

Understanding Unearned Advantage- Vernā Myers- Clientell Article

[352 words]

We like to believe that we've earned our success through hard work and personal merit. It's much harder to accept the notion that our success *also* depends on our society's system of power and privilege, which favors some groups over others.

Consider this phenomenon: When a white man walks through the doors of a law firm, he is assumed to be a competent, committed lawyer who will be an asset to the firm. Walking through those same doors, a woman of color is often assumed to be support staff. Even once she's seen as a lawyer, there's silent concern that she may not be "qualified" or truly committed. Everywhere, the white man sees people who look like him – as partners, clients, managers, colleagues, and potential mentors. The woman of color seeks desperately for a successful female to take her on as a protégé and help her grow.

Most people I meet in law firms emphatically reject the idea of group superiority. Yet our culture still implicitly regards some groups -- males, whites, the upper class, heterosexuals, U.S. born, Christians and able-bodied individuals -- as superior to others: females, people of color, the poor, gays, those not native to the U.S., Muslims and the disabled.

This latent system of "unearned privilege" is about *having the benefit of the doubt* -- not because of who you are and what you have done, but because of how people perceive you as a member of a favored group. Acknowledging unearned privilege means recognizing the advantages we've gained from a system stacked in our favor.

When I started to grapple with the unearned advantages I enjoy because I am straight, Christian, U.S. born, able-bodied and of the professional class, I asked myself what I was going to do about it. Personally, I have committed to sharing the opportunities I've been given, building relationships across difference, and confronting small, subtle acts of disadvantage and exclusion. (At VMCG, we have also begun offering client workshops on "unearned privilege.") This is not about guilt; no one asked for the advantage. It's about triggering deep, positive change by taking personal responsibility.