

IMAGES of COLOR, IMAGES of CRIME

Readings

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Chapter 18

White Privilege, Color, and Crime; A Personal Account

Peggy McIntosh

In 1988 I published an autobiographical account of my experience of having white-skin privilege by contrast with African American female colleagues who work in the same time, place, building, or line of work, doing research on and programs about women (McIntosh, 1988). I listed 46 ways in which I experience daily conditions of unearned overadvantage by contrast with these colleagues. I listed conditions that seemed to me a little more connected with race than with class, region, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, though I wrote that I saw all of the factors as intricately intertwined privileging systems that bear on any one person's experience.

I explained that I did not ask for the unearned advantages that I put on my list. They came to me because of my placement within systems of privilege and disadvantage that do not have to do with merit. I had come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I could count on cashing in each day but about which I was meant to remain oblivious. White privilege is like an invisible, weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, code books, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks. Seeing this, which I was taught not to see, made me revise my view of myself, and also of the United States' claim to be a democracy in which merit is rewarded and life outcomes are directly related to deservedness.

Among the 46 conditions of white privilege I listed in the 1988 paper were a few that pertain specifically to my relation to the law, to crime, and to the courts. At the invitation of the editors of this volume, I am giving examples from the original list, and I have expanded it in order to illuminate my experience of having white-skin privilege with regard to crime and the courts in particular.

My method remains autobiographical. In the 1988 paper, I compared myself only to African American female colleagues with whom I came into daily or fairly frequent contact. For this analysis, I have broadened the sample to include friends, and colleagues in other racial/ethnic groups who are engaged in a variety of occupations outside of this building and line of work. Once again, I know something about their experiences and have heard some of their stories. It is by contrast with these that I tell of my own experience, and of the racial over-advantage that makes my life markedly different from theirs in most circumstances, including many involving law, crime, and the courts.

Before turning to this list, I want to make clear again the focus of my original analysis. The point of my work is not to make me or other white people feel blamed or guilty for benefitting from inherited systems of system over-advantage. We did not invent them, and in my analysis, we were taught not to see them. I observe that the people who benefit most (in the short run) from privilege systems in the United States are kept most blinded to the existence of privilege systems, to preserve the myths of moral and managerial meritocracy and the belief that democracy is working as it should.

Rather than creating a sense of guilt or blame, the point of my work is to help those with the most power to recognize that privileging systems exist and that the existence of unearned disadvantage usually involves a corresponding existence of over-advantage. Without this understanding, it is impossible, in my view, to either make sense of or to do effective work to improve race relations and most other power relations that exist in U.S. society. In this chapter I raise again my question of 1988: Having seen

unearned power or permission to dominate, how can I use my unearned power to distribute power more fairly and to weaken systems of unearned privilege?

I will start with some general points from my earlier list, than repeat those that related most specifically to crime, the courts, and the law, and then add further points about white privilege, crime, law, and the courts in my experience.

In 1988, I wrote that the African American women in the same building and line of work whose stories and lives I knew something about could not, as far as I could see, count on most of the 46 conditions I listed. Readers are reminded that my list was and is context-specific and autobiographical; it is about what I knew and does not claim to be about the privileges of all white people everywhere relative to all people of color. Some readers may wish to make their own autobiographical lists grounded in their own daily circumstances and perceptions.

1. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
2. The day I move into new housing that I have chosen, I can be pretty sure that my new neighbors will be neutral or pleasant to me.
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. I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race in all classes, in all subjects, at all grade levels.
5. If I want to, I can be pretty sure of finding a publisher for this work on white privilege.
6. I can go into a supermarket and find the staple foods that fit with my cultural traditions, or into a hair dresser's shop and find someone who can cut my hair.
7. I can swear, or dress in secondhand clothes without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
8. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
9. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.
10. I can remain oblivious of the language and customs of persons of color who constitute the world's majority without feeling in my culture any penalty for such oblivion.
11. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a cultural outsider.
12. I can easily buy posters, postcards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys, and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
13. I can go home from most meetings of organizations to which I belong feeling somewhat tied in, rather than isolated, out of place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance, or feared.
14. I can choose blemish cover or bandages in "flesh" color and have them more or less match my skin.

At this point, I turn to conditions on my 1988 list that relate most closely to color and crime.

15. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the newspaper and see people of my race widely and positively represented.
16. Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial responsibility.
17. I can arrange to protect my children most of the time from people who might not like them.

