

Racial Discrimination/Racial Privilege

Many Whites Are Unaware of the Unearned Privilege Their Skin Color Affords Them in the Workplace and When Confronted by Police

by Michael R. Wenger

More than two years ago, former United States senator and current presidential candidate Bill Bradley wrote in *FOCUS* that “the flip side of racial discrimination is racial privilege, which consists of all those things that come to white Americans in the normal course of living—all the things they take for granted that a black person must never take for granted.”

Bradley acquired this insight, uncommon among white Americans, from his experiences as a member of integrated basketball teams, in both the college and the professional ranks. On and off the court, the Princeton University and New York Knicks star perceived realities that most Americans rarely see. He observed more than discrimination against his African American teammates. He witnessed, as well, the advantages that came his way simply because of his skin color.

During the year I served as a deputy director for President Clinton’s Initiative on Race, we met with white Americans who claimed allegiance to the ideal of equal opportunity and fairness for all, but lacked any conscious awareness of the unearned privileges their skin color confers on them every day. Comfortably ensconced in their social cocoons, few have the opportunity to communicate and interact in meaningful ways with people of color and, thereby, to comprehend different perspectives on race. For equal opportunity and racial justice to truly permeate our society, more white Americans must understand Bradley’s perspective.

Band-aids and Billboards

As a white man who was married to an African American woman and has three children as a result of that marriage, I have had more than a passing acquaintance with both racial discrimination and unearned racial privilege. My perspective has been informed by being able to contrast the treatment I have received as a white person with the discrimination my family and I have encountered because of our mixed composition.

One of the most chilling experiences of my life occurred in the early 1970s when I was driving in North Carolina late one night with my former wife. We came upon a huge billboard, illuminated with red spotlights, that read: “This is Klan Country. Fight integration and communism. Impeach

Earl Warren. Welcome to Smithville.” (Then Chief Justice Warren of the U.S. Supreme Court presided over the Court’s *Brown v Board of Education* decision in 1954.)

The terror we experienced during the remaining 40 miles of our journey that night was palpable. My wife immediately slid down under the dashboard in front of the passenger seat so she couldn’t be seen from outside the car. To reduce the chance of being stopped by the police, I eased up on the accelerator so I would not exceed the speed limit by a single digit. As we stopped for a red light in town, we saw a group of white teenage boys congregated on the corner across the street. As a white man apparently alone, I was in no danger. If they discovered my wife huddled under the dashboard, we feared we might never make it out of town.

Twenty-five years later, the scars of that experience remain. I have never again driven in that part of North Carolina without a knot in the pit of my stomach and a wariness about whom I might encounter. I often think about the freedom from such torment that my white skin usually affords me and the enduring pain that my then wife must still feel from her segregated rural North Carolina childhood—and young adulthood—seared with terrifying and humiliating experiences based solely on her skin color.

My education about race began in earnest a decade earlier. In the early 1960s I’d become conscious of white privilege for the first time. I was among 17 students from Queens College in New York City, all but one white, spending the summer of 1963 in Prince Edward County, Virginia. We were teaching the basics of reading and writing to young black children who had been shut out of the public schools for four years because of Virginia’s “massive resistance” to school integration.

One Saturday, six of us, all white, had driven to Richmond for a change in scenery and were returning to the county seat of Farmville. A girl in the car had to use the rest room, so we stopped at a gas station. She got out of the car and went around to the back, but returned immediately, considerably paler than when she left. When we asked what was wrong, she replied that there was a “Whites Only” sign on the door, and she just couldn’t make herself go in. Of course, we all knew about “Whites Only” signs, but we’d never had to confront the practical consequences of not being able to use a public facility. While our friend made it back to Farmville uncomfortable but intact, the experience left an indelible imprint concerning

Continued on Page 4

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Racial Discrimination

Continued from page 3

the privileges of our skin color that, until then, we had taken for granted.

This privilege was reinforced the next evening when I was watching television in the home of a black family in Farmville. A commercial for "flesh colored" band-aids flashed on the screen. I'd seen it countless times previously, but had never given any thought to whose flesh the band-aids matched. For the first time that evening I confronted feelings of loneliness and powerlessness that were strangers to me but constant companions of people made to feel like outsiders in their own country.

Whites Learn the Game

Conditions have changed. That North Carolina billboard has crumbled. The "Whites Only" signs are gone from rest rooms, soda fountains, and other public facilities. One only infrequently sees the kind of blatant insensitivity characterized by that advertisement for "flesh-colored" band-aids. But scars from the long nightmare of overt discrimination endure and are passed on.

Even as blatant racial discrimination has diminished, subtle differential behavior based on skin color remains widespread. Such behavior not only creates persistent barriers to equal opportunity for people of color, it clearly benefits white people and helps to perpetuate our unearned privilege in education, economic opportunity, and other aspects of our daily lives.

Lawrence Otis Graham, a young black man, in his book entitled *Member of the Club*, describes how racial privilege worked in the Wall Street law firm he joined following his graduation from Harvard Law School. He tells of the advantage enjoyed by young white attorneys who lived in the same communities as and socialized with the firm's partners, almost all of whom were white. Not surprisingly, these young white attorneys became proteges of these partners, learned how to "play the corporate game," received the choice assignments, and advanced quickly. Black attorneys, however, rarely receive this kind of corporate nurturing. Such differential behavior may not be conscious, but it nonetheless gave young white attorneys a powerful advantage.

