

WHITE WITHOUT PRIVILEGE

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This morning, I went to the jinja near my office to pay my respects to the kami. There happened to be a Japanese woman paying her respects at the same time, and as I stepped back to leave, she turned towards me and murmured (in Japanese) “Wonderful!”.

I assume that she was referring to the way I had followed the correct etiquette. It is, after all, *extremely* unlikely that she was referring to my appearance. On the other hand, would she have felt the need to say anything had I not appeared white? I rather doubt it.

That doubt is the defining experience of not having white privilege.

“White Privilege” is a term used to describe the unearned entitlement of white people. It seems to have been coined by Peggy McIntosh in a paper entitled “White Privilege and Male Privilege” in 1988, and an excerpt from that paper, called “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” is widely available online. This idea has recently become popular in the phrase “check your privilege”.

White people in the UK clearly have white privilege; white people in Japan do not. First, I want to defend the second half of that assertion. Then I want to discuss some of the implications I have drawn from my personal experience of having white privilege, and then not having it.

McIntosh’s article gives a convenient list of 50 privileges that come with being white. Many of them are not available to white people in Japan. For example, the first one is “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of

the time.”, which is impossible for white people here. Similarly, number 6 is “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.” Er, no. Or 21: “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.” I’ve been explicitly asked to do that; it is part of the job description of the Kawasaki City Representative Assembly for Foreign Residents. Or 38: “I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my race would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.” No. And, of course, number 50: “I will feel welcomed and “normal” in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.” Welcome, possibly. Normal, definitely not.

More generally, “white privilege” is often described as the privilege of having your race not matter. People do not see your race, they just see a person. That is emphatically not the case in Japan; I am a white person first, and whatever else I may be after people have got to know me a bit.

Unless everyone describing “white privilege” online has the concept completely wrong (and they don’t), I lost my white privilege when I came to Japan.

What lessons do I draw from this experience?

First, it is very hard to notice white privilege if you have it, because there is nothing to notice. That is the point. Your race just doesn’t come up.

Second, *all* white people in the USA have white privilege. It doesn’t matter how poor you are, or how much you suffer

discrimination in other ways, your white skin still means that you have white privilege.

Consider President Obama. He clearly has vastly more privilege than the overwhelming majority of white US residents. He is the *president*. But they have white privilege and he doesn't. No-one asked whether people were opposed to Dubya because of his race; people do ask that about Obama. (It is worth noting that, if I became prime minister of Japan, people would wonder about the influence of my race. See also point 38, above.) "White privilege" may not have been the best name for the issue, because the connotations of "privilege" are a bit more positive than what it actually gets you.

Third, however, white privilege really is a benefit. It is wearing and stressful to stand out all the time, to constantly be wondering whether people are judging you on your race, to constantly have to wonder whether your race will cause a problem.

That is even true when you do not really face any racism. I don't think that there is a significant amount of racism directed against white people in Japan. I've encountered almost no personal racism, and there are too few white people for systemic racism to be anything more than an unintended side effect of other policies. Nevertheless, the lack of "yellow privilege" is a problem.

There are two points arising from this.

First, I think the loss of white privilege is what makes some white residents of Japan think that there is a lot of racism directed against white people here. It's uncomfortable, and it involves things that are called racism back home in the USA.

Second, I don't think it is racism even in the USA. It is entirely understandable that people of colour would think that it was,

because it is impossible, in their experience, to separate it from the racism that they do experience. However, the issues are separable, and white people in Japan get the loss of white privilege without the racism. I think the people who see this as racism are mistaken, albeit for understandable reasons.

That has a couple of practical consequences.

I think that members of minorities need to suck this up and deal with it. If you are a visible minority, you *will* stand out, you won't find members of your race around all the time, and people will take actions and ask questions based on your race. That isn't racist. It's just a fact of your situation. If you can't cope with it, move somewhere where you are not a visible minority. If you decide that moving is harder than dealing with it, that is an important discovery. Thinking of it as racism is a mistake, because it just increases your hostility to the society you live in, for no good reason.

What's more, I don't think it can be changed. I am never going to fade into the background into Japan. It doesn't matter how accepting of white people the Japanese are, or how much they treat me just like a Japanese person. I will always look different, and thus be memorable, and inspire questions and comments that would not be inspired by someone who looked "normal".

The other side of the coin is that it is stressful, and it is pleasant to deal with people who don't seem to take your race to be a defining issue, and don't say anything to draw attention to it.

So, if you're a white American, you're quite right that it isn't racist to ask someone where they came from, or how they got into needlepoint, or gaming, or whatever. On the other hand, if one of the

reasons you are interested is because you don't see many non-white people in that context, it is *considerate* to not ask, at least not at first. If you've been sharing a hobby with someone for a while, it's natural to swap stories of how you got into it. It's not a natural question the first time you meet, for someone you'd expect to be in the hobby. (It is notable that the only white Shinto priest in Japan says that he got into Shinto because he thought the shoes were cool. To me, that sounds like the response of someone who has been asked that question too many times.)

It's important to remember the difference in perspective. There are very few white people with a deep interest in and knowledge of Shinto. A Shinto priest could easily go his entire life without meeting one, so of course I'm interesting, and priests I meet tend to be curious about why I'm involved in Shinto. On the other hand, I am always a white person with a deep interest in and knowledge of Shinto when I meet a Shinto priest, so I get it almost every time. It's like making a joke about someone's name — even if it is funny, they have heard it lots of times already. (Unless they only changed their name a few minutes earlier and have been in your

company ever since, so you know you're the first person to do it.)

Let's summarise.

- White privilege is a real thing, and not having it is a genuine source of stress and discomfort.
- White people do not necessarily have white privilege; it depends on their society.
- If some white people have white privilege in a particular society, they all do.
- The discomfort resulting from not having white privilege is not the result of racism.
- Nevertheless, a lot of groups do suffer both racism and the lack of white privilege.
- White people in Japan do not have white privilege, but neither do they suffer from racism.
- It is not *racist* to do the things that cause stress and discomfort to people without white privilege.
- It is, however, *considerate* to avoid doing them.

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