

In 1990, Peggy McIntosh (Senior Research Scientist and Associate Director at Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley College) wrote an essay on “white privilege”^[i]. Using 50 examples, her essay helped illuminate the many ways in which she (like other people within the white community) experienced many special types of “white privilege” on a daily basis.^[ii]

In reflecting on the list, it seemed to me that there were important similarities when it came to “age privilege”. Age privilege is the wide range of privileges and generally accepted entitlements accorded to young and middle aged persons. It encompasses

- all the things that people can do or expect with some degree of ease because they are young or middle aged adults,
- things they can take for granted, as well as
- the “privilege” of not facing significant barriers and obstacles if they are not older persons.

Below are 34 examples of age privilege I have adapted from her essay.

Mirroring Ms. McIntosh’s words on privilege^[iii], I would like to say “As far as I can tell, my parents and in-laws, older relatives, coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into contact cannot count on most of these conditions.” That is a sad state of affairs.

I would also like to point out although these are my age privileges for now, they will not always be. Each day I, along with everyone else, become older. That is an important consideration for everyone for shaping a different present and future.

Daily Effects of Age Privilege

As a person who is “not a senior yet”:

1. If I wish, I can arrange to be in the company of people of my age most of the time. I can also expect people will not assume I will want to associate or live with others simply because they are of similar age to me.
2. I can go shopping or banking alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be harassed for taking my time.
3. I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my age widely represented.
4. I can be sure that my children or grandchildren will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of people my age.
5. I can be pretty sure of having my voice heard in a group in which I am the only member of my age.
6. I can be casual about whether or not to listen to another person in a group in which s/he is the only member of his/her age.
7. I can go into a music shop and count on finding the music of my age represented, into a supermarket and find the staple foods which fit with my needs, means and family size.

8. Whether I use checks, credit cards or cash, I can count on my age to not work against the appearance of my ability to handles my finances.
9. I do not have to educate my children and grandchildren to be aware of systemic ageism.
10. I can have things slip my mind, or talk with my mouth full and not have people put this down to my age.
11. I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to mental incompetence of people my age.
12. I can go to a physician for a health concern and not be told "What can you expect at your age?"
13. I can speak in public to a powerful group without putting my age on trial.
14. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my age.
15. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my age group.
16. I can remain oblivious of the situations and experiences of older persons who constitute up to a quarter of a country's population in some parts of the world without feeling any penalty for my ignorance.
17. I can criticize our government and talk about how much I fear its policies and behavior without being seen as a "burden" or "a special interest group".
18. I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the "person in charge", I will be facing a person of my age.
19. If a traffic enforcement officer pulls me over, I can be sure I haven't been singled out because of my age.
20. I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, featuring people of my age and these will not have putdowns.
21. I can go home from most organization meetings feeling that I belong and connected rather than isolated, out-of-place, outnumbered, unheard, held at a distance or feared.
22. If I declare there is an age issue at hand (or there isn't an age issue at hand), my age will lend me more credibility for either position than an older person will have.
23. I am not made acutely aware that my hair colour, face, shape, bearing or body odor will be taken as a reflection on my age.
24. If I should need to move, I can be pretty sure of renting or purchasing housing in an area which I can afford and in which I would want to live.
25. My age gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other ages.
26. I can worry about opportunities at my age without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
27. I can take time off from my job without having my co-workers on the job assuming it is because of my age.
28. I can think over many options, social, political, imaginative or professional, without asking whether a person of my age would be accepted or allowed to do what I want to do.
29. I can be late to a meeting without having the lateness reflect on my age.

30. I can choose private or public accommodation without fearing that people of my age cannot get in or will be mistreated in the places I have chosen.
31. I can be sure that if I need legal help, my age will not work against me and my lawyer will not treat me in a patronizing or paternalistic manner.
32. If I have low credibility as a leader I can be sure that my age is not the problem.
33. I can travel alone or with my spouse without expecting to be ignored, hostility or exasperation in those who deal with us.
34. I will feel welcomed and "normal" in the usual walks of public life, institutional and social.

Charmaine Spencer, 2009.

^[i] The excerpted essay "'White Privilege': Unpacking the Invisible Backpack" by Peggy McIntosh can be found at : <http://www.case.edu/president/aaction/UnpackingTheKnapsack.pdf> The essay was based on a larger working paper she had written: Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies. The essay was reprinted from the Winter 1990 issue of Independent School.

^[ii] The term "white privilege" refers to an accepted way in which life is ordered around white values, beliefs, history, and experiences; how whites were acknowledged and visible. It highlighted how in effect other persons were not accorded this same freedom and entitlement.

White privilege encompasses all the things that you can do with some degree of ease because you are white, as well as the "privilege" of not facing significant barriers and obstacles if you were non-white.

^[iii] Ms. McIntosh stated the following in the context of race and white privilege, "As far as I can tell, my African American coworkers, friends, and acquaintances with whom I come into daily or frequent contact in this particular time, place and time of work cannot count on most of these conditions."