

RECOGNIZING PRIVILEGE: RURAL, URBAN, AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Sunny L. Munn
Doctoral Candidate
Workforce Development & Education
The Ohio State University

Sara Rinfret
Assistant Professor
Department of Public and Environmental Affairs
University of Wisconsin-Green Bay

Kendra Davitt
Law Student
School of Law
University of Texas, Austin

Abstract

Forms of White oppression in the United States are hierarchically evaluated through male-dominated society. This paper concentrates on a different perspective—White, female privilege through the experiences and self-reflections of narratives from three geographical perspectives—rural, urban, and international. Within the theoretical frameworks of place and geography these stories come to life through an autoethnographic approach to establish that we can “unpack the invisible knapsack” in the arena of adult education.

Stories of race are most often told through the eyes of those being oppressed, instead of those with the power to oppress. As stated by Audrey Lorde (1984), society makes it “the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes” while the “oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions” (p. 114). Stories abound of this racial oppression which shapes the lives of African-Americans and other minorities in the United States; too often, however, we are unaware of how our own privilege as White Americans creates this oppression (Frankenburg, 1993; McIntosh, 1997). This is because to be part of the White majority is to be race neutral and exist in an unmarked category (Lipsitz, 2008), members of which rarely engage in conversations about race and privilege. Whiteness goes unnoticed because it is the standard against which everything else is measured (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). Recognizing our racial privileges is not an easy task.

Without an open dialogue on race, racism, oppression, and the role of White people, the “Othering” of non-White groups will continue through the conscious and subconscious actions of Whites. The first step in recognizing White privilege is to recognize the conscious and

subconscious actions of Whites. We must allow individuals to engage in this conversation at any stage of racial awareness enabling them to move forward and recognize privilege.

Our race, gender, and class define our positionality in society (Tisdell, Hanley and Taylor, 2000). “When learners and teachers enter classrooms they bring their positions in the hierarchies that order the world” with them (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998, p. 1). It is our responsibility to “negotiate these positionalities that exist in the classroom” (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998, p. 1). As future educators, we have the power to affect change, by facilitating the deconstruction of hegemony perpetuated by White privilege. From our experiences as both students and instructors in the classroom, we hope to use this exercise of recognizing our own White privilege to deconstruct and eventually eradicate its presence.

This paper examines privilege as conceptualized by three White females. Using autoethnography, we each describe an experience in which we became aware of our White privilege. We begin this paper by defining privilege. This section is followed by an explanation of autoethnography, the method used in this research. Then, we use the definitions of privilege to explore our own stories of recognizing White privilege through the central theoretical framework of geographical space. Through autoethnography, we examine three narratives—rural, urban, and international—to acknowledge that White privilege occurs and can be realized in many places. Following our personal narratives, we provide a critical analysis discussing three prominent themes common to each of our stories. Implications of recognizing privilege and its importance in higher education conclude this paper.

Defining White Privilege

Defining White privilege is complex and multi-faceted. White privilege surrounds issues of race, class, and gender. To better understand each, we must first define the notion of Whiteness. This then helps to distinguish between White privilege, the role of gender, and racism.

For many, “Whiteness is not a natural state deducible from physical characteristics, but rather a historical, cultural, and political construction that is the social site of power and privilege” (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998, p.2). Although, individuals from over fifty nationalities immigrated to the United States after 1930, Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) altered the immigration entry form to include only six categories including: White, African or African descent, Filipino, Indian, Eskimo and Aleutian, (Guglielmo and Lewis, 2003). Ultimately, this assigned “White” as the official race of any European descendent, stripping away their ethnicity. These examples helped “Whites” during increased waves of immigration to solidify hierarchical advantages based on their ethnicity or country of origin creating divisions among groups of European immigrants such as Italians, Polish, Irish, and Jewish. By 1965, most racial divisions among “Whites” had disappeared as they accepted the deculturation of becoming part of the “White” and privileged race in America (Guglielmo and Lewis, 2003).