18. I can take a job with an affirmative action employer without having co-workers on the job suspect that I got it because of race.
19. I can choose public accommodation without fearing that people of my race cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
20. I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
21. If my day, week, or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.
22. If a cop pulls me over, or if the IRS audits our tax return, I can be sure it is not because of my race.
23. If I get angry and ask to speak to the “person in charge,” I can be fairly sure I will be talking to a person of my race.
24. I did not need to teach our children about systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.
25. I can go shopping alone in department stores near my house without being followed or harassed by store detectives on the grounds that I may be shoplifting or soliciting.
26. We were able to teach our children that the police were their allies, and that they should dial 911 if they had an emergency.
27. In my neighborhood, I can be sure that the police will not harass me because of the color of my skin.

What follows here are further points explicitly related to color and crime.

28. In my neighborhood, any police officer who might need to arrest people in my family is likely to be a person of my race.
29. Criminality is not imputed to me as a genetic component of racial character; I am not assumed to belong to a group of people predisposed to crime.
30. The word “criminal” in the dominant culture does not conjure up the faces of people whose skin color is like that of my father, mother, brother, sister, husband, nieces, or nephews.
31. I have never heard or read the suggestion that the people of my color ought to be locked up or killed. Even Islamic fundamentalists do not call for the killing of all people of my color, only certain “morally corrupt” ones.
32. In World War II my grandparents, despite having German ancestors two generations ago, were not locked up by the U.S. government in internment camps on the suspicion or pretext that they might be traitors.
33. Nearly all of the lawyers and judges who study, write about, argue, debate, and practice law in the U.S. are people of my race.
34. Law-breaking by the U.S. government with regard to treaties with Native American people was not taught to me as a criminal aspect of my racial heritage.
35. Deceiving Native Americans is not described as a genetic or inherited trait of whites.
36. Refusing to honor Native American treaties today is not shown to me as law-breaking by white people.
37. The U.S. government has never made it a crime for me to speak my native language or observe the religious ceremonies of my parents and grandparents.
38. The prison system is thoroughly controlled by people of my race.

39. The Constitution I am subject to was created by people of my ethnic heritage to apply to some people of my ethnic heritage and to not apply to people of other races.
40. I am assumed to be entitled to whatever legal defense I can afford, even if it allows me to be acquitted of a crime I have committed.
41. If I am suspected of being guilty but am acquitted, I will be seen as someone who got through the cracks rather than as a person who especially deserved not to get through the cracks.
42. Those who have been able to afford the high costs of legal training have been, for the most part, people of my race.
43. Lawyers featured as experts by the media are overwhelmingly people of my race.
44. Those who have been able to pay lawyer's fees and legal costs have for the most part been people of my race.
45. A successful tax evader in my ethnic group is usually portrayed as a cheater or even a victor, but not as an innate criminal or a representative of a whole race of people who drain society.
46. A deadbeat dad in my ethnic group is portrayed in the media as financially but not sexually irresponsible.
47. When I walk into the courthouses of my country, I can expect respectful treatment from the receptionists.
48. As a child, I heard jokes and sound tracks that cast people of other races as habitually dumb and coarse, or else sneaky, shifty, sly, malicious, or underhanded, and left people of my race protected from such typecasting.
49. The voiceovers of criminals, shifty individuals, and villains in Disney films and in ads rarely sound like people of my racial/ethnic group.
50. If I stand in line at the bank teller's window, no one looks strangely at me, as though they have a problem with my being there.
51. If I suffer damages and decide to take a case to court, the people I see in the legal system will probably be people who were trained to trust my kind and me.
52. I can stand behind another person at an ATM machine without being feared as a potential mugger.
53. If I am laughing with friends on a street at night, it is not assumed that we are in a gang.
54. A realtor has never discriminated against me to "protect property values."
55. No one has ever suggested that I might have dealt drugs in order to afford a certain car or house.
56. The men of my race who took 400 billion dollars in the 1994 U.S. S & L (savings and loan) scandal are not branded as criminals or seen as enemies of the U.S. people, even though the money has never been returned.
57. When I think of prisons, I do not have to think of people of my race as disproportionately serving time in them, having longer than average sentences, and being executed in greater numbers.
58. I am allowed to believe, and encouraged to believe, that people of my race are in general law-abiding rather than law-breaking.
59. TV shows and films show people of my color as the main defenders of law and order; cleverest detectives, best lawyers and judges, and wiliest outlaws.
60. Portrayals of white males on TV as criminals and violent individuals do not incriminate me as a white; these males, even the outlaws, are usually presented as strong men of a quintessentially American type.

