align with some of the financial literacy standards mandated by HB1 and outlined in the same revision document.

Activities:

The unit is designed for teachers to facilitate in the order that the activities are listed. Any of the activities can be re-arranged as a teacher feels achieves the greatest educational efforts.

1. Start with an anticipation guide comprised of question that underscore student's perceptions of luck, fate, effort, etc... Examples may include: If I find a dollar in the street, I would ask around and see if I can return it to somebody; I believe that all people are free to be whoever they wish to become; etc.
2. Discuss satire as a literacy device and view Eddie Murphy's *White Like Me* "docu-skit" on Hulu.com. Have them look for white advantages satirized in the video @

<http://www.hulu.com/watch/10356/saturday-night-live-white-like-me> and discuss them as a class.

3. Read Peggy McIntosh's essay (include graphic organizer to hold thoughts and/or model before, during, and after adolescent literacy strategies). If a broad gap of reading levels exist in your class (and in what class doesn't it), consider differentiating the content through the use of alternative texts that define and provide examples of white privilege, including texts by Ruth Anne Olson (1992) or Robert Jensen (see #4, below) that are easier and shorter. Have groups report out summaries and at least one example from their assigned text. Discuss.
4. Ask students to rank on a scale of 1 (Strongly disagree) to 10 (Strongly Agree) their level of agreement to three consensegram, likert-scale questions asked of Robert Jensen after his article about white privilege appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*:
(<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whiteprivilege.htm>)
 - a. White privilege doesn't exist because affirmative action has made being white a disadvantage.
 - b. White privilege exists, but it can't be changed because it is natural for any group to favor its own, and besides, the worst manifestations of racism are over.
 - c. White privilege exists, and that's generally been a good thing because white Europeans have civilized the world. Along the way some bad things may have happened, and we should take care to be nice to non-whites to make up for that

NOTE: Consider having students keep this document and re-assessing themselves at the end of this unit to determine if growth has occurred. Students can write up

a 2-page reaction paper that explores if and what level of growth and/or awareness may have occurred and what impact this may have on students' lives.

5. Use the following graphs and tables from *The Ultimate Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* (Heintz & Folbre, 2000) to explore the economic impact of white privilege. Students can be organized in groups of 3-4 to discuss and draft their own Peggy McIntosh-structured examples. These can be written on "blank check" templates to explore the symbolic costs/expenses:
 - a. 1.4, The Color of Wealth (p. 17)
 - b. 4.1, Who We Are (p. 68)
 - c. 4.2, Asian and Latino Diversity (p. 69)
 - d. 4.4, Neighborhoods in Black and White (p. 71)
 - e. 4.15, Lending Discrimination (p. 82)
 - f. 4.16, Affirmative Action (p. 83)
 - g. 7.11, People of Color Lack Insurance (p. 132)
 - h. 7.12, African-American Children at Greater Risk (p. 133)
 - i. Of interest may be appendix T.16, What They Call Us: Racial and Ethnic Labels in Economic Data (pp. 202-04).
6. Create a blog or class wiki where students can respond to periodic postings of a new teacher-posted privilege and/or for students to add other backpack items they discover/uncover – maybe 1-2 per week (use a rubric that assesses online posts for web-based courses that cover such areas as read & respond; also respond to one other classmates' response; etc.).

7. Add a sprinkling of quick-writes and exit slips to help students articulate their understanding and reactions. This will also help the teacher with formative data to ensure that the unit is proceeding as desired.
8. End the unit by having students re-assess themselves on the consensogram questions by Jensen listed in #4, to determine if growth has occurred. Students can write a reflective essay based upon a couple choices:
 - a. PROMPT #1: Explore if (and to what level) of growth and/or awareness may have occurred and what impact this may have on their lives.
 - b. PROMPT #2: Do you agree that an invisible backpack exists? Explain to what degree; include examples and details to support your opinion.
 - c. PROMPT #3: Take the Harvard "Are you a racist?" online psychological test [Project Implicit -- <https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/> and the Implicit Association Tests (IAT)] and then respond to the following prompt: Is "automatic preference" a fair name for the benefits afforded whites under white privilege? Explain. Describe the possible impact your result may have on you? On others? On the growth or destruction of the backpack? Describe what value a test like this might have for members of society?