The privileges of Whites exist in the United States because of “the political economy of internal colonialism” (Martinas, 1998). The deculturation and acceptance of Whiteness created a norm or standard by which everything and everyone else was judged. White people had

privileges in the United States that no other group had; Africans were enslaved, while Native Americans were run from their own land. U.S. policy has perpetuated this privilege since the beginning (i.e. The Indian Removal Act 1830; *Scott v. Sandford* 1857; Chinese Exclusion Act 1882; *Plessy v. Ferguson* 1896; Jim Crow and antimiscegenation laws) allowing White privilege to become institutionalized within American society. Because of this:

White privilege is defined as unearthed benefits, which in our society are determined by light skin color and the White race. Without exploration of White identity development, societal messages of the dominant culture, or agents, are reinforced; this indicates that Whiteness need not be studied because of its norm. If Whiteness is viewed as the norm, the implication is that any race other than White is perceived as abnormal. This perception of abnormal contributes to notions of racism (Taylor and Wolfe, 2008, p. 19).

More simply, White privilege is “a right, advantage, or immunity granted to or enjoyed by White persons beyond the common advantage of all others” (Clark, 2008, ¶ 1).

Expounding upon this definition McIntosh stated that White privilege is “an invisible package of unearned assets which [Whites] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [Whites were] “meant” to remain oblivious” (McIntosh, 1997, p. 291). This privilege is an invisible shield to the “privileged.” It occurs when the “characteristics of the privileged group define the societal norm” and members can “avoid objecting to oppression” (Wildman and Davis, p. 316).

Privilege is also perceived in terms of one's relationship to White men. As Hurtado (1996) notes, “Each oppressed group in the United States is positioned in a particular and distinct relationship to White men, and each form of subordination is shaped by this relational position” (p. 152). Because White women are responsible for the continuation of the White race by bearing future White males, it is this relationship to White men, which privileges us as women (Ferber, 1999; Hurtado, 1996). By perpetuating this dominant power over other groups, this relationship to White men also acts to oppress us as females.

Therefore, in a society in which White is the norm, all Whites have privilege whether or not they are overtly racist (Jensen, 1998). The connections between White privilege and racism can lead some to discomfort. Many Whites do recognize their privileges in society, but claim that they are not racist because the United States has moved past it. According to Jensen (2005), “Whatever we have done, it's not enough. It's not enough because a White-supremacist society still exists. The fact that racism still exists should cause us discomfort, every day” (p. 1). These conceptualizations of Whiteness, privilege and racism are used to uncover how each of us came to recognize our own sense of Whiteness.

Method: Using Autoethnography to Understand White Privilege

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method which uses personal experiences, observations, and reflections of self to gain a deeper understanding of human behavior. It is an “autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Using

autoethnography to identify the privileges we have experienced because of our skin color requires using our experiences “to garner insights into the larger culture or subculture of which [we] are a part” (Patton, 2002). The autoethnographic research we employed is presented as a type of self-awareness in which we use our personal encounters as the primary data source for our research (Patton, 2002).

This piece emerged out of a discussion around race and our varied experiences. We were trying to understand how our position in society was constructed by the color of our skin. For the three of us, talking about our racialized experiences was not enough. We began this autoethnographic research by first reading Peggy McIntosh’s (1997) seminal work that recognizes White privilege. This piece provided clarification for us in understanding the lifetime of White privilege we have and continue to experience.

Our subsequent conversations focused on how we recognized our own privileged experiences and relationships with racial minorities. We questioned the interracial dynamics of our youth, adult lives, and educational experiences. These conversations enabled us to distinguish that the color of our skin granted us privilege that non-Whites did not encounter. From our own narratives, we learned that identifying privilege is difficult because our experiences of privilege are those that we, as White females, have previously taken for granted. From these exchanges, we each wrote our own accounts of recognizing privilege.

Social Geography of Race: Our Personal Stories Recognizing Privilege

Not only does our race, class and gender define our positionality within society but so does the geographical location in which these social constructs are experienced. Higley (1995) contended that through an examination of privilege, power, and place we can understand the intersection between class, status, and geography. Haritgan (1997) notes that “the contours and scope of the connection between Whiteness and positions of privilege vary distinctly by region, continually being reconfigured and reasserted in relation to local pressures and challenges” (p. 183). Through our discussions of race and privilege, we came to realize that the places in which we grew up have influenced our perceptions of and experiences with race and privilege throughout our lives.