61. Illegal acts by the U.S. government, in the present and in the past, around the world, are not attributed by whites to white immorality and illegality.
62. Bad race relations in the United States are not attributed by whites to criminal behavior, despite a history of race-related breaking of laws by whites over the entire span of Anglo-European life on this continent.

This list could expand much further. The examples are hard to allow into my awareness, however, because these truths are so unpleasant to face and so disruptive of my acculturated sense of myself in moral and political worlds.

My conscious mind was schooled to believe that to some extent justice will be done through the legal system of the United States; it balks at the realization that continual unnamed injustices result from the projection onto my race of being on the side of law or being an admirable, individualistic challenger to the law while people of color are subtly portrayed as beyond the ethics and rules of law and order, whether by being shiftless, exploitive, unreliable, violent, or criminal.

The bad behavior of a person of color, when it occurs or is thought to occur, is unfairly projected onto his or her entire group, whether it is the stereotype of inscrutable shiftiness attributed to Asian Americans, the gangsterism attributed to Latino men, or another of the myriad common projections and stereotypes. Meanwhile, people of my Anglo-European ethnicity escape mass negative projections by the media and by other white citizens. Projections onto Italians that they are connected to the Mafia, onto Jews that their main value is making money, onto the Irish as drunken drivers do occur; but they do not so clearly incriminate them without trial. And the Anglo-European character perpetually bobs up, like a Weeble doll, as the norm of uprightness that negative attributions cannot destabilize, except for very short periods, in particular instances of crimes that are seen as committed by individuals.

I am struck by the magnitude of the effects of unincriminated “whiteness.” As a case in point, white-collar crime is considered to be unlike other crimes. There is a lack of public acknowledgment in the media of the damage it does to society. Men like Michael Milken and Donald Trump and even the S & L scandal perpetrators continue to be lionized for their ruthlessness in breaking laws. The \$400 billion “lost” in the S & L scandal has never been traced, but the white men who are sitting on the money are not known as white crooks if they are thought of as crooks at all. Imagine what would have happened in the United States if black or Chicano men had made so much investors’ money disappear.

The reason I see the need to *do the arithmetic of unearned over-advantage as a function of unearned disadvantage* is that without it I am allowed to consider myself as a person neutrally placed in relation to these matters of law. Then I do not need to bother myself about “the forces for law and order” as long as I behave myself and do not run too many red lights. But in fact, the forces for law and order, because they do not deal evenly with us, are a threat both to me and to my colleagues of color, bringing them an absence of legal protection and security and bringing trepidation, anxiety, and anger, if not outright harassment and persecution. If I am let off what they endure, then I have an unearned advantage in the form of freedom from danger, fear, and anger, and I become a target for their legitimate anger. I do not think it is good to be made a target of others’ legitimate anger.

Several years ago, the teenage friend of a black colleague of mine was stopped by the police as he drove to his family’s suburban home one night. The police made him wake up both of his parents in the middle of the night to prove that he belonged in the mostly white neighborhood, that is, that his credentials were not forged. The memory of the police hostility and the humiliation will never disappear from that family and their community; for this family, I think the town’s police can never be seen as

allies. But can I see them as my allies? How are they my allies if they humiliate and try to intimidate my neighbors?

The police claim they do such things in order to protect “our” neighborhood. But it is a protection racket. They are creating a problem of bad race relations that they then claim to protect the neighbors against. Meanwhile, white privilege might be seen to insulate my family against such treatment and the knowledge of such treatment. We do get unearned freedom from fear, anger, and preoccupation with the question of what the police may do to us. But the bad race relations are not a favor to whites. They surface in the schools and in the streets, and they lower the quality of life for everyone, including whites, who become targets for anger they do not understand and are kept from understanding by the silence surrounding privilege.

I fear police sirens when I am pulled over for speeding, but even then I can observe the processes by which police officers decide to let me off with just a warning. I am a late middle-aged white woman with her hair in a bun who speaks with a soft voice and lives on a well-known street in a mostly white town. I can see the officers’ inclination as they talk to me and look at my license, to feel that I am not as much of a danger on the road as, say, a young black man would be. Yet I think I am every bit as dangerous on the road as the next speeder.

While writing this chapter, I had a vivid experience of how white privilege works in my favor in my place of work. Campus police found computer equipment on the porch of the building at 11:00pm, saw computer equipment in the back seat of my nearby car, and after searching the grounds came into the building. They thought they had interrupted a robbery. I could tell by their faces, though, that they believed me when I said that I was just working late, and that earlier that day some new computer equipment was installed, and we were told we could take away old equipment if we would pay for the repairs. I think that an African American colleague found in this apparently incriminating situation would not have been so easily believed, and would have had much more reason to be scared in the situation, if she had dared to work in this building so late at all.