I also found the following activities that can be used and integrated. All eight are available from Gregory Jay @ <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>:

1. "Consciousness raising: Begin with Peggy McIntosh's essay on "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack." Read other deconstructions of whiteness in David

Roediger's anthology *Black on White* to establish the long history of African American theorizing about whiteness. Sample contemporary white writers on whiteness" (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).

2. "Screen the video *Blue Eyed* , which records a whiteness workshop for teachers run by Jane Elliott, inventor of the famous brown eyed/blue eyed classroom experiment. Also recommended is white filmmaker Macky Alston's PBS documentary *Family Name*, in which he seeks out the extended black family of Alstons and explores his relation to the color line" (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).
3. "Keyword exercises: have students collect the entries on "race," "white," "Caucasian," "Aryan," "black," and "Negro" (for example) from at least two dictionaries and two encyclopedias. Compare the results, and ask students to now try writing their own definitions of some of these terms. Or have them use an interview technique, in which they record definitions of these terms gathered by interviewing other students, family members, teachers, librarians, etc." (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).
4. "Historical research: have students find uses of the word "white" and "black" (or "colored" or "Negro") in legal or political documents, such as acts of Congress, Supreme Court rulings, state and local statutes, etc. Discuss "whiteness" as a legal category (or legal fiction). Investigate the laws on interracial sex and "miscegenation" (see the anthology *Interracialism*, ed. Werner Sollers)" (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).

5. "Life analysis (based on the questions in McIntosh's essay): have students make a list of ten things they normally do during the week. Then have them imagine that they woke up one day to find that their "race" had changed to [fill in the blank]. Going through their lists, students should analyze how each thing might be different for them were their "race" different. Would they be able to go to such places, talk to such people, enjoy such events, etc.? Would they feel comfortable doing so? What would be the chances that people of that race would be found doing these things in these places in these ways? What other things might they be doing instead? What real differences, in other words, does "race" make each day in our lives" (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).
6. "Cultural Identity paper: This assignment challenges students to examine their identity in terms of culture, race, and ethnicity. Typically, white students have tremendous problems with this assignment at first, since they have unconsciously coded "culture" as something that only "people of color" have. "I don't have a culture, I'm just white, just an American" is a fairly standard first response. By exploring their own race and ethnicity, and by thinking critically about the notions of culture and identity, students gain both a vocabulary and a method for taking on the larger issues raised by multiculturalism and whiteness studies. (For an account of this assignment see Gregory Jay, *American Literature and the Culture Wars*, chapter three, "Taking Multiculturalism Personally.") (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).

7. "Media analysis (read excerpts from Richard Dyer's book *White*): look for images of whiteness in the media. What kinds and types of whiteness appear most often? Are there different classes of white people? If so, how are they represented differently by the media? How long can one watch television or read a newspaper or magazine without encountering anything but white people, or mostly white people? Have students bring in copies of major newspapers and magazines and analyze the distribution of images of whiteness and blackness. Make a list of the top grossing films of the last five years and consider whether their characters and presumed audience show a bias toward whiteness. Consider screening such films as *King Kong*, *The Jazz Singer*, *Pinky* or *Imitation of Life* (1934; remade 1959) " (Gregory Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).
8. "Literary analysis: read portions of Toni Morrison's Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. Using texts by white authors, analyze the way whiteness gets constructed through comparisons to a dark or black "other." Debate whether or not schools should offer courses with names such as "Major White American Authors" or "The White Tradition in American Literature." Compare texts by white and black authors to analyze what difference whiteness makes (for example, compare Franklin's Autobiography with Douglass's Narrative, or the poems of Langston Hughes with those of Robert Frost, or the stories of Alice Walker with those of William Faulkner). Have students rewrite particular stories or passages by changing the race of the narrator or main character. (For a substantial overview, assign Valerie Babb's book *Making*

Whiteness Visible: The Meaning of Whiteness in American Literature and Culture " (Jay, <https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/Teachwhiteness.html>).

