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## Discovering white privilege



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My entire life I've had a racially diverse group of friends, and I've always prided myself on that. My high school was nine percent white, with the rest an even mix of Asian, black, and Latino kids. I was almost always the only white person in any given social setting. So I've always thought of myself as very racially savvy. In high school we'd joke about race all the time because we were faced with our differences and the stereotypes that we did or did not display. I thought I knew what race meant, and what it meant to be a part of a certain race. I took Race, Class, Gender during my first semester at Boston College and learned a lot about the systemic ways in which racism works in housing, education, and criminal justice systems. I learned that race was a social construct—that things like skin color, eye shape, and hair type are markers of a person's potential because people use these classifications to justify the oppression of certain groups in very subtle and pervasive ways. But one course wasn't enough for me to internalize and understand racism. I

returned to my second semester at BC to a student body of mostly white people who almost never discussed race, so I slipped back into the sheltered, politically correct world of BC. It wasn't until I started working at Community Change Inc., my PULSE placement, that I really began to understand the ways race is a social construct and how it affects white and black (and brown and yellow) relations in America.

One night in high school, I was over at a friend's house with a group of girls from our field hockey team (all of whom were black except me). One friend asked me if I was uncomfortable being the only white girl there, to which I replied "No, I'd be uncomfortable if I was with all white people!" Which was true. My impression of white people at my high school was that they were superficial and stuck up. The friend who asked me the question admitted that she'd be uncomfortable in an all-white group too. So when I showed up to my PULSE placement I expected to be a whiz at all the race stuff. But when asked what my experience with race was, I pointed to my black teammates, my Asian best friends, and my racially diverse schools. It never occurred to me that my being white affected me in many more ways than the race of my friends did. White privilege, a term I had become very familiar with in my Race, Class, Gender course, is a term that applies even to me, the race expert that I thought I was. It wasn't enough to have friends of different races to qualify as an anti-racist. I had dismissed my friend's insecurity about being around all white people as her being her typical shy self, but I failed to understand the underlying race-relations in this situation. I, being of the dominant race (in the sense that white people control politics, history books, business, the media, and countless other aspects of American life) felt comfortable with people of other races (and obviously get along fine with white girls, seeing as most of my friends here are white), while my black friend would have felt very uncomfortable with all white people (a race that has oppressed hers for centuries). At the time, I thought this was just an example of how great I was at navigating different racial groups, when in fact it exemplifies the white privilege of feeling no racial tension no matter the race of the

I used to equate race with one's ethnicity and culture. But there are people of different ethnicities who are of the same race. Don't we clump all "African-Americans" into one racial category even if their ancestors come from different countries? Why are disparities in wealth, education levels, and incarceration rates, based on race, not ethnicity? If race is just physical characteristics, how did racial stereotypes develop and how are they perpetuated today? How were those stereotypes used to dehumanize certain groups of people? How are those stereotypes used to create legislation that benefits those already in power? These are questions we must ask about every institution we are a part of.

So on the journey to internalizing racism, I found that really the point is to internalize white privilege, because that is the side of the story of racism I can attest to. Dismantling racism for me requires recognizing where white privilege has played a part in my life, bringing that knowledge to other white people in places of power, and intervening when I see white privilege creating a disadvantage for others.

*Author's note: This column is inspired by Debby Irving's manuscript to "Waking Up White." She is looking for a publisher and is hoping to be published in 2014.*

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