Ruth Frankenburg (1993) refers to this as the “social geography” of race - “the racial and ethnic mapping of environments in physical and social terms and enables also the beginning of an understanding of the conceptual mappings of self and other operating in White women’s lives” (p. 44). Although our stories of recognizing privilege did not always occur within the same geographic location that we were raised, it is that setting that inherently helped to shape our views of race and privilege. We came to realize that our stories of recognizing privilege could not be the same without an understanding of our lives within the geographic location for each. Each story emerged from childhood experiences with race, including how we relate those experiences to the places in which we grew up. We use our differences in geographic location as the basis of understanding our perceptions and actions related to race.

We are three White females—Sara of French decent, Sunny of Italian-German heritage and Kendra of Eastern European ancestry. Space and geography has defined the racial experiences of all three of us. Sara and Kendra grew up in similar neighboring small towns¹ and Sunny in a larger, nearby, metropolitan city. Our experiences in recognizing privilege occurred in three very different locations. Although Sara might not have immediately recognized her own White privilege, her recognition of “Whiteness” came full circle during her first year of college. Kendra’s recognition of privilege occurred on an airplane as an international traveler in the middle of college, and for Sunny, her understanding of privilege became real when she visited a very small town in Kentucky the summer before entering high school.

The following three stories are autoethnographic accounts of our different experiences recognizing the privilege of being White and female. Our stories reflect our personal experiences and reflections recognizing these privileges as we grew up from the 1980s-2000s.

Country Girl

It was difficult for me to recognize my privileges as a White female growing up in rural Ohio because demographically everyone in my town was “White.” My recognition of White privilege went undiscovered because of the homogeneity of the rural culture in which I lived. I learned however, that this seemingly familial atmosphere also had a reputation of hostility towards outsiders, especially “non-Whites.” Given my personal experiences in this community, I would not have recognized the privileges associated with being White and female without family discussions or the opportunity to view my hometown from the outside by moving away to college.

My awareness of White privilege began subconsciously through experiences within my community. The local high school I attended during the 1990s consisted of 600 students, who all shared the same skin color, White. Many trucks in the school parking displayed confederate flags in the back windows. As DeGuzman (2001) reminded us in *X-ing the Flag*, the modern symbolization of the confederate flag is a blatant reminder of bigotry and racism. She argued that the “X” of the flag denotes the White race over the Black race.

I did not realize how uncomfortable the confederate flags made me feel until after my government class watched the film *Roots*. I remember asking one of my classmates why he had a confederate flag in the back of his truck. He replied, “It is a free country, and my form of expression.” I kept thinking about what the confederate flag actually symbolized. I asked my classmate if his freedom of expression bothered him after watching the film *Roots*. He replied, “No, why would it?” Again, I got a sick sense in my stomach because I could not understand why someone who I considered a friend would place something in his truck that represented such hatred. I began to wonder why this did not bother other classmates and realized everyone I was surrounded by was White. Since everyone was White in my school, questioning or even caring how such acts of discrimination affected people of color was irrelevant. As McIntosh (1997) reminds us, we fail to recognize such instances as problematic because we are privileged by our White skin color.

¹ For the purposes of this paper, we define “small-town” as a population less than 12,000 residents.

When someone of another color did attend our school, it was immediately apparent. I vividly remember my sophomore year of high school, when a Black male transferred to my class. On his first day of geometry class, he was ridiculed by my classmates—several of my male classmates mumbled racial slurs such as “monkey,” “nigger” and “we are going to lynch you like they do in the South.” I remember watching the Black student sit quietly with his head down as my classmates called him names. This harassment continued for weeks until the student eventually transferred from our school. I did not understand why my classmates would demonstrate, or tolerate, such abhorrence. I asked a classmate why he called this student names, forcing him to transfer schools. He rolled his eyes in response, indicating that my question was an indignation at the status quo, or something that I, as a White female, would not understand. I asked again, and he responded, “He’s Black.” —as if it was acceptable to treat another person horribly because they were different. It saddened me that I went to a school with people who could not become friends with a person because of his/her skin color. Or, another assumption is that because of our predominantly White school, we were not expected and thus unable to critically examine our own White race and the implications of our actions. According to Taylor and Wolfe (2008), “White students are less likely to be aware of the privileges associated with Whiteness. The ability to be oblivious to one’s race is a luxury that White people have” (p. 19). I still did not understand my privilege, however I began to question the way others around me reacted to people of color and the norms by which all Others were measured. This prompted me to discuss my experiences at school with my parents and sisters.