In the nine years since I published the original white privilege paper, I have done more than 90 co-presentations with persons of color on the subject of privilege systems. Many co-presenters have said that within the last few days preceding our co-presentation, their financial credentials had been doubted or in stores they had been asked for more kinds of personal identification than had others. It does not matter whether they are full professors or owners of their own businesses; they get incriminated through whites’ racial and ethnic projections onto them of financial unreliability and habitual dishonesty. I escape these projections. I can thus live naively, out of touch with the society we actually have, and unthinking on the question of how I reside in that society and it resides in me.

I was in Sweden when the O.J. Simpson criminal trial verdict was announced. My Swedish colleagues had trouble believing the rejoicing and relief at his acquittal among many people of color. They knew U.S. race relations involved discrimination, which they could understand, but not white privilege, which they had never conceived. Skillful lawyers with good legal resources and winning arguments have often allowed white murder suspects to go free. Many African Americans, in addition to feeling that the racism of the Los Angeles Police Department cast doubt on the whole way they got evidence on Simpson, observed that finally a black man had been defended by a highly competent, confident, and large legal team that won the case.

I think that the anger of many white people in the United States that Simpson got off in the criminal trial reveals more than their feeling that he was guilty, which I share. I think it also reveals an assumption of white privilege: whites’ belief that they deserve whatever legal power they can muster, whereas people

of color are immoral if they can afford and obtain lawyers to make a successful defense in the face of evidence of guilt. The second, civil case deepened the bitterness of many people of color who felt that whites had gone to special lengths to see “justice” done in the case of this black celebrity.

There have been two main misreadings of my analysis of white privilege. Some well-meaning white readers have felt that they will now just divest themselves of unearned advantage. It is not that simple. Doors will continue to open for us whether or not we want this to happen. I have, however, identified at least 10 ways in which I can, in my own circumstances, use power to share power and use unearned privilege to weaken systems of unearned privilege. There are ways to collaborate, work as allies, and create change within institutions, policies, and individuals.

My own forms of activism have especially involved choosing to work with women and men of color and trying to diversify all-white groups if I work with them (this is related to point one on my list); organizing for integration of my neighborhood (point two); challenging and changing curricula, scholarship, and teaching methods to create more critical and more inclusive knowledge and education (related to points three and four); co-presenting on white-skin privilege with persons of color to share podium time and honoraria (point five); asking the local supermarket buyers why they will stock specialty Chinese but not specialty African American foods (point six); writing to Hallmark and Crayola’s executives about both racism and sexism in their product lines (point 12); trying to listen and then respond as an ally to participants of color in mostly white organizations (point 13); doing homework on, taking seriously, and disseminating words and works by those who do not have white privilege (points 1-62); getting and using money to spread understanding of privilege systems (and denial of them) through school-based faculty development seminars, consultancies, talks, articles, letters, and conversation, including family conversation (points 1-62); understanding how much I have to learn from people I was taught to overlook, fear, or avoid; learning some of what they have to teach and being awed and grateful for that; and putting my life on a more inclusive and generous base, aware that white privilege both helps and hinders this effort.

There are also people of color who misread the original paper in a way that deepens the conspiracy theory, that is, that white people know all about our racial status and behavior as whites. These readers think that I was saying things that all white people know. On the contrary, I was carefully taught in hundreds of ways not to know, not to see, what I wrote in that paper. I was taught that I didn’t have a race. The word “race” referred to other people. I was just “normal.” And I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group. People who benefit most, in the short term, from privilege systems are kept most blinded to them for they interfere, as I have said, with the ideology that democracy has been achieved and is working well.

I can understand that some people of color find that everything I have written confirms their experience and observations: it is obvious to them. This is what makes some readers conclude that we whites must all know of our unearned privilege and that I just blew the cover of my race. But white people are socialized, conditioned, and educated to not know about white-skin privilege, even more thoroughly, I think, than males are raised to be oblivious to male privilege. To use a parallel and telling example with fewer political and social ramifications: most right-handed people cannot tell you about right-handed privilege. They are not taught to be aware of it. Left-handed people have a lot to say on the subject of being left-handed, which comes as a surprise to the dominant group.