Bibliography and Resources

Essays & Texts:

White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Backpack. Peggy McIntosh's seminal 1989 essay.

<http://web.nmsu.edu/~mlicona/NMSU%20Courses/WhitePrivilege.doc>.

White Privilege in Schools. Ruth Ann Olson (1992). Eliminating White Privilege in Schools: An Awesome Challenge for White Parents and Educators.

Teaching Effectiveness Program:

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/diversity/instructor/instructorprivilege.html>

Resources to examine white privilege - "In order to truly understand issues of diversity, we must consider the idea of privilege and how it impacts everything around us—in and out of the classroom. The articles below provide information, questions, and resources on this challenging concept."

White Privilege Shapes the U.S.:

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whiteprivilege.htm>

Discussion of privilege by Robert Jensen, a professor in the Department of Journalism at the University of Texas at Austin. Article first appeared in the *Baltimore Sun*, July 19, 1998.

More Thoughts on Why the System of White Privilege is Wrong :

<http://uts.cc.utexas.edu/~rjensen/freelance/whitefolo.htm>

Follow-up essay to White Privilege Shapes the U.S written by Robert Jensen and taken from the *Baltimore Sun*, July 4, 1999.

Much more on White Privilege including a link to the Peggy McIntosh essay

http://wik.ed.uiuc.edu/index.php/White_privilege

Teaching Effectiveness Program:

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/diversity/instructor/instructorprivilege.html>

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Resources on White Privilege

<http://www.canopyweb.com/racism/>

<http://www.mtholyoke.edu/org/wsar/index.html>

http://hansengeorge.blogspot.com/2007_10_01_archive.html

Activities & Other Lessons:

Self-tests of prejudice through the Project Implicit and the Implicit Association Tests (IAT).

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>

Tests address race, skin color, ageism, gender and a handful of other bias assessments, including:

- **Race ('Black - White' IAT).** This IAT requires the ability to distinguish faces of European and African origin. It indicates that most Americans have an automatic preference for white over black.
- **Skin-tone ('Light Skin - Dark Skin' IAT).** This IAT requires the ability to recognize light and dark-skinned faces. It often reveals an automatic preference for light-skin relative to dark-skin.
- **Weapons ('Weapons - Harmless Objects' IAT).** This IAT requires the ability to recognize White and Black faces, and images of weapons or harmless objects.
- **Asian American ('Asian - European American' IAT).** This IAT requires the ability to recognize White and Asian-American faces, and images of places that are either American or Foreign in origin.

White Privilege Checklist

http://www.unh.edu/residential-life/diversity/aw_article17.pdf

PBS Lesson - White Privilege

http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/twotownsofjasper/classroom_lessonplan02.html

Video on web:

Eddie Murphy SNL skit – White Like Me (Satire)

- <http://www.hulu.com/watch/10356/saturday-night-live-white-like-me>

Tim Wise, author of *White Like Me* ... What is White Privilege? (9:51):

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=J3Xe1kX7Wsc&feature=related>

Tim Wise – The Pathology of White Privilege: Racism, White Denial, and the Costs of Inequality:

Pt I (of 6)...10 minutes:

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=SZ8xQPdjfM&feature=related>

Pt II (of 6)...11 minutes:

http://youtube.com/watch?v=OlqLijhXT_M&feature=related

Pt III (of 6)...10:40:

<http://youtube.com/watch?v=kQWP7fUSPJU&feature=related>

Pt IV (of 6)...10:40:

http://youtube.com/watch?v=o13Lr6Sr_cU&feature=related

Pt V (of 6)...10:40:

http://youtube.com/watch?v=2VuA_wXi02I&feature=related

Pt VI (of 6)...10:40:

http://youtube.com/watch?v=KR0_jYssnXQ&feature=related

ABC - 20/20 What Would You Do / Racism In America:

Part 1 -- <http://youtube.com/watch?v=eNu-WZdHzaA&feature=related>

Part 2 -- http://youtube.com/watch?v=HIVgMvuCM_k&feature=related