When I asked my parents why my classmates illustrated such hatred, their answer was that many of my classmates, at a young age, were instilled with ideologies that coincide with White supremacy and sexist tendencies. This was the opposite of my experience. My father grew up in the Bronx where he was friends with many persons of diverse races and ethnicities and taught my sisters and I not to judge others by external appearances. When I was five years old, a family friend adopted a Black daughter, who I played with on a regular basis and never considered to be different from me. I realize now that I thought it was odd that there were not more Black kids in my town. But I did not question this until the mistreatment of my Black classmate in high school or until after learning about the Civil Rights Movement or watching *Roots* in my government class. I am not sure exactly when I started to think about issues of race, maybe it was after one of these things or it was the culmination of these experiences that made me curious.

The environment in which I lived protected me from having to wonder about such things, therefore much of my thoughts were subconscious and did not become conscious actions until I started college. I would question the mistreatments of non-Whites with my family at the dinner table. My father would always stress that our country was founded on equality, and that people continue to fight for this every day. He also stated that we do not realize racial inequalities because we lived in a town with a strong White demographic. But if we did face such circumstances in the future, we should confront the person in question. I began to wonder if I would actually “challenge” someone if something would happen at school. I would always ask questions, politely, as I did with the classmates that had the confederate flag or ridiculed my peer

in geometry. I kept thinking to myself that people in my hometown, deep down, were good at heart.

Clearly, there are differing perspectives on race in my hometown. The first, or in my opinion, negative point of view, would be those in my community that made racial remarks in my geometry class or hung the confederate flag in the back of their truck. The second point of view pertains to those that are “neutral”—culturally and politically neutral toward members of other races (Frankenberg, 1997). These race neutral persons were highly-educated individuals and leaders of our community; however, I began to realize that they did not challenge or question racial overtones in our community. For example, on one occasion at the local town restaurant, a local towns person questioned why a “nigger woman” was a newscaster on the nightly news, which was broadcast from a large city nearby. Instead of challenging this person, the “neutral” Whites remained silent, even myself. This occurs, according to McIntosh (1997) because this is what White privilege entails—persons do not recognize or question a White newscaster because this is the accepted norm in my hometown. Rather, people challenge persons of another skin color because it questions their power in society. In this case, the town drunk was questioning the capabilities of the Black newscaster because a Black newscaster challenged his sense of Whiteness or power. Without a minority present to offend, the racism was taken as harmless ranting from a town drunk

With these experiences—confederate flag wavers, racial slurs in class, and the town drunk, I was beginning to wonder if I lived in a town which privileged Whites. The environment in which I lived protected me from having to wonder about such things, therefore, many of my thoughts were subconscious and not apparent or obvious to me until I started college, and I would see the stark differences in attitudes when I returned home. My conceptualizations of two notions of “Whites” or White privilege began to click after my high school English teacher had our class read *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). This novel illustrated a small southern town that examined, what I had been experiencing—two perspectives of Whiteness. As I read this novel, I was able to recognize these differing perspectives as two realities. Prejudice and discrimination against individuals reminded me of the Black student in geometry, who embodied the character, Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Robinson, who, like my classmate, was on trial by his “White” peers for something that he could not change—the color of his skin. Atticus Finch, the hero of the story, personified that some individuals are “neutral” as he represented Tom Robinson in a murder case. Similarly, Atticus Finch the small town lawyer is much like many individuals in my community who do not view someone by the color of his or her skin, but by the overall character of the person as himself or herself.

