

White privilege essay



My Experience with White Privilege October 14, 2008 How America came about is fascinating, and learning about immigration, rights, laws, and racism makes learning more beneficial. It helps you to understand why we, as a nation, are the way we are today, and why we will continue to be stuck in our ways. According to James Barrett and David Roediger, “ The Story of Americanization is vital and compelling, but it took place in a nation also obsessed by race...the process of “ becoming white” and “ becoming American” were connected at every turn (36). One of the most controversial topics is white privilege and discrimination.

Segregation within school systems has been a dominant problem in the past and will always continue to be. Being privileged is a something that individuals should be conscious of due to their past and understand that it is a privilege to be white rather than to be discriminated against. Becoming conscious of one’s own white privilege is the first step to understand the deeper meaning of racism and discrimination. My intentions of writing this paper were to describe a situation in which I was conscious of my own white privilege. White privilege was always on my side until high school where I felt as though I was discriminated against as being a petite, white girl, from upper-class Allendale leaving me to be seen as an easy target. While at my locker one day during lunch, I was approached by two of the black students (one male and one female) and a Latino girl, and they tried to convince me something hurtful was written about me in the bathroom.

Being that I am not the type to care, get involved, or respond, I turned to walk away. The Latino girl proceeded to grab my hair causing me to turn and face her and she punched me square in the face. After several minutes of

back and forth wrestling and punches, the fight was broken up by my teachers. It turns out that there was nothing written about me, they were just trying to get me into the bathroom to fight me, opposed to the hallway which is out in the open. All three of the students that were there were taken to the principal's office immediately and suspended for two days whereas I got off free and I was allowed to go back to my day.

During the duration of the day, one of the African American men left the principal's office in rage and had a mission to destroy all my belongings in my locker. The boy pried open my locked locker and poured a bottle of soda all over my books, notebooks and belongings. After I reported this to our principal, he held the three students involved in the fight until one person came clean about who had been at fault for ruining my locker. It turned out, that no one admitted to it, and they were all suspended even longer than originally for not fessing up. The following week, none of the three students attended my high school anymore and I was told by my principal that they left to attend other high schools in surrounding towns.

After this incident, I have never come into contact with any of them ever again. However, several of my male friends found out what happened that day and wanted nothing but to get revenge and retaliate against them and show them who runs the high school, being that whites are the majority. I became very conscious of my white privilege growing up in a one-square mile suburban town of Allendale, New Jersey. My entire educational career through eighth grade consisted of white, middle-to-upper-class Americans.

All the people were similar, with the same morals, values and beliefs. Everyone dressed similar and drove similar cars, partook in the same activities and hung out in specific niches. At this point in my life, I could say I could correlate my life to Peggy McIntosh's article when she describes the matrix of white privilege; There was one main piece of cultural turf; it was my own turf, and I was among those who could the turf. I could measure up to the cultural standards and take advantage of the many options I saw around me to make what the culture would call a success of my life...I could think of myself as "belong" in major ways, and of making social systems work for me. I could...be oblivious to anything outside of the dominant cultural forms (295). It wasn't until high school where I thought I would potentially move out of my small town bubble.

My high school is regional; students from Allendale, along with the surrounding towns of Ho-Ho-Kus, Upper Saddle River and half of Saddle River attended. Being that I came from such a white school system, the thought of going onto high school and being surrounded by students of other races and ethnicities is something that never crossed my mind. I was never taught about the disadvantages of being white, but rather I learned about blacks and their disadvantages of dealing with racism. Over the years, little was taught about racism and what it stood for, instead we were just told that this is what happened to people when they were of different races and ethnicities back in the day.

The article by Peggy McIntosh describes how whites are taught to think of blacks; "As a white person, I realized I had never been taught about racism as something which put others at a disadvantage, but had been taught not

to see one of its corollary aspects, white privilege , which puts me at an advantage”(291). Being white was never something that I had to deal with in or outside of school, or even within my community. I wasn’t necessarily shocked to walk into high school my first day to find only a select few of Latinos and African Americans. However, these were things that I never thought about or even had to think about.

The few Latinos and African Americans came from Upper Saddle River and Saddle River. I was never stereotypical of these groups of people until I was surrounded with people from towns that had engaged with these people all the way up through high school. The Latinos in my school all stuck together, as well as the three African Americans that attended my high school. I feel as though this particular situation involved me having the white privilege advantage and it seems as though my white privilege helped to get me out of trouble. I should have gotten in trouble for “ self defense” and throwing punches back, but I feel as though since I had never caused problems before, and they had been the center of most of the problems I was let go with no punishment.

The students that got in trouble, were seen as troublesome students because of their past, where I had a clean record with no reason to suspect I was the start of the brawl. Considering my school is mostly made up of white students and entirely white faculty, when the three students got in trouble, it was probably a stereotypical decision based on non-whites. Blacks have always endured pain and agony as, “...victims of discrimination, segregation, and violence, blacks in the North encountered a powerful cluster of negative

racial images. These stereotypes contributed to the conditions of racial degradation and poverty, which, in turn, reinforced prejudice” (Takaki 107).

This excerpt further explains that stereotypes stick and the negative racial images will forever be a part of the everyday lives of blacks. The primary reason of why the situation occurred, I believe dates back to sundown towns. Beginning in about 1890 and continuing until 1968, white Americans established thousands of towns across the United States for whites only. A ‘sundown town’ is any organized influence that, for decades, was all-white on purpose. Many towns drove out their black populations, and then posted sundown signs.

