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Racism Feeds on Embedded Privilege

By V. Elaine Gross

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Many Americans would like to believe that racism is behind us. After all, amendments to the Constitution abolished slavery, asserted the right of all citizens to vote, and abolished poll taxes to ensure that the right to vote was not undermined through deviousness and technicalities. The civil rights acts in the 1960s deemed it illegal for blacks to be discriminated against in employment, government programs, public accommodations and housing.

But racism has not disappeared from American life. It remains embedded in government and other public and private institutions central to our society, in sometimes hard-to-see systems that disadvantage blacks and confer privilege on whites.

While overt racism in the public arena became illegal in the 1960s, and during the past 38 years many efforts have been undertaken by both whites and blacks to "wipe out" the "blot" of racism, analysis of the 2000 Census has shown that New York is the fourth most segregated area for blacks in the country and that Long Island is the most segregated suburban area in the United States.

Blacks of all incomes live in a few communities that are predominately African-American and disproportionately low income. Some mortgage lenders still offer blacks and whites different mortgage products based on their race, and a black child can almost be guaranteed an inferior public school education because of discriminatory housing patterns, in conjunction with exclusionary school districting patterns and inequitable school-funding schemes.

Where did we go wrong? Central to an honest assessment of this troubling dilemma is an understanding of white privilege.

Racism in the United States, institutionalized some 383 years ago with the institution of slavery, has disadvantaged African Americans through institutional structures, policies and practices. That same system of institutional racism has afforded whites an array of social, political and economic advantages as a group, simply because they are white.

In her published writings, contemporary white writer Peggy McIntosh of the Center for Research on Women at Wellesley College, describes these advantages as a reflection of white privilege. She had been taught that racism 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."

McIntosh goes on to say, "I have come to see white privilege as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was 'meant' to remain oblivious." Her list of 26

unearned assets includes the ability to rent or purchase housing in any area that she can afford, going shopping without fear of being followed by employees of the store, and purchasing items with cash or credit, knowing that her skin color will not work against the appearance of financial reliability.

Overt racism is intentional and easily recognized and understood, whether it involves individual acts of meanness or institutional practices that isolate blacks or discriminate against blacks. But a more sophisticated understanding of the full implications of racism must include an acknowledgment of this corollary aspect, with its unseen and unintended dimensions that especially help to perpetuate institutional racism.

How does white privilege work? First, it denies the implications of our history of institutional racism. It supports the rationalization that blacks and whites really have a level playing field and that differences between blacks and whites are not due to racism but are because of blacks' inferiority or due to happenstance.

Second, it hampers the "undoing" of institutional racism because it fosters the illusion that the privileges that whites enjoy are entitlements based on merit and should be fiercely guarded. Sure, some whites may think, I want improved schools for blacks, but that isn't going to have any impact on my school district, is it? OK, help blacks have better housing options, but that doesn't mean they have to live in my community, does it? Better economic opportunities for blacks seems fair, but I can still hire my staff through a word-of-mouth system among a circle of my (white) colleagues, right?

Some whites don't want to acknowledge white privilege, or at least they don't want to talk about it. But undoing institutional racism requires us to examine all systems that disadvantage blacks and, now, many other people of color, and to make the necessary corrections, even if it means changes for whites. Ultimately, we will accept this challenge because the very future of our region and, indeed, of the entire country depends on erasing racism.

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