To Kill a Mockingbird, and my own personal experiences, had a profound impact on my view of racism and its linkage with White privilege. It sounds cliché, but this novel opened my eyes to the mistreatment of persons of different races. I realized that when you live in a predominantly White community, you become insulated from “others” and become unaware of your own Whiteness. I began to realize that because of my skin color, society treated me as superior. I was not called names in geometry class, or questioned because of the color of my skin. This does not happen to Whites. Without the strong principles of racial equality espoused

by my family, or moving away to college, I am not sure I would have realized this privilege within my own community.

I believe that I did not truly grasp the “Whiteness” of my small town community or high school experiences until I moved away to attend college. In 1999, I moved one hundred miles from home to embark on a new chapter in my life—to get a four year college degree. I was excited to be in an urban and diversified environment, something that I had never encountered. My college was located in a suburb of Columbus, Ohio, much bigger than my small hometown. The college town had a metropolitan feel, but after my first day of attending classes, and eating in the cafeteria, I wondered again why the student body only had a handful of minority students. I questioned once again if I was in an insular situation, surrounded by Whiteness. The answers to this question came full circle after taking a freshmen seminar course my first quarter at college. In this course, I learned through reading W.E.B. DuBois and written assignments that I had been living a White and privileged life. The professor challenged us to read works written by civil rights leaders and to place ourselves, as Whites, in other people’s shoes. Because of courses like this one, I began to make sense of my experiences in rural Ohio and why they occurred. My discussions with my family, my high school English teacher, and race neutrals in my community guided me, but real recognition of White privilege began to come full circle with my coursework in college. I finally began to confront my experiences from high school, discussing my experiences, openly in class. My professor ultimately taught my classmates and I that often times “White” students have more experiences than others because of rural hometowns like mine. I began to understand that society has, and continues to be dominated by “Whiteness” which affords White opportunities over others. This bothered me, but I continued to become involved in activities that moved me from outside of my comfort or “White” zone by volunteering in after school programs, mentoring inner city children. I know that this is not much, but I believe that I tried and continue to challenge my Whiteness, something that many persons do not or never will do in my hometown.

City Slicker

As a child, I grew up in a racially and culturally diverse climate. My upbringing exposed me to the dichotomous relationships of black and White, poor and middle class, urban and suburban. As a teenager I understood that this was an opportunity, a privilege afforded to me by my parents to experience multiple environments and to open the door to many types of people and experiences.

In *Daughters of Suburbia*, Kenny (2000) examined the silenced culture of privilege lived by White middle-school girls growing up in a Rhode Island suburb. She examines the “normative Whiteness” and intricacies of a culture left unexamined and silenced into a belief of non-existence. Growing up, uncomfortable issues of race, culture, and socio-economic class were never silenced, instead I was encouraged to challenge the status quo. My parents and I discussed everything—no topic was neutral - even the experience of privilege at the expense of others’ oppression was never left untouched. I did not grow up in the environment examined by Kenny (2000), nor did I experience the normative childhood of a White female where potentially controversial issues are left undiscovered. However, this certainly does not mean that my

privileges were erased. Instead, it means that I became aware of my White privilege much earlier than many others.

Through my experiences and observations of friends and acquaintances living in the suburbs I learned to dislike the silent code or neutrality of Whiteness and culture of suburbia (Kenny, 2000). The silent code of suburbia represents the acceptance of things as they are, the unconscious or conscious desire for all things to remain the same and the unwillingness to experience things outside of the “box.” There was no questioning of what was – there was no critical reflection to challenge one another about the rights and wrongs experienced by others everyday. Things were just accepted as they were. This environment seemed so plain and homogenous, and at times unwelcoming—a world I could never relate to. I realized that my White friends growing up in the suburbs did not have the same perceptions of race as I did, often carrying the belief that race was not an issue which affected them. Kenny (2000) calls this the “culture of avoidance” or what Whites “have been taught not to notice” (p. 17). Growing up I recognized the prejudices towards African-Americans, an injustice that made me feel uncomfortable and, later, one that made me a target for attention in my all-White, catholic high school. I was not brought up in a “culture of avoidance” but instead I was taught not only to notice, but to stand up.