Other towns passed ordinances barring African-Americans after dark or prohibiting them from owning or renting property. Evelyn Nakano Glenn helps to further explain the regulations, “ White controlled municipalities passed ordinances creating racial zones. When these laws were found to be unconstitutional, whites formed neighborhood associations and turned to “ private” arrangements such as economic boycotts, violence, and restrictive covenants. These restrictions deprived blacks of a central element of liberal citizenship, namely property rights” (37-38). This is proof that the African-American populations had no choice but to leave because they weren’t welcome.

No one would support their businesses or wanted anything to do with them; they were literally driven out of these towns and wouldn’t stand a chance if they stayed. Being that the town of Allendale where I grew up was a sundown town, which is the most obvious explanation as to why I grew up

surrounded by all whites. Moving onto high school, the other regional towns of Ho-Ho-Kus and Upper Saddle River were sundown towns as well. This plays a huge role in the situation at my high school because people of color and different races are focused on more and white students carry all the dominant privilege. If I had been a different race I think the entire situation would have never occurred because I would probably be a person that was known for affiliating with them.

If I had been black, I would have probably felt like I should stick with the other three black students in the high school. The situation would have been the same if I were Latino or another race. Segregation still takes place in America and being one of only a few black families within your community will be a repetitive cycle for black families looking to move to our dominantly white community. According to Douglas Massey; “ When avenues of spatial assimilation are systematically blocked by prejudice, and discrimination, however, residential segmentation increases and persists over time.

New Minorities arrive in the city and settle within enclaves, but their subsequent spatial mobility is stymied, and ethnic concentrations increase... whereupon group members are forced to adjacent areas, thus expanding the boundaries of the enclave” (225). I feel as though since my region of New Jersey is predominantly white, what would things change now? Why would blacks and ethnic families feel inclined to move to a neighborhood where they stand out? Especially for African-American families, my town along with the surrounding towns do not sell African-American hair products in any of my supermarkets or pharmacies nor are there salons where African-American women can go to get their hair braided. My community has

adjusted to the white population and being that my town is so small, I feel as though it would take dramatic lengths to change the way our community functions. Being white, I feel as though I benefited from the whole situation because I did not get in trouble for punching the girl back, and I did not get suspended. I was allowed to return to my day at school as though nothing happened while they were kept in the front office until school was let out and were suspended for the rest of the week (2 days). This experience made me think about my race in a different way because I had never encountered issues with non-white people, because I was never around them.

Coming from a primarily white school, white students stand to make white privilege stick out like a sore thumb. It helped me to understand that white people dominated my school population and that this would have never been an issue if the school had always been made up of a majority of other races and ethnicities. It is as if the select few minorities felt as though they needed to stand up for themselves and prove that just because there are so few of them they can still “run” the school. The three students involved, I feel, chose to leave due to feeling like they were discriminated against and treated differently than other students. They could have felt mistreated or felt that being out numbered was a disadvantage for them.

Moving to surrounding schools definitely made them feel like they belonged better because I know there were mixed groups of people outside of our high school district. Being that ninety-nine percent of my school was white could have made the few students feel intimidated and make the white students angrier and feel the need to gang up on them after this incident, almost to prove their white privilege. This incident correlates to issues of citizenship

and my ability to participate as a full and equal member of American society because I suffered no consequences from the incident except for a bloody nose. A bloody nose is a temporarily occurrence but because of what happened, it hasn't affected me being a full and equal member in the American society.

It has however, affected the minority students at my high school, and drove them away. As described by Evelyn Glenn, “ At its most general level, citizenship refers to full membership in the community in which one lives. Membership in turn implies certain...reciprocal duties toward the community (37). ” These black students are citizens but they do not live in a community with other African-Americans reside.

They can be still be involved in the community but the families as a whole might not be as eager to get involved as they are outnumbered and may feel their voices may not be heard or make a difference. There are a few potential long term consequences of white privilege for myself that will be with me as long as I live. Being that Quinnipiac University is not very diverse, but more diverse than my high school, it was difficult to get used to seeing people of color and different ethnicities every day. I do not believe growing up in an all white community has been beneficial to me, and I wish I was more natural around people of different races and ethnicities. It is unrealistic to say that I will never have to deal with this, but in the real world, and when finding a job, you will be presented with a variety of people that may even become more of friends rather than co-workers.

Someone's accent or skin color does not determine what kind of person they are, it is their personality that makes them who they are. I also believe in regards to the incident, if I had been at fault, and was suspended for my actions of self defense, I would have not been able to attend a prestigious school such as Quinnipiac. When applying for colleges, most applications ask if you have ever been suspended, such as the Quinnipiac application which asks if you have ever been suspended or missed significant time from school. I would have then had to explain the situation and how I was suspended for self defense. If colleges see that you are a troubled student, and have a record for misbehaving, they will not accept you to their school.

Community colleges of lower rankings will be more willing to accept a student with a past, rather than a private school like Quinnipiac University. Discrimination and segregation still exist today. The past makes up the present so learning about what people of all races and ethnicities went through in history is important as a citizen of the United States. Everyone, in some way, or somehow, has dealt with discrimination whether it is you or friends and family. While on the other hand, it is imperative to pay attention to your privileges and understand what it means to be American.

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