

# Invisible Privilege

## What White Men Don't See

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*Cages. Consider a bird cage. If you look very closely at just one wire in the cage, you cannot see the other wires. If your conception of what is before you is determined by this myopic focus, you could look at that one wire, up and down the length of it, and be unable to see why a bird could not just fly around the wire any time it wanted to go somewhere. Furthermore, even if, one day at a time, you myopically inspected each wire, you still could not see why a bird would have trouble going past the wires to get anywhere.*

*...It is only when you step back, stop looking at the wires one by one, microscopically, and take a macroscopic view of the whole cage, that you can see why the bird does not go anywhere; and then you will see it in a moment. It will require no great subtlety of mental powers. It is perfectly obvious that the bird is surrounded by a network of systematically related barriers, no one of which would be the least hindrance to its flight, but which, by their relations to each other, are as confining as the solid walls of a dungeon.*

**Marilyn Frye<sup>1</sup>**

Frye's image of a one-wire-at-a-time view of a bird cage provides a powerful metaphor for the vastly different experiences of discrimination that exist in our society and our organizations.

White men see the cage of discrimination one wire at a time. When they are not hired for a job they seek, or fail to achieve a desired promotion, or are subjected to the abuse of a tyrannical boss, they may equate this hurtful experience with similar situations encountered by their colleagues who are white women or people of color. "Yes, I know. That happened to me," they are apt to say. "But I'm not whining about discrimination. Get over it."

On the other hand, the negative experiences of people of color or white women expand, wire by wire, to form the cage of discrimination. When white men are able to "take a macroscopic view of the whole cage," the existence of the cage and its function become, as Frye says, perfectly obvious.

In this article I review what I have learned - as a white man myself - about the nature of the cage of discrimination. I have come to recognize that the forces and barriers which shape our lives are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but, as Frye says, systematically related to each other in such a way as to limit and restrict our lives.

## Features of "the white-male system"

Since the role of manager has traditionally been held by men, the qualities associated with management closely parallel our culture's expectations for the masculine role. Because of this, most male managers are oblivious to how their gender identity as men influences their behavior and relationships in the organizations in which they spend a majority of their waking hours.

Similarly, the role of manager has traditionally been held by white people. Because of this, most white managers are oblivious to how their race influences their behavior and relationships.

Put these together the fact that most managers have traditionally been white and male-and you have the foundation for a "system" normed on the experiences, values and perceptions of one group. "White-male managerial behavior" is unconsciously accepted as the norm into which all managers aspiring to the top must assimilate-including white male managers! Adapting to the implicit demands of this culture comes so easily-almost "naturally" -to most white men that they are usually unconscious of its power and influence.

But succeeding by assimilation to this ethic not only keeps us-as white men-from understanding how we are advantaged at the expense of others; it also blinds us to the potential limitations of the system itself.

To be specific, the cultural system that predominates in organizations is marked by an emphasis on objectivity, competition and "getting down to business." Being hard-nosed, top-down, one-up and adversarial is taken for granted. Logic, rationality and objectivity are prized above intuition, feeling and subjectivity. Managers are expected to be single-mindedly devoted to the pursuit of organizational goals and objectives, to be competitive, rational, decisive, ambitious, efficient, task-and results-oriented, assertive and confident in their use of power. Stated another way, the norms which all managers are supposed to follow are "masculine."<sup>2</sup>

In this culture, men (and women who pursue managerial careers) are furthermore expected to subordinate all other life roles to their work. But in order to successfully pull this off, as Kanter notes, you need to "act as though" you have no competing loyalties) This is no small feat for managerial men, who are much more likely than their female counterparts to be married and have children. In one representative sampling, 94% of all

middle-and upper-level male managers were married (compared to 41% of the women at corresponding levels); 97% of those men had children {and 61% of the women did not!}."

Thus, working excessive levels of overtime--a prerequisite for advancement to higher managerial levels in conventional corporate cultures--practically demands the services of a stay-at-home spouse, and is an assumption which is implicitly "gendered."<sup>5</sup> That is, organizations can only expect and anticipate such workaholic contributions from those people they presume to be unencumbered by outside (read: "domestic") responsibilities. In this culture, those people are "men" (or unmarried women).