For me, recognition of privilege came as a kind of “Ah-ha” moment, in which I realized in an instant that I had certain abilities and privileges at my fingertips (i.e. my actions, thoughts and reactions were not blamed on my race), which previously went unnoticed. However, for others, recognizing “White privilege” might occur over a period of time. It could occur anywhere, at any time and any age. Or for many, it might never occur. My moment occurred when I was fourteen and on my first family vacation as part of an interracial family, with my mother and stepfather, who is African-American. At fourteen, I understood something to be very wrong with the circumstances given that I, a fourteen-year-old female, had more power and was provided more respect than my adult African-American step-father simply because of the color of my skin.

Every July we attend our family reunion in Kentucky on my step-father’s side. On the way, my mother explained that I could not interact with my stepfather as I usually would. This meant, I should not speak to him unless I was spoken to, nor should we tease or roughhouse. I had to be very conscious and aware of the tone of my voice as well as the language I used when speaking to my stepfather, and I most certainly was not to look at him funny or talk back even if I was just joking. My mother explained to me that the folks in this town would not be receptive to our interracial family and that even though I was the child and my stepfather the adult, I would always be right—even when I was wrong—because I was White. I had to be careful because members of the community, especially White men, might perceive my actions towards my stepfather as defensive and think that my mother and I were being threatened, leading them to potentially harm my stepfather.

I was shocked to say the least—how could anyone perceive playful, loving interactions between a father and daughter as criminal, simply because one was Black and the other White? I felt very uncomfortable and awkward as I saw confederate flags all over town and people stared

at us while we ate at a local restaurant. In general I felt unsafe and very vulnerable and wondered if this is how my step-father felt under normal circumstances on a daily basis. Because of these experiences, I understood the possibilities of what could evolve if I acted towards my stepfather the way I would at home. I realized that our family was not accepted in these small rural parts of Kentucky as they were in Columbus. I also realized that because I was White, I was in control. I had the power to decide our fate that day. And that power was provided by the color of my skin, not my gender, my age or my actions. In that moment I understood White privilege.

In Peggy McIntosh's (1997) work, she "unpacks [an] invisible knapsack of White privilege" to list and understand the "conditions of daily experience that [she] once took for granted, as neutral, normal, and universally available to everybody" (295). The ability to interact with my stepfather in a familiar and loving manner was an experience of everyday life that I had taken for granted. It was also through this experience that I decided to make a conscious effort not to back down to the prejudices and inequities often forced upon us in society. Attending a nearly all-White, Catholic high school, in which one of the three African American members of my class was threatened and forced to leave by White male members of my class, it seemed that this position was challenged almost daily.

Although the education I received in high school was of the highest quality, I lost the diversity, which I so much appreciated as part of my education in elementary and middle school. It was also these four years that made me believe that growing up in suburbia was more disadvantageous to individuals than it was beneficial. It did more to promote ones prejudices and inability to speak of the "unspoken" or others races and cultures, than it ever did to protect. Suburbia in general is known to structurally and economically keep some people in and others out (Kenny, 2000), this was the same structural system I experienced in high school. I was often ridiculed and harassed for being part of an interracial family, frequently being called a "whigger" or "nigger lover" and also for living in a less economically advantaged area of town, or as many of my classmates saw it, a "Black" area of town. Harassment because of my relationship with African-Americans occurred to the point where my stepfather offered to stay home from parent-teacher conferences, hoping it would help me get along better in school if he were not "seen". It was the color of my skin, which afforded me the privilege of choosing which parents I wanted to be seen with, and which I did not. I could choose to be "safe" and hide behind these privileges or I could choose to challenge them. These experiences impacted me greatly, as I continued to think about such things as I got older and became curious about race relations in America. I was then, and still am today, committed to challenging those experiences and opportunities afforded to me because of the color of my skin.

