

Prejudice and Discrimination

Asa Coats

January 24, 2006

At some point in our lives, we all feel the sting of discrimination. Whatever our race, our ethnicity, our gender or sexual orientation, there is someone who will discriminate against us; in fact, there is probably someone who *has* discriminated against us already. Thus it is obvious that prejudice is *not* dead. Though I by no means intend to belittle or altogether ignore the prejudice and discrimination faced by a member of the so-called majority for not fitting all of the unattainable standards prescribed by society, it should be equally obvious that a member of a minority will face more discrimination and prejudice than a member of a majority.

Our time is a time in which those who had formerly been oppressed stand up and start making changes. For the members of the majority, this is often uncomfortable. Many feel the sting of discrimination when they look across the magazine rack at a store and see magazines like *Bust* or *Jane, XY* or *The Advocate*, *Jet* or *Ebony*. Others turn on the TV and see a music awards show geared specifically towards black artists. Still others may be looking at scholarships for college and see scholarships for women only. However, while these are certainly tastes of discrimination, members of a majority face these things rarely enough that they can forget about them easily in between the occurrences. Members of minorities, on the other hand, often encounter discrimination on such a frequent basis that it isn't possible to forget.

In her essay *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh writes that white privilege is “[like] an invisible package of unearned assets . . . about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” She precedes an enumeration of the contents of this “invisible knapsack” by saying that as far as she can tell, her acquaintances who are not white “cannot count on most of these [benefits].” These range from the simple ability to be around people of one's own race with minimal effort to the ability to “swear, . . . dress

in second hand clothes, or not answer letters . . . without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty[,] or the illiteracy of [one's] race.”

Though many people devote their course of study to exposing the privilege of males in our society, much of it is still ignored and downplayed. The facts remain, though: the 2003 US Census said that women made 75 cents to a man's dollar in the same job. An author named B. Deutsch enumerated the list of male privileges in an essay called *The Male Privilege Checklist*, inspired by Peggy McIntosh. The essay points out that men are, among other things, never taught to fear walking alone in the dark in an average public space. Deutsch finishes the essay by saying that the final male privilege is having the privilege of being unaware of one's privilege. This is indeed the ultimate privilege; to look in a book and see men represented predominantly does not measure up to the ability to simply forget that such a privilege exists.

The idea of heterosexual privilege is so new to the mainstream that terminology is still evolving for it. One word of choice for many advocates of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender) rights is “heterosexism”, a term that means the equivalent of racism or sexism, but rather than the sex or race being assumed as the means by which one person is better than another, it is the sexual orientation. As this is a prejudice I have felt personally, it is one that is hard for me to describe. I lack the logical, withdrawn, scientific view of it that others might have. Every time that someone says that homosexuals ought to be “treated,” every time that a relative asks whether a boy has a girlfriend yet or whether a girl has a boyfriend yet, every time that someone says “that's so gay,” every time that a major corporation is willing to use gay-themed advertisements — but only in publications that will probably never be read by the mainstream culture, that is heterosexism in action, for unlike racism and sexism, which have become for the most part visible, heterosexism is still almost entirely invisible, and thus it is very easy to ignore.

Prejudice is a problem, and it is one that we, as human beings, seem to naturally fall into. It's a powerful evolutionary force, as when a primitive human might choose a piece of red fruit and later become ill, the primitive human would probably avoid a fruit of that color in the future. However, this makes prejudice all the more painful, destructive, and (in some cases) even deadly when aimed at other humans. It is easy to sit and let the prejudices within yourself and within others steep, but it is neither healthy nor right to do so. Martin Luther King, Jr., said in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail*

that “[w]e will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.” If it is true that, as many have said before, the worst atrocity a person can commit is to do nothing in a time of ethical peril, then perhaps we must all begin unpacking our “invisible knapsacks.”