During its meeting on Race and Employment in Phoenix in January, 1998, the President's Advisory Board heard racial privilege described by Jose Roberto Juarez, a St. Mary's Law School Professor: "When we talk about an employer who says, 'Well, the reason that I hired this particular person is because they had better people skills,' quite often that means, gee, the white guy got along a whole lot better with all the other white guys and if we had hired this Chicana, she was going to make us all uncomfortable and so that's why we didn't hire her."

Both Graham and Juarez portray the racial privilege that permeates virtually every aspect of our daily lives. It begins at an early age. For example, for me, a middle-class white boy growing up in the New York City area, high expecta-

tions in school were a given. Virtually from the day I arrived in kindergarten, teachers began to prepare me for college and a professional career. Like most children, I unconsciously responded to those expectations. When I responded inadequately, my parents got a call from the teacher, and I was quickly set straight. It would have taken real effort for me to fail.

My three children, now grown, college educated, and professionally successful, had a different experience. My two daughters, both of whom went to public schools, constantly confronted low teacher expectations simply because of their darker skin hues. Their mother and I faced an annual struggle to prevent teachers from seating them in the back of the room and ignoring them if they didn't cause trouble. I cannot remember ever receiving a call from a teacher if they weren't doing well. As they got older, we had to fight the effort to "track" them into vocational education classes "so they will have a better chance to succeed." At home we had to compensate for damage inflicted on the girls' self-esteem by the school's lower expectations.

My son spent several years in private schools in the Washington, D.C., area, where expectations for him were high. Yet, when he transferred to a public school, he had to confront the same problems as his sisters despite having a good academic record in the private schools. As an adult, he has spoken often about the deflating impact of low teacher expectations on the aspirations of many of his public school classmates.

Not only are white students often better prepared for economic success because of higher teacher expectations, the objective reality remains that schools with a predominantly white student body have more highly qualified teachers, more advanced materials, and more modern facilities. In truth, while many white Americans criticize affirmative action for students of color, their children are enjoying the fruits of unearned privilege, an unconscious kind of affirmative action for white students.

Whites Aren't Followed in Stores

The advantage continues into the job market. Law professor Juarez's testimony reminded me of an experience in which I was one of four people interviewing candidates for a high-level executive position. An African American woman emerged as clearly the best qualified candidate, but she had to be hired over the objection of one of the interviewers—another white male—who contended that "although she's clearly the best qualified, she just won't fit in here." She was hired and she "fit in" just fine. But she had to overcome the hurdle of subtle racist perceptions that white Americans rarely encounter.

That white Americans rarely have to confront these experiences is the essence of racial privilege. Everyday situations that intensify stress for Americans of color are foreign to most white Americans. If you are white in America, you don't worry about whether you'll be able to catch a cab, cash a check, or shop without being followed

Continued on back page

Racial Discrimination

Continued from page 4

around the store. You feel little anxiety that your skin color will get in the way of finding a job, being promoted, or buying a house you desire. Fear of police harassment is a largely unknown emotion.

Today I am married to a white woman, and it often occurs to me how comfortable it can be to be white and unobtrusive. In a fancy restaurant or social gathering we are, more often than not, surrounded by people who look like us. When we're driving our late model car, we are never stopped by police who consider us to fit a profile of drug dealers. But even in situations when we are in the minority, as my wife and I are in the predominantly African American residential community where we live just outside of Washington, D.C., we have the instinctive security of knowing that we are part of the majority in the larger community and that our whiteness confers advantage in most situations.

Challenge to a Multiracial Democracy

That circumstance, however, is changing. Demographers project that by the middle of the 21st century, white Americans will comprise barely more than 50 percent of this country's population. Rather than being threatened, as many white Americans are, by the nation's emerging multi-racial and multi-cultural complexion, we should embrace these changes and recognize how sharing the benefits of this society will strengthen us as we compete in the global economy, enjoy the fruits of each other's cultures, and build a more stable democracy.

Recognizing the dramatic changes that are occurring, the Advisory Board to the President's Initiative on Race, chaired by Dr. John Hope Franklin, declared in its final report that "the greatest challenge facing Americans is to accept and take pride in defining ourselves as a multi-racial democracy."

The Advisory Board understood that meeting this challenge requires a greater awareness of today's racial realities. Thus, it called for a sustained and penetrating public awareness campaign to disseminate factual information about such things as our changing demographics and persistent disparities in educational attainment and economic advancement, to confront stereotypes, and to promote greater racial understanding and mutual respect.

The Board proposed, as well, an idea that can help us, in a small way, relate to Senator Bradley's perspective and raise our consciousness about the role of skin color in our society. The Board asked that each of us commit at least one day per month to thinking about how issues of racial discrimination and racial privilege might be affecting people with whom we come in contact during the day. In other words, for just one out of every 30 days, try to get beyond our skin color and imagine what it might feel like to be of a different racial background.

For white people, this means trying the following: Observe who attracts the first empty cab that passes. Take note of who is asked for identification to cash a check. Notice whom the sales clerks follow in the clothing store. Sense the feeling when you observe a stereotyped character on television, read of a racial incident in the newspaper, hear a "shock jock's" racist joke, or are in the minority at a social gathering.

Heeding these suggestions will not eliminate racial discrimination or racial privilege. Nor is it a substitute for meaningful and sustained interracial communication and interaction. But simply being more observant and more sensitive can help us to recognize the realities of everyday life that others must face. And because the first step toward solving a problem is to recognize it, that recognition can establish a foundation for constructive and necessary action to narrow racial divisions and successfully meet the challenge set before us by the President's Advisory Board. ■