The Traveler

Growing up in small-town Ohio, near the same area of country girl, I was socially privileged in my community, which I realized soon after getting my driver's license. When my dad came home after work one day, he pulled me aside and told me that I needed to watch my speed on a specific nearby street, because he heard I'd been driving too fast. My father was the local public defender, and his position afforded me some recognition and advantages that many people didn't have. However, I never thought that the color of my skin was something that could

grant me such advantages. While my hometown was predominantly White, race was never an issue, or at least not one of which I was aware. This could be because my best friend, who I've known since the age of two, is a Black female who had been adopted by a White couple, and I was close friends with a large Vietnamese family who had several children close to my age. My multi-racial group of friends was not prone to racist comments, and my close friendships with our few minority students may have shielded me from any snubs that may have occurred.

At Ohio State, where I went to college, my peers must have composed a wider and more realistic representation of diversity, but the implications were lost on me. Immediately after graduating from college, I helped my best friend move to Los Angeles. Finding round-trip tickets to Japan for \$400, I beseeched her and her boyfriend to take a mid-move trip with me. Not up to the challenge, they remained in LA while I went to Japan alone - my first experience in a non-White country. On the plane, I met some Japanese students, who helped me into the country when the customs officer hesitated to admit me—not wanting to be responsible should something happen to me because I was White..

Riding on the Nambuko line with uniformed schoolchildren, I suddenly realized that I was White. Nothing seemed out of place to me, everyone else looked the same. But as I towered above them, my great paleness was a beacon for their stares. I had never been that different before. All of my international travel prior to this had been in Europe, where the vast majority is also White. The furthest I'd been from normal was the Czech Republic, which varied mostly because of the trauma of its political history. The epiphany was nothing less than shattering. In that moment I realized that the feeling of "difference" I experienced in Japan was the feeling of "normativeness" I experienced at home in the United States, although at home it went unnoticed because there it was I that everyone else was measured against. It was kind of an awkward realization of the privileges I experienced because of being White.

Despite the lingual and cultural differences, I was never treated poorly. Although, I felt like an outsider because for the first time I was a minority, everyone I encountered was very polite, and helped me as much as possible as I worked through the coded maps and cryptic menus. However, I wondered how this would have changed had my skin color been different. My Whiteness was not just a beacon for stares, but also apparently a beacon for other White people. The three or four I encountered during the trip immediately approached me with an almost frenzied look in their eyes—as if the color of our skin gave us anything in common.

Returning to the United States, our plane was diverted to San Francisco. Upon landing, we were greeted by a heavily armed militia and taken to a secluded room at the far end of the airport. Only later did we find out that these unusual measures were because of terrorist attacks that had occurred that morning on the east coast. Being the last plane permitted to land in the United States on September 11, 2001, we were the subjects of much media attention. Despite the 95% Asian population on the plane, I was the person of whom interviews were requested. Despite the fact that we had all had the same experience (mine perhaps less traumatic since I had a clear understanding that this was not the norm), because I was White, because I was assumed to be American because of my skin color, I was the one who was asked to speak for our group.

McIntosh (1997) noted that as a White person, she is never asked to speak on behalf of her race. By this, she means, for example, when one African-American is in a group, that person is often asked to speak on his or her experience as if it is the collective experience of all African-Americans. A White person, contrarily, rarely is asked to speak on behalf of the collective of White people, because it is assumed that the White experience is the norm, and is experienced by all equally. This was the opposite of my experience, where I was asked to comment on an experience on behalf of White people, on behalf of Americans during this conflicting time, and as a representative of the feelings of all the people on my plane—simply because I was White.

The Country Girl, City Slicker and Traveler: Common Themes

Through discussions about race and our positionality in society (Tisdell, Hanley and Taylor, 2000), we each critically reflected on our experiences recognizing White privilege. Although, our educational experiences may have ultimately framed our understanding of privilege it did not provide us training in seeing ourselves as oppressors. Instead, as a challenge to the status quo, it was understanding and describing our own personal stories about White privilege that enabled us to realize our advantages in society. From our narratives, three themes emerged including: a) geographical location, b) values of family and friends, and c) stage of racial awareness.