The white readers who have found the analysis most unsurprising are in general those who, through interracial relationships, cross-cultural adoptions, and other “border crossings” are positioned so as to have double or triple perspectives, seeing on both sides of lines of privilege. White women who become

keenly aware of male privilege may also get, as I did, to the insights on race privilege if they are able to de-center themselves, as we have asked men to do. But in doing so, we forego the moral high ground that many of us found so empowering in being the people with justice on our side. It can feel sickening to be de-centered when you have felt centered for the first time ever.

I originally found that going into this subject deeply shook up my sense of being a moral and a nice person. It complicates the whole matter of moral worth. But it has nothing to do with niceness. It has to do with being oppressive through privilege and oblivious to one's oppressiveness, again through privilege. One white privilege is not to know about white privilege. This has nothing to do with whether one is nice. It is about the sense of entitlement with which people of my color took permission, or what we read as permission, from God, or nature, to fill the turf, the time, the payrolls, the centers of recognized authority, including the courts of law. And then not to know that this is our racial history.

I believe that when this happens, the centers of recognized authority within the psyche also take on a cast of white dominance, and replicate the larger society in the inner self. And then the forces of law and order, or of brave domination, in the psyche can feel they are holding at bay the forces of lawlessness and all the projections that they have acquired. To me, it feels as if forces in my personality that are privileged in the wider society for whites become forces in a multiple, interior self that have license to govern, imprison, or ride roughshod over the rest of my personality and perceptions. Then what I call interior colonization occurs (McIntosh, 1990). The self gets taken over by just a segment of itself, and the rest gets identified with the Other, imprisoned, or silenced, while the authorities can deny that any repression is occurring.

Through my work on these problems, I have found it is hard to keep alert to myself as white. It requires diligent reflection on the relation between what I send out to the world in my projections and what I receive. I find that the ancient Greek idea of seeing a two-part process is useful, though we learned about it in school in order to learn that it was inaccurate. Yes, I do seem to send out "eyebeams" that pick up some things and not others, so that what I send out bears on what I get back. One's racial and other social understandings go forth and pick up what they have the capacity to see. Keeping alert to the racial origins of my eyebeams is appropriate but taxing. I was not taught to see myself as white, let alone to see my seeing as influenced by whiteness. And I was taught to see myself as on the side of the law and fairness. It seems now that my Anglo-European eyebeams saw lawfulness where people of my color were in control and the scene was quiet.

This work on seeing privilege is epistemologically dizzying as well as emotionally hard. It is hard to learn you are being de-centered when you were not aware of being central to begin with. I think that for heterosexual white males it has been especially hard, like a one-two-three punch, first having "maleness" problematized, and then "whiteness" and then "straightness." I think that many people who are trying to be reflective are feeling a kind of epistemological nausea from being whirled around so suddenly, as it seems to them. And I myself find that a retreat from the subject of being consciously white is tempting. I see it as curling up and falling asleep, and sleep has its place. But nightmares will come. And I would rather be awake, and not a sleepwalker. I now feel that being a white sleepwalker through the world of white control perpetuates a zombie-like incapacitation of the heart and mind.

It is only a hypothesis, but I would guess that white oblivion about, and inculturated denial of, privilege acts as a psychological prison system that costs white people heavily in terms of preventing human development. Walking obliviously through our own racial experience may perpetuate the imprisonment of the heart and intelligence in a false law-and-order of tyrannizing denial about who, what, and where we are. So the societal systems of color and crime may reside also in the psyches of white

people, where an equivalent of bad race relations or white supremacy damages the civic health and balance of the soul.

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Discussion Questions

1. Talking in a group of four or five others in your class, name and describe some effects of one unearned disadvantage you have had in life. Plan for equal time for each speaker, and time the speakers. Anyone who takes more time than is allotted may be privileging himself or herself.
2. Next, talking in a group of four or five others in your class, name an unearned circumstance of advantage you have had in your life that has not been mentioned. Again, plan for an allotment of equal time for each speaker and keep track of the time. To repeat: anyone who takes more time may be privileging himself or herself through dominance in the taking of "air time."
3. In a group of four or five (still using equal time), discuss a way in which you have seen white privilege at work in the context of law school, justice studies, or the courts. (This discussion will require more time altogether.)
4. Name one way in which you can use your power to share power in your context or use privilege to weaken systems of unearned privilege. (Take equal time, and keep track).
5. In the small group, have each person discuss some frustrations, difficulties, and/or payoffs in structuring the uses of time in this way during the discussion of privilege, color, and crime. I am hoping that time-use habits will be seen as one more aspect of privilege, and that being democratic can also entail stringent controls, at times, on the sharing of power. (Take equal time).