

Juliet Quebatay
December 6, 2016
Final Story Draft

Brown Privilege: A myth

“Check your privilege” is a common phrase. We all have privileges: ability, class, sexuality, religion and gender are just a few types. Privilege is a special right, advantage, or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group as defined by The English Oxford dictionary.

“White privilege” is also a common phrase, especially in America. According to Katherine Waxstein, research graduate assistant for diversity and multicultural education at UT, it is any advantage or protection afforded to a person or a group of people who are or who appear to be "white."

“Brown privilege” is a less common phrase. Brown privilege would be any advantage of protection afforded to a person or a group of people who are or who appear to be a person of color. However, there is no real definition for it.

You might say that’s because it is not a real thing. Or is it?

“Absolutely not,” said 20-year-old student Reiamari Guevarra. “Saying having brown skin as opposed to white skin would benefit you in some way is disingenuous.”

Waxstein agrees. She explained, “In the United States, our societal and systemic structures cater to people or groups of people who are or who appear to be "white," and consequently disadvantage people or groups of people who are or who appear to be of color.”

“With these structures in place I do not believe that ‘brown privilege’ can exist,” Waxstein concluded.

Elvis Offor, an engineering student at UT also agrees. “The ways in which history has treated people of color in the United States has shown to often downplay the status or contributions of them within numerous industries such as the arts or sciences like underrepresentation of Hispanics and Blacks in STEM fields.”

But there must be some privilege in being a person of color in America, right?

“I can see how a person might frame my experiences as a brown person as some kind of privilege,” Guevarra said, “but that’s a really superficial way of viewing it and just shows someone’s white privilege.”

Offor expanded on his thought. “I came across a blog post arguing for brown privilege,” he said. “The author, who was white, was in an Indian restaurant where, after asking for a particular dish, the server defaulted to asking if he wanted it ‘medium spicy.’ He cited this as an

example of brown privilege in that there is a stereotype that white people cannot handle spicy food. If anything, this may be categorized as a microaggression.”

Microaggression refers to a comment or action that is subtly and often unintentionally hostile or demeaning to a member of a minority or marginalized group, according to MerriamWebster. People of color and other minorities experience this every day. People like Guevarra.

“Someone might think I’m lucky that I never have to tan because I am naturally tan,” she said. “But they’ve never had to defend their ethnic or racial identification, been told they don’t belong in the country they were born and raised in, or been accosted by random strangers who want to play the ‘what kind of brown person are you’ guessing game because you look ‘exotic’ and ‘foreign’.”

“But hey, I don’t have to tan,” Guevarra said sarcastically, “so that’s good.”

When you Google white privilege, you will find the history of the term and several examples. White privilege was popularized by Peggy McIntosh, a women’s studies scholar at Wellesley. She wrote a paper called “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies.” This paper cited 46 examples of white privilege such as:

-- I can be reasonably sure that my neighbors in such a location will be neutral or pleasant to me.

-- I did not have to educate our children to be aware of systemic racism for their own daily physical protection.

-- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.

These may not seem like privileges, because they may seem second nature or normal. That’s the privilege, to be able to go about a normal day without even having to think about issues that do not affect you. There is privilege in finding a solid definition and examples for your privilege.

When you google brown privilege or black privilege, you will not find a solid definition. You will find examples of microaggressions.

“Most people don’t see microaggressions. There isn’t that much intent to be harmful, but people don’t realize that they are,” says Dr. Renee Smith who teaches journalism 465, media and diversity.

“They are a great teaching point,” she says.

John Blake, a writer at CNN, wrote an article called, “It’s time to talk about ‘black privilege,’” an example of using microaggressions as a teaching point. This article explains why some people believe that people of color have privileges and contests those statements. He points

out that there is a “Black Privilege Checklist” like McIntosh’s list of white privileges. Although there is not one solid list, here are a few samples of unofficial lists:

-- There are a wide variety of clubs and organizations catering specifically to black people. There are no organizations specifically for white skin that aren’t controversial.

-- A black person could potentially benefit from affirmative action. There is almost no affirmative action for white people on the basis of skin, even for foreign-born whites.

-- I can use my race to promote myself in the media or work. White people cannot promote their race.

“We need to acknowledge and combat this speech,” Smith says.

Any club that does not have a race attached to it is likely to be majority white. Not to mention that you do not have to be a person of color to join an ethnic or racial club. Ethnic and racial clubs are in place to celebrate a culture. There can be a European club, Canadian club and American club. A white club however, does not celebrate culture. It celebrates skin color.

A person with a white sounding name on their resume is 50 percent more likely to be called for an interview. Additionally, Caucasian students receive more than three-quarters (76 percent) of all institutional merit-based scholarship and grant funding, even though they represent less than two-thirds (62 percent) of the student population.

Another article you will find is titled “Brown Privilege: The Real Racism.” It reads like satire, but brings up points that may be a true concern to the author, Joseph Berne, or others. This is the article Ofor cited when explaining microaggression.

Berne explains, “You know what happens when I walk around the Asian grocery, looking at packages of rice noodles labelled in Vietnamese? Sometimes people look at me funny. Maybe. Or maybe they’re just trying to get by because I’m blocking the aisle. Whatever. The point is, when I’m the only white guy in the store, it can feel weird.”

Smith is educated in this situation. She has her students attend a culture club meeting, preferably one they have not heard of. After the meeting, they write about their experience. She had a student write about how people in the club did not want to hear from a white girl. The student felt ignored and out of place and asked Smith if they could discuss this in class.

Smith, of course, was delighted to hear this. “She got the full minority experience,” she explained. “That’s how minorities feel every day.”

Microaggressions can happen for many reasons, including when the majority feels marginalized, when the person is ignorant of their actions, or because they are taught microaggressions. They can be hard to point out in conversation because they seem part of privilege. Those with microaggressions have the privilege to say these things, and others find it normal or real.

The phrase “brown privilege” came up at the University of Tennessee during the College of Communications and Information’s Diversity and Inclusion Week 2016. During the “Diversity and Inclusion and Media Portals” discussion, Mona Nair, anchor and reporter for WATE- TV 6, answered a student’s question, saying: “Yes, there is white privilege, but there is brown privilege too.”

“Minorities are termed "minorities" because they are groups of people that are in shorter supply,” she explains. “There are many times that hiring managers, without saying it aloud, believe a certain position would be a good one to be filled by a candidate that checks the diverse box. When your resume arrives in such a situation, that's when what I classified as "brown privilege" kicks in.”

However, Nair admits that brown privilege does not apply in a social aspect. “I'd say less so. Or maybe no. I haven't really experienced any brown privilege outside the professional environment,” Nair says.

Brown privilege is situational. It may only happen half of the time or to a certain person but not to all people of color. When things happen to work in your favor in a certain situation, it may be coincidence or luck.

Each person, whether they are aware of it or not, has certain privileges. These privileges can be societal or situational. But brown privilege will not be on the list of societal privileges, at least in America.

“I undoubtedly have privileges,” Offor says. “However, I don't believe they exist as part of my race as they do a part of my family's economic standing.”

Guevarra may have the best explanation why brown privilege does not exist. “Brown privilege may be true on a case-by-case, individual level, but it is not in any way true of society as a whole.”

Waxstein explains that, “If brown privilege were to exist, it would have to exist within microcosms across the country that do not reflect the larger American society.”

-###-

1634 Words