Our stories are tied together through the theoretical framework of place and geographical space. Recognition of White privilege is illustrated in our stories as geographically dissimilar. Meaning that wherever we are—in a rural community, the city, or another country we experience privilege because we are White. Sara's recognition of White privilege unfolded in a small rural community in Ohio. Sunny's reconciliation of White privilege did not occur until traveling to another nearby state. Kendra grew up in a nearby county to that of Sara, but did not grasp her sense of Whiteness until traveling internationally.

Although our three stories reveal differing perspectives which emerged out of our geographical location, recognizing and understanding White privilege was revealed by the attitudes and values of our families which did not tolerate acts of racism or prejudice towards non-Whites. Discussions with our parents or friends led us all to question the motives and hatred exhibited by those around us. For example, Sara endured high school experiences of classmates expressing hatred toward Blacks. She had discussions with her parents to understand that it was not okay to treat a person differently because of their skin color. Sunny's experiences with an interracial family and open communication revealed her White privilege early on, while Kendra's experiences growing up with multi-racial friends helped to clarify the reality of her White privilege while in college.

Part of working together to illustrate how we each came to recognize our White privilege was conceptualizing that we each have a different understanding of White privilege. Our recognition of this privilege occurred during different stages in our lives. Sunny recognized privilege as a young teenager. In an instant, she realized the privileges granted to her because she was White as opposed to her Black step-father. On the other hand, Sara's recognition of White privilege continues to occur over her lifetime. Being isolated from people of color the majority of

her life, it has been difficult to fully understand how the color of her skin positively affected her while negatively affecting others. Kendra's recognition was similar to Sunny's "ah ha" moment but occurred in her twenties and had nothing to do with the dichotomous Black-White relationship of race in the United States, but instead involved individuals of Asian heritage. Because we are so used to not seeing Whites as racialized, it is difficult to see ourselves as the standard in a system of racialized norms. We are the norm which every other group is compared to, therefore when it comes time to compare ourselves to others in order to recognize the injustices perpetuated by this norm, it becomes very difficult to see.

Implications for Adult and Higher Education

Just as other authors have described Whiteness to be an unmarked category, or an unnoticeable norm, Shore (2001) stated that Whiteness is "positioned unquestioningly as the invisible norm, a norm that appears to have no tangible effects on pedagogy" (p. 43). In our own classrooms, whether they are traditional classrooms, state agencies, think-tanks, or courtrooms, and in the classrooms of others, we hope to deconstruct the hegemony created by White privilege. "Hegemonic practices and structures normalize and, indeed, reify the experiences of some members of society, while negating the realities of others" (Sissel & Sheared 2001, p. 4). To do this we must challenge the status quo, promote the inclusiveness of all learners, and act to legitimate and not "Other" the experiences of non-White learners. White privilege is important to discuss within the context of adult education because without discussion it cannot be recognized, deconstructed, or understood. Without discussion, its prevalence and domination in our classrooms will continue and the voices of "Others" will continue to go unheard. Most often we think that the extent of deconstructing these hegemonic educational practices is defined by including the voices of "Others", by discussing the racialization of the Other, yet we never stop to think about our own racial formation (Shore, 2001) and its importance in establishing and maintaining the status quo. This practice "normalizes[s] Whiteness and particularize[s] Otherness" (Shore, 2001, p. 47). If we do not take the time to understand our White privilege and how its role dominates the institution of education we can never really be inclusive of all experiences. In the classroom, we are still taught from the White perspective as the norm, and all other perspectives as derivations. In a recent conversation, an acquaintance said "I learned history this way (the textbook, status-quo, White version). I didn't even know there was a Black version of history." It is our job to work with our students to deconstruct this norm and to challenge its existence in the classroom.

As three White, emerging female scholars we hope to teach in a way that seeks to deconstruct the status quo, instead of perpetuating it and our own privileges. By sharing our own stories in recognizing White privilege, we understand that it is no easy feat and it is not meant to be. As White females, we have never been asked to take responsibility or understand our own racialization as individuals of color are often asked to do. In our "classrooms," we want all of our students to engage in their own critical reflections regarding their positionality in society as constructed by race, class and gender. In order to do so, we must understand how our own positionality will affect how we teach in the classroom. We begin this task by sharing our stories and setting the example, hopefully opening doors.

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