As a person who is both "white" and "male," I not only fit the normative profile of the competent, to-be-taken-seriously "manager," but-precisely because I do-I am not likely to be aware that I do, nor how I am privileged by it. I do not have to deal with a whole range of additional pressures beyond those associated narrowly with my job performance. I do not have to expend the type of substantial emotional energy trying to "fit in" and justifying my presence that my female and "non-white" colleagues do. If I suddenly became female or were transformed into a person of color, my awareness of the consequences of race and gender would be all-too-evident. As Marilyn Frye explains, "One of the privileges of being 'normal' and 'ordinary' is a certain unconsciousness. When one is that which is taken as the norm in one's social environment, one does not have to think about it. If one is marginal, one does not have the privilege of not noticing what one is."<sup>6</sup>

It is axiomatic in the social psychology of dominant/subordinate relations that those with more power are typically unaware of how the system operates to grant them their status, that they are more likely to notice small losses and threats to their status rather than its perpetuation or enhancement, and that they are more likely to be aware of the burdens associated with their position than their advantages, which-because they are unconscious-are literally "taken for granted."<sup>7</sup>

In the following section, I explore those dimensions of -conferred and taken-for-granted advantage which accrue to incumbents by virtue of being "white" and "male." One caveat is in order: Note that the articulation of the "white-male system" of management only provides clues to what behaviors and qualities are

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rewarded, i.e., are requisite for *individual success*. It does not demonstrate whether those qualities contribute to *organizational effectiveness* in any meaningful way! Indeed, when they are practiced to the exclusion of qualities which are culturally defined as "feminine," they are in fact generally antithetical to effective organizational dynamics—a fact that largely explains American industry's recent attraction not only for diversity, but for quality, empowerment, teamwork and work-family issues, as well. We turn now to the heart of the matter: How this system confers "unearned advantages" upon white men which they usually take for granted. Here are some two dozen examples of "wires" that constitute the "cage of discrimination" —none of which apply to the experience of white men.

### The dirty (two) dozen

**1** When I go on a job interview; I do not stop to think how the fact that I am "white" or "male" may be held against me in some way. I don't anticipate that coworkers will presume that I am less competent, because of my race or gender. I don't expect people to believe I have an "attitude." I don't wonder whether I will be taken less seriously "because I am a man"

**2** If I get a position, people are not likely to assume that I "only" got it on account of my race (or gender) or spontaneously assume (and declare) that I was probably "unqualified."

**3** If I accept the position, I am not likely to wonder whether—on account of my race—I will "fit in" (or experience potential hostility) in the neighborhoods I will be moving into. (I am also not likely—on account of my race alone—to have to exclude any geographical region as an "unacceptable" area to move to or consider in my job search.)

**4** Given pre-existing stereotypes, my on-the-job commitment and competence is likely to be assumed—unless proven otherwise. (For women and people of color, the opposite typically holds true.) In other words, as a white man, I rarely wonder whether others are judging my ability on the basis of my race or gender. I typically do not worry about whether my commitment or performance will be judged either more harshly on account of my race (or gender) ... or more leniently!

**5** When I look at the distribution of people up the organizational hierarchy, I am likely to see many others of my own gender and race. "People like me" will be well-represented at higher levels—the higher I look, the greater the proportion of people of my own race and gender. In fact, I can assume that when I walk through the door at work, most people on my level and nearly everyone above it!—will be people of my own race and gender.

**6** I am not likely to be restricted from business-related networking opportunities because of my gender (or race).

**7** My physical appearance is either neutral, or an asset. In contrast, women—who face a more restricted latitude of what constitutes "attractiveness" in the first place—may find that while being considered unattractive is a deficit, being "too attractive" can also be a liability and detract from their ability to be taken seriously. If I am tall, I do not have to worry, as a man of color would, whether the people I interact with will initially and spontaneously fear me. In fact, as a tall white man, my height will likely enhance the perception others have of me as a potential "leader."

**8** When I act in ways that are stereotypically presumed to be "managerial" and "serious," I will not be seen as violating people's preconceptions regarding appropriate behavior for people of my gender and race. If I do well in my position, I will not hear others say, "You're not like most people of your race or gender ...."

**9** I can assume that nearly all the "support functions" in my organization (secretarial, custodial, meal service, etc.) will be performed by people of a different gender (and/or race) than my own. Thus, when I walk the halls of my own organization, I am not likely to be mistaken for the janitor or the security guard. (Ditto for when I travel.)

**10** When I travel alone on business, I can count on my personal space — on the plane, at a restaurant, or bar — being inviolate. I will not have to worry about someone of the other gender interrupting me without invitation. Similarly, I can expect that most people I interact with in business—clients, colleagues, customers — will likely be people of my own race (and

gender); I won't have to worry if they will "feel comfortable" with me.

**11** I will see "people like me" well-represented in official company literature (annual reports, advertising, etc.). The implicit communication I will see and hear is, "You belong here."

**12** I will not be asked to represent the "white" (or "male") viewpoint on matters under discussion. I am unlikely to be referred to (either to my face, or privately) as "the white manager" or "the man manager" in our division.

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**13** I will not have the additional burden of wondering, if my performance is judged to be "not up to par," whether my detractors will argue, "See? I told you we shouldn't have hired a man (a white) for the job!" On the other hand, if my performance is exceptional and record-breaking, I don't have to worry whether it could foster resentment and anger in those who feel strongly that someone of my race (or gender) "has no business being in this business."

**14** I will not, as a white person, feel obligated to "give something back" to the "white community," or extend myself outside work hours to bring others of my race into the opportunity structure.

**15** If there are already one or two people "like me" in highly visible, top-level positions. I will not wonder whether that reduces the likelihood of my advancement to those ranks. (Women and people of color must often vie for limited-"token" -"slots," whereas white males expect to compete for all positions.) Thus, if I get promoted, I am not likely to wonder whether this reduces the chances for other people of my gender or race.

**16** If I get promoted, I am likely to assume that my race or gender had nothing to do with it; I will believe my success is based solely on my competence. If I am promoted ahead of another white male

(or passed over for promotion), I will not wonder whether the promotion (or its denial) was based on my race or gender.

**17** I can assume that I will be neither patronized nor pitied on account of my race (or gender).

**18** I can assume that my mentoring relationships with superiors will remain (appropriately) professionally focused and not become sexualized on account of my gender. I will not (as a male) generally worry about the likelihood of being sexually harassed.

**19** As a man, I can assume that being married and having children will not adversely impact my prospects for advancement-and, in fact, will probably enhance them.

**20** As a married man, I may unconsciously expect that my wife will defer to my career, thus enhancing my prospects for organizational advancement over her own. As a man in our gendered work-family system, I can rationalize away a lack of parental- or domestic-role performance with the excuse, "I've got too much work to do; I'm too busy with work to do that now." (Married women are less likely to be allowed this "excuse" or have it respected by their partner I receive-"See how hard he works to provide a good life for his family.")

**21** As a man, at social functions involving partners of organization members, I am not likely to be mistaken for "just a spouse" (and possibly ignored).

**22** As a white person in a white-dominated organization, I do not have to contend with people consistently mistaking me for "the other person white person who works here." (See # 15)

**23** I can congregate with people of my own race at work, without being accused of "not being friendly" with my colleagues. I can engage in same sex conversations without being accused of "gossiping."

**24** As a white person, I am far less likely to be discriminated against when I apply for a

home mortgage loan. I can count on there being many people of my race in the community I move to. I can assume there will be facilities to provide the services I need-hairdressers and barbers, pharmacies that sell band-aids that match my skin, churches that I am familiar with. I can count on not being treated like a potential shoplifter every time I enter a department store. I can count on not being mistaken for a burglar if I park my moving van in front of my house and begin to remove my possessions.

### **Knowledge as power**

When white men have the opportunity to step back and really see the "wires" of the cage of discrimination, we understand at once why the system is dysfunctional. The system which has-through no fault of our own, on the individual level-advantaged us and disadvantaged others has always been both unfair and hypocritical. In this era, when the majority of new entrants to the work force are white women and people of color, such a system is not only ludicrous, it is-financially and organizationally-exorbitantly expensive.

### **End Notes**

1. Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983), p. 23.
2. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Men and Women of the Corporation* (New York: Basic, 1977).
3. Kanter, *Work and Family in the United States: A Critical Review and Agenda for Research and Policy* (New York: Russell Sage, 1977).
4. "The stigma facing mommies," *Newsday* (March 27, 1989), Section 3, pp. 1,8-9.
5. H. Papanek, "Men, women and work: Reflections on the two-person career," *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 78, pp. 852-872.
6. Frye, p. 146.
7. See Peggy McIntosh, "White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack," *Peace and Freedom Gully/August*, 1989), pp. 10-12; v. Goode, "Why men resist," in M. Kimmel and M. Messner, *Men's Lives* (New York: McMillan, 1989), pp. 43-58; and W Gamson, *Power and Discontent* (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey, 1968).

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In making the paradigm shift to the new ways of living, leading, organizing, managing and working together that are required by the new realities, we must re-examine the key assumptions of the old paradigm. Making the shift requires that all of us-white men, white women, people of color, straights and gays, people who are able-bodied as well as those who have disabilities--commit ourselves to working together to dismantle the system that is holding us all back.