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Equality Of Privilege: A Labor Day Essay

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by Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman and Ramya Vijaya

WAGNER COLLEGE NEWS SERVICE

Most folks need to work for a living, which makes Labor Day a very popular holiday indeed.

Most folks need to work — but some folks don't have the same access to good-paying jobs that others have. In many cases, if not most, that's not by design — it's just the way things work.

Our country's founding document proclaims that "all men are created equal" — but on this Labor Day we ask you to consider a certain kind of in-equality that often works invisibly, without any deliberate ill will or conspiracy by one group against another. It is the social force that draws mostly white workers into most of the good-paying managerial and professional jobs in America. Social scientists usually call this force institutional racism — but that's an awfully inflammatory term.

A less inflammatory way of looking at the way this force works in America today might be to step back and objectively observe the patterns of privilege in our society, like they were the natural ebb and flow of social tides.

For instance, if you are white, it is very likely that most members of your family are white, and so are most of your friends, right? And if you are a person of color, then your friends and family are also predominantly people of color.

Since our social lives are segregated, and since white people historically dominate the better-paid occupations in our country, it follows that if you are from a white family, it is more likely that you will know a relative or a friend who is in a better-paid profession. So the privilege of knowing someone who can offer you a job or a referral, or act as a role model for better-paid occupations, is more likely to be available to you if you are white.

And if you are not white, that privilege is less accessible to you.

This difference in access to privilege exists in our society regardless of whether individual white people have racist opinions and prejudices or not. Due to past discrimination and the continued social segregation, white people as a group are more likely to have access to this privilege, even if they are not consciously racist. That's why this natural pattern of privilege is referred to as institutional racism — it's a social phenomenon that produces a racist result, regardless of whether the individuals through whom it operates are racist or not.

The invisibility of institutional racism is evident in the argument some people make that, when hiring, employers don't see black, white, brown or any other color — they only see the best-qualified, hardest-working potential employee, someone who can help their company prosper.

But that's not what really happens in most job interviews.

The employer is usually looking at several resumes from people with similar qualifications — but only one can be chosen, and the employer is not really going to be able to determine, within the brief space of an interview, who the best or hardest-working candidate is. That's why employers often prefer to hire someone they know, or someone recommended by someone they know.

If no such candidate is available, the employer will try to figure out which applicant is most likely to fit in with the culture of the workplace — a highly subjective judgment. Often it is the person who talks like you, has gone to similar schools as you, can make references to the same movies and books and TV shows with which you're familiar, who enjoys foods similar to the ones you grew up with, etc., who seems most likely to "fit in" with your company's culture.

And since white people dominate higher-paid occupations, the culture to fit into is the white culture. It therefore follows that white candidates will have an easier time establishing their "fit" with a company culture than other candidates.

That's almost certainly not the intention of most employers — it's just the way things work.

But we can do better than that.

This Labor Day, let's make a decision to become conscious of the forces that are normally invisible, the forces that often make America such an unequal place. Instead, let's make our country a place where not only are all men created equal — but where all people truly have equal opportunity to work and prosper.

Jean Halley, Amy Eshleman and Ramya Mahadevan Vijaya are the authors of the new book, "Seeing White: An Introduction to White Privilege and Race," a new textbook published by Rowman & Littlefield. Vijaya is an associate professor of economics at Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Halley and Eshleman are associate professors of sociology and psychology, respectively, at Wagner College, a U.S. News & World Report Top 25 regional university on New York City